

Kristen Poole. *Supernatural Environments in Shakespeare's England: Spaces of Demonism, Divinity, and Drama.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Pp 289.

Kristen Poole belongs to the growing group of scholars, now from a notable variety of methodological and ideological backgrounds, who are participating in the 'turn to religion' in early modern literary studies. In this case the 'turn' involves a surprising, albeit partial, reclamation of that anathema of the new historicists, E.M.W. Tillyard; 'in many ways', Poole writes, 'Tillyard was right' in his insistence on 'Elizabethan England as a religious period' (164). Yet Poole also makes clear she does not wish to return to the 'idealist' modes of earlier criticism. 'In short, I aim', she announces (somewhat hubristically), 'to historicize God' (199). By paying attention not only to the continuing significance of religious belief for early modern individuals but also to aspects of material culture (the undisputed focus of current cutting-edge scholarship), Poole maps out — literally at times — a potentially fruitful field of inquiry. As the book's front blurb claims, Poole's study 'examines the seemingly incongruous coexistence of traditional religious beliefs and new mathematical, geometrical ways of perceiving the environment' (i). Where critics have concentrated on a 'crisis of faith', Poole sees a 'crisis of cosmic geography' (5). Where critics (including myself) have been concerned to trace the gradual transformation of the theological into the psychological, Poole traces the transformation of the theological into new perceptions of material reality, thus rejecting a potentially psychoanalytic approach in favour of a phenomenological one. I have personalized my last remark here in order to qualify any (subjective) resistance evident in the ensuing analysis with my own freely admitted critical or methodological bias.

Poole admits in her introduction that she must confront a series of ideological paradoxes. Augustine apparently resists the idea of a spatial God, but for Plato, who deeply influenced Augustine before the two together deeply influenced the Renaissance, geometry was 'both a sign and a function of divine perfection' (7). While I'm not sure that the famous new testament passage 'in him we live, and move, and have our being' (Acts 17:28) is really evidence that for Paul, as for Plato, 'the divine is spatial' (7) — I would in fact place Paul's mysticism closer to Augustine's position — Poole nevertheless argues forcefully that 'One of the great social paradoxes of the [early modern] period was the simultaneity of a heightened geometrical awareness and a widespread fascination with the supernatural, especially demonic, behavior that refuted

a fixed sense of space' (10). To understand the ongoing transformation of the Renaissance microcosm/macrocosm relationship, which carries 'multiple implications' and whose *eventual* obsolescence must not be presumed too soon, Poole suggests that the cultural critic must navigate carefully between 'open and fluid' and 'closed and mechanical' concepts of the body's relationship to its environment (13).

One case of postmodern presumption is tackled directly in chapter one, 'The Devil's in the Archive: Ovidian Physics and *Doctor Faustus*', which challenges our present disbelief in the satanic. My own experience in the archives first attracted me to this discussion in article form, since my impression from the proliferation of early modern printed material on witchcraft subjects, like Poole's, was that the early modern devil has not been given his due. Anxiety about the 'permeability' of the body and the self to satanic influence is certainly much on the minds of writers of the period. In spite of this context I continue to suspect — and no doubt this is an expression of my own critical hubris — that early modern *playwrights* constitute a remarkably skeptical subset of early modern writers. Poole quite correctly argues that a writer like Reginald Scot would likely have been 'considered more radical than rational' (32) by many of his contemporaries. But *The Discovery of Witchcraft* seems a favourite source for early modern playwrights, and not just Shakespeare. If I were to suggest that these playwrights seem to 'gravitate towards' writers such as Scot and Samuel Harsnett (the latter mentioned by Poole only once) almost as naturally as do postmodern scholars (32), my claim would beg a more systematic analysis that carefully calculated the frequency of allusions and sources in surviving Renaissance playtexts. In a book that reads only five plays by two playwrights (*Faustus*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *The Tempest*), Poole might want to consider her dramatic context more broadly. In this first chapter Poole takes Tom McAlindon to task for surmising, 'with no supporting evidence whatsoever', that 'Marlowe's attitude towards witchcraft would have been much the same as Scot's' (32). Yet even without details of the critical context in this case the reader might assume a fairly well-established scholarly consensus regarding Marlowe's skepticism, based in part on early modern commentators such as Richard Baines, Thomas Kyd, and Robert Greene. Poole could consider in more detail claims by other critics for the skepticism of Marlowe and Shakespeare regarding witchcraft and demonic possession — not to mention the even more obvious skepticism of Ben Jonson, a major playwright and prominent citizen of early modern England

whose notably consistent worldview makes the notion that most early modern subjects subscribed to 'Ovidian physics' seem particularly problematic.

The other, more crucial problem with this concept is that the English writers of the witchcraft pamphlets themselves, although they differ regarding the degree to which Satan or other devils can interfere with human endeavour, pointedly reject (following Augustine) the possibility of human metamorphosis. The French writer Jean Bodin seems unique in asserting this particular power. Poole recognizes both Bodin's (unusual) claim and the resistance of English commentators to the idea of human metamorphosis (52–3) before curiously asserting the viability of animal transformation through one (unexplored) citation of Wayne Shumaker (54). Ultimately she argues for a 'trickle down' of the notion 'into popular understandings of the demonic' in an attempt to preserve the historical validity of the concept: 'demonologists admitted that the devil was so skilled at illusion that it would take an expert to distinguish between real and illusory physical effects. ... even if people did understand that metamorphosis was an illusion, this understanding would provide small consolation for the devil's victims' (54). Such an argument may very well speak to levels of anxiety about witchcraft in early modern society but is a questionable justification of 'Ovidian physics' as a (quasi?-)scientific principle.

Poole's most surprising claim occurs near the end of the chapter: 'Ovidian physics ... is a mode of thought and perception that does not recognize a division of imagination and reality; it admits that our knowledge of nature is interconnected with the devices of fancy. *It acknowledges that reality is an imaginative construct*' (56–7, my emphasis). While beliefs concerning the powers of devils and witches in early modern England were various and controversial, this culture nevertheless attended scrupulously to the distinction between imagination and reality and carefully worked out its own theories of the imagination as a faculty distinct from reason and the higher understanding. The problem of the uses and abuses of imagination is one of the central moral concerns of the age and is ubiquitously addressed in early modern literature. What this remarkable culture *never* does, in my opinion, is entirely collapse the distinction between imagination and reality: a suggestion I can only read as a misplaced instance of postmodern thought. Moreover, I remain unpersuaded by the concept of 'Ovidian physics' because Poole never clarifies its implications for *Doctor Faustus*, which, while it certainly contains Ovidian references, does not constitute or culturally reflect a (scientific) insistence on the literal reality of human metamorphosis. Poole

includes a longish digression treating Freud's consideration of a seventeenth-century demonic contract, which supports the concept of 'Ovidian physics' for the Renaissance in a manner unclear to me, and a related treatment of the demonic contract in *Faustus*, which questionably asserts that here 'form trumps content, as the play insistently draws our attention to the document's materiality' (45). Neither of these discussions serves to clarify the nature of the tragic suffering of the protagonist; therefore, the general analysis seems to contribute little to an elucidation of the cultural meaning of the play.

A similar problem arises from Poole's treatment of *Hamlet* in chapter three, although here the 'scientific' aspect of the argument is more persuasive since Poole strongly argues for an interaction between belief in the supernatural and 'cartographic epistemology' (95). Though never named, purgatory remains a haunting presence within the text of *Hamlet*: an observation that has figured significantly in scholarship on the play at least since J. Dover Wilson's *What Happens in Hamlet* (1935). The protestant rejection of purgatory presumably contributes to its nominal exclusion from Shakespeare's tragedy, but the concept did not of course instantaneously evaporate in post-Reformation England and Poole traces how 'Early modern discussions about the place of purgatory swung between [the] poles of materialism and fiction' (97). She links her assertion of the material reality, for some believers, of purgatory to Margreta de Grazia's demonstration of 'how the modern emphasis on Hamlet's psychological interiority has obfuscated the play's materiality and concerns about the land, its engagement with the actual mud and loam of the earth' (97). De Grazia's focus on the material dispossession of Prince Hamlet is a point well taken. She effectively demonstrates that 'a 200-year-old critical tradition has been built on an oversight (and of the play's premise, no less)', but this point comes with a warning: 'whether the category of the psychological will remain the best hermeneutic for meeting the challenge [of deciphering Hamlet's interiority] depends on whether it can survive the demystification'.¹ Poole, for her part, wishes to preserve the tension in the play between earthiness and intellectual abstraction: 'As the afterlife appears in *Hamlet* ... it is both a material, loamy, rotten affair and the subject of abstract, philosophical, fantastical musings' (98). For Poole the famous volcano Mount Hecla in Iceland is the perfect embodiment of this tension: 'In its association with a specific geographical location and fable, Mount Hecla ... is a site that swirls together the materially real and the fabulous' (98). The chapter weaves together much fascinating archival and cartographical material with a fresh consideration of the playtext and persuasively establishes an Icelandic connection to the image

of purgatory in *Hamlet*. But Poole's discussion does not then proceed to a consideration of the significance of her new identification of a paradoxically real and fabulous location for the entrance to purgatory for the tragic action of the play. Admittedly my bias is that a psychological category remains an inescapable hermeneutic for meeting the interpretive challenges of this most famous text, and I am tempted to see the continued 'ghostly' existence of purgatory in a protestant social context as an uncanny evocation of the unconscious, charged in this case with the anxiety of Hamlet's masculine self-fashioning traumatized by Claudius's unexpected election. In fact, Poole has given me further evidence for this speculation by tracing connections between the vengeful and patricidal Pyrrhus in the player's speech in act two and Vulcan's underground workshop in that other supposed volcanic entrance to purgatory, Mount Aetna (123).

More satisfying (for me) is Poole's discussion of *Othello* in chapter two, where, in this study's most brilliant critical maneuver, she establishes a connection between Desdemona's murder scene and 'the visual and dramatic tradition of *ars moriendi* literature', a popular genre of the sixteenth century that presents deathbed scenes and focuses 'on the invisible battle between the dying person and demons' (63). The early modern individual on the threshold of death was clearly entering an altered ontological dimension. Therefore *ars moriendi* literature records a 'double vision' that includes both the dying person's often terrifying encounter with demons and the experience of everyone else who crowded into the room to observe and speculate upon this one-sided performance. Because the *ultimate* viewer, the reader of such texts, must mediate between these two experiences or perspectives, the genre as it evolved potentially accommodated both 'traditional belief and emergent skepticism' (80), a potential not surprisingly exploited at crucial moments in the theatre. Othello's certainty concerning the 'ocular proof' of Desdemona's guilt, the cultural conditioning (through his conversion to Christianity) that has encouraged his belief in demonic influence on human behaviour, and his anticipation of his own damnation after recognizing the truth of his wife's innocence can all be related to the *ars moriendi* tradition, though often in terms of its ironic inversion or parodic representation: '*Othello* borrows the form, but only to undo it' (94). Poole, however, sees the confusion inherent in the appropriation as a kind of guarantee of the reality of demons (91), of 'a devil loose in the world' (94), while I am inclined to see a parallel rather than a contrast with Greenblatt's reading of demonic influence in *Lear*, where the

devils' power — in the face of real *human* evil — is ultimately exposed as fictional or theatrical.

Two later chapters offer intriguing historical contextualizations. Chapter four contrasts Calvin's 'understanding of creation as having a spatial order that is subordinate to the fluctuations of God's providence', leading to a worldview characterized by 'the possibility of unanticipated mutability', with Hooker's 'more rigid' model of creation 'adhering to immutable divine laws' (136). *Macbeth* is then read as an expression of the 'impossible simultaneity of these incompatible ... understandings of divine cosmic structure' (136). This discussion contains an erudite and very helpful treatment of Calvin's keen interest in early modern scientific developments, the astonishing ambivalence evident in his emphasis on both universal order and radical (apparently arbitrary) providence, and the differences between Calvin and English Calvinism. The application of this ideological context to *Macbeth* is less persuasive. Poole argues that 'in trying to become the agent controlling his actions and direction, [Macbeth] doesn't accept Calvin's notion of predestination' (161), whereas just the opposite seems true: by abandoning heroic self-reliance in favour of an intensifying obsession with the witches' prophecies, Macbeth effects a perverse realization of supernatural predetermination. Moreover, Poole does not develop the presence of Hooker within Shakespeare's writing sufficiently, other than through a general appeal to Tillyard's Elizabethan world picture, and the reader, as in previous chapters, is left to fill in too much of the argument when she actually turns to analyzing the literary text.

This limitation is partly mitigated in the final discussion of *The Tempest*, which explores 'how the emergent science of geodesy [in the early modern period] was grounded in a theological sensibility', specifically by tracing how 'the idea of perichoresis ... the mutually permeable and interconnected relationship of the three persons of a triune godhead ... comes to express ... the interrelationship of humanity and environment' (168–9). Poole's extremely informative discussion follows the 'sixteenth-century English national project of mapping the land' (173–4) into its more localized project of land surveying, which for the early modern mind 'was a form of participating in [the] divine geometric order' (185). The subsequent focus on the enhancement of the 'geodetic register' (210) of *The Tempest* explores relevant imagery in the playtext more thoroughly than some of the earlier chapters. In the process, Poole interestingly relates the tragicomedy's 'push-and-pull dynamic' — with Prospero 'godlike but utterly dependent on Providence' (216) — to a

supernatural environment both 'solid and geometric' and 'labile and metamorphic' (218).

Poole has no doubt been industrious in the archives, and her original contexts open up fresh and intriguing possibilities for future readings of these familiar texts. It is therefore, perhaps, simply my own bias that leaves me at times surprised at how little she has to say, in a treatment of four famous tragedies and one tragicomedy, about the interiority of the protagonists in question. The obvious refutation of my objection is that Poole's subject is the early modern *environment*, but in three cases in particular (*Faustus*, *Hamlet*, and *Macbeth*) the analysis could nevertheless be strengthened by an expanded treatment of the connection between inner and outer. To claim, for example, that in *Macbeth* the 'troubling instability' of the moral frame is directly connected to the inconsistency of the cosmic frame and to assert that both frames arise from inconsistent ideological conceptions of God is still to beg the question of the relation of Macbeth's own moral position vis-à-vis these competing conceptions. Does the problem of his inner integrity arise from too *little* relation to divinity, or from too *much*?

Although the idea of 'culture wars' gets much less attention than it did a decade ago, there seems at present in the academy a notable split between those scholars who (while reading historical contexts carefully) attend ultimately to the interiority of the early modern self, and those who focus predominantly on objects of material culture as a way of understanding the early modern experience. The two schools ought to be allowed to co-exist until a third consensus position manages to effect a brilliant synthesis. In the meantime my instinct for self-preservation fuels a polemical temptation to underscore how a rigid attention to material culture can become something of an obsession. When Poole suggests, for example, that Hamlet's exclamation that he is 'but mad north-north-west' underlines the play's Icelandic connection (126), I naturally check out Mercator's map centred on the North Pole which she has reproduced for the reader and decide that Iceland is actually *northwest* of Denmark, but wonder if the reading can be saved by noting that Iceland is north-northwest of *England* — and then the whole process, for a moment, seems to me misplaced. Must every new reading be radically different from earlier readings and from our lived experience, and must we not rest until we have rendered the early modern historical moment completely alien to us? I am constantly struck, rather, by uncanny resemblances between then and now. To take one final example: Poole accurately surmises that the famous anecdote involving a real devil suddenly appearing on stage during an early

modern production of *Faustus* is now only ‘deployed for the purposes of seasoning an undergraduate lecture or adding a little zest to a scholarly essay’ (34). But is the correct response really to note how different, how much more ‘serious’, this experience was for early modern people? I wonder, was the frisson experienced in Exeter so different from the one we experience now when we contemplate the videos or photographs of ghosts reproduced on the internet, some obviously staged or ‘fictional’ but some eerily unsettling since ‘scientifically’ corroborated? Is there not a deep affinity between the way early modern and postmodern individuals stare into the metaphysical abyss? And are not our *identifications* with early modern culture the intellectual gestures that make our professional activity the most compelling, especially as we share the results of our research in the classroom?

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Notes

- 1 Margreta de Grazia, *‘Hamlet’ without Hamlet* (Cambridge, 2007), 5.

Federico Schneider. *Pastoral Drama and Healing in Early Modern Italy*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2010. Pp 236.

Federico Schneider’s *Pastoral Drama and Healing in Early Modern Italy* is a welcome and valuable contribution to the ever-growing interest in this particular niche of early modern Italian studies. The book represents an attempt to dispel a traditional, though erroneous, view. As Schneider puts it, ‘after more than 40 years of fruitful scholarship, the long held prejudice that Renaissance pastoral drama was nothing but a shallow form of *divertissement* has been conquered definitively’ (1). Among the first studies to attract scholars’ interest in the genre were Marzia Pieri’s *La scena boschereccia nel Rinascimento italiano* (Padua, 1983) and, more recently, Laura Riccò’s *Ben mille pastorali’ L’itinerario dell’Ingegneri da Tasso a Guarini e oltre* (Rome, 2004). For the English speaker, Lisa Sampson’s *Pastoral Drama in Early Modern Italy: The Making of a New Genre* (London, 2006) is a goldmine in terms of