Response: Politics! Poetics! History?

Steve Mentz
Politics! Poetics! History?

Response by STEVE MENTZ

Does Shakespeare provide insight into the Anthropocene? Can the Anthropocene illuminate Shakespeare?

The contributions to this special issue suggest diverse ways to answer these perhaps over-broad questions. They also imply that the reflective structure of these opening inquiries—holding the Shakespearean mirror up to Anthropocene nature—might not be the only way to bring these ideas together. The Anthropocene is a new term with many meanings, and Shakespeare’s “myriad-minded” plurality has been a critical cliché since Coleridge. Juxtaposing the multiplicities of the geological epoch and the four-century-old plays might do something more complex than clarifying the meanings of each separate entity. We won’t end up with a new “Shakespeare” or a newly-Shakespearean sense of our geological epoch but instead a productive entanglement of unlike things. When these archives of knowledge and habits of critical thinking touch each other, as these contributions show, strange new things emerge. In this response, I’ll think about how the encounter between the Anthropocene and Shakespeare speaks to the three nouns in my title. We need to frame an adequate politics for the Anthropocene. A broadly Shakespearean poetics can help. But the scale-shifting challenges of history may limit any such politico-poetic gambit. The Anthropocene, I suggest, may be best conceived as a problem in poetic form.

Politics!

When thinking about the essays in my half of the group, I began by trying to divide the political from the poetic. All the papers emphasize the political implications of their literary analyses. Sara Crover reads Richard II’s failed stewardship of the garden of England in terms of twenty-first century Canadian environmental politics. Ameer Sohrawardy unveils George Sandys’s polytemporal descriptions of the Near East in terms of twenty-first century geopolitics. Charles Whitney uncovers Shakespearean tragedy in terms of Agnotocene (“Ignorance-cene”) failures to respond to intergenerational claims for justice. Shannon Garner-Balandrin turns toward early modern romance as a means to conceptualize climate change. McKenna Rose finds in Marlowe’s Faustus, in particular its handling of blood as stage property and symbol, resonant formulations for engaging environmental catastrophe.
Political imperatives drive the essays, but in every case the authors also invoke poetic form. Crover’s activism concludes with a plea for new metaphors for human-nonhuman relations. Sohrawardy’s multiple temporalities and spaces generate complex generic templates for the Anthropocene. Whitney uses the genre of tragedy to protest the willful ignorance and apathy of twenty-first century policy makers. Rose uncovers a globalizing early modern logic in Faustus. Garner-Balandrin shows how Macbeth, a play Whitney also explores, stages the challenge of prophetic knowledge, which is arguably the double-binding knowledge that climate science provides us with today. Because of scientific prophecy, we know what the Sisters tell Macbeth: that we will destroy the world.

These papers highlight the enmeshment of Anthropocene politics and early modern poetics. Their oscillation between these modes echoes the split between historicism and presentism that arguably defines premodern ecostudies. Most Shakespearean ecocritics fall into this alternating trap, as do most of the eco-theorists cited in this issue, from Ghosh to Morton to Latour, Bogost, and Bonneuil and Fressoz. I don’t think we can avoid it, and I think environmental humanists do our best work precisely when we recognize and strategize about our shifts across modes, scales, and objects of study.

Among theorists of Anthropocene politics, Jedediah Purdy and Jason Moore have interesting things to contribute to bridging politics and poetics. Purdy, a law professor, seeks in After Nature (2015) a model for an “Anthropocene democracy,” which he admits may just be a “productive fiction” (270) but which also points toward a somewhat hopeful future that seems more elusive today that it did when I read his book in the first half of 2016. Purdy invokes “a democracy open to the strange intuitions of post-humanism: intuitions of ethical affinity with other species, of the moral importance of landscapes and climates, of the permeable line between humans and the rest of the living world” (282). I find solace in this incremental approach, while I worry about its limitations.

A political inverse appears in the eco-Marxist radicalism of Jason Moore’s Capitalism in the Web of Life (2015), which insists that the Anthropocene is really the Capitolocene, and the era’s destructive consequences derive from five centuries of colonialist exploitation that began squarely within the early modern period. But Moore’s analysis recalls that “Nature can neither be destroyed nor saved, only reconfigured” (48). The task of the environmental humanities includes uncovering or imagining these reconfigurations. The heart of this project may shift the emphasis from politics to poetics, or perhaps arrive at politics through poetic forms.

**Poetics!**

I’ve long felt that the special contribution literary studies can make to eco-thinking is articulating a poetics or a form for conceptualizing human-nonhuman relationships. Genre, in fact, may be the essential literary critical tool for ecological thinking in the Anthropocene. My favorite image of ecological resilience and peril
Politics! Poetics! History?

is a swimming human body immersed in the World Ocean, but these papers each craft powerful alternative versions of eco-poetics. Whitney requests that we all become murderous Hamlets. Rose hopes that rethinking “materiality” in theatrical terms can revivify the global imagination of Faustus. Sohrawardy unravels spatial and temporal multiplicity in Sandys’s early modern Holy Land. Garner-Balandrin repurposes the material entanglements of early modern romance. Crover makes a plea for post-stewardship metaphors. Each of these innovations suggests a newly configured eco-poetics of dynamic possibility. At the risk of putting my finger on only one side of a delicate terminological scale, I further suggest that these versions of eco-poetics collectively advance the larger project of post-sustainability ecocriticism.

A new critical model that I find both useful and chastening for Anthropocene poetics appears Donna Haraway’s recent book, Staying with the Trouble (2016). Haraway advances yet another neologism for our age: the Chthulucene, which she clarifies does not invoke the same Cthulhu as H. P. Lovecraft’s slumbering Elder God, and in fact some of the letters “h” are in different places in these two C(h)thul(h)us (101). She also uses the term “the trouble” to describe the way we live now. Haraway asks us to “make kin …[and] make trouble, to stir up potent response to devastating events, as well as to settle troubled waters and rebuild quiet places” (1). She offers trouble as an alternative to both techno-utopian solutions and tragic despair. Trouble seems a proper task for humanist poetics in the Anthropocene.

History?

The term that might bridge the politico-poetic divide but that also seems potentially fraught is history. In terms of a tool for cultural analysis, the Anthropocene is a new idea, generally agreed to have been coined around 2000, but the phenomenon it describes, in which human activity influences the climate system, is variously conceived as seventy or two hundred or five hundred or ten thousand years old. The search-for-origins rush that Golden Spike discourse around the Anthropocene has launched has spread from the sciences to social sciences and humanities. If the Anthropocene emerges from what Timothy Morton calls “agrologistics,” a way of conceptualizing the nonhuman environment as tool and resource associated with the dawn of agriculture ten millennia ago, its flavor of radical newness may dissipate (13-18). What balance should we strike between recognizing traces of Anthropocene thinking in the historical record, including the works of Shakespeare, and emphasizing the radical novelty of the post-industrial present?

Here I’m happy to admit culpability and a slow journey to complexity in my own recent critical practice. When I first read Lewis and Maslin’s argument for the 1610 “Orbis” spike, I jumped in and waved the bloody Prospero flag. Even so, I never quite believed in the firmness of the 1610 date, both because that claim seemed no better than several other contenders and because I remain committed
Shakespeare in the Anthropocene

to a plural version of the origin-mania that defines and disfigures Anthropocene studies, as it also does Renaissance historiography. I later revised my early speculations on the 1610 Anthropocene into a book chapter in the collection Anthropocene Reading, in which I emphasize that “I don’t believe in magic numbers” including the number 1610.9 My anxiety about Golden Spikes and how we think about early modernity as a period of transformation speaks to the risks inherent in the teleologies that travel alongside terms like history, Renaissance, and modernity, not to mention Anthropocene. The ‘cene in Anthropocene means “new” (from the Greek kainos, as coined by nineteenth-century geologist Sir Charles Lyell) but it’s also coming to refer to an Age-by-Age structural progression of geohistory. I’d argue, to some extent against my own first instincts regarding the 1610 Anthropocene, that we need to beware the ‘cene as another potential manifestation of progressivism, Whig history, or Swerve-ism.

The important point here, I think, is that the Anthropocene concept should not be anthropocentric. The Age of Man is about weakness and vulnerability, not power or control. Justin Kolb’s notion of abjection, which he introduces in his contribution to this issue, emphasizes this point. In place of eternal progress and transformative modernity we require a deeply plural and posthuman theory of catastrophism to place the Anthropocene in history. This approach appears in Jeremy Davies’s brilliant The Birth of the Anthropocene (2016), on which John Mitchell’s essay draws extensively.10 Posthuman plurality also figures in co-respondent Jeffrey Cohen’s gorgeous book Earth, co-written with planetary scientist Lindy Elkins-Tanton—but perhaps that hint toward catastrophe, scale, and the poetics of collaborative imaginations is all I have time to drop onto the table now.11

Notes

Politics! Poetics! History?


---