EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES

***Water and Cognition in Early Modern English Literature*, ed. by Nic Helms and Steve Mentz (Amsterdam University Press, 2024). 314 pp. ISBN 9789463724791**

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Water and Cognition, edited by Nic Helms and Steve Mentz, considers watery spaces in conjunction with cognitive studies. Cognition, in this sense, considers 'ideas about the "extended mind" and other forms of distributed cognition' (p. 11). As Helms and Mentz demonstrate, *Water and Cognition* brings together cognitive science and ecocriticism to ask how the environment influences how humans think, and how they think about thinking' (p. 13). Displaying the work of sixteen prominent scholars in the fields of Early Modern English literature, Cognitive studies, Ecocriticism or 'Blue' Humanities, and History, this collection explores the connections between water and thinking from a range of disciplinary perspectives. Terming the attempt 'watery thinking', this collection demonstrates the opportunity afforded by exploring aquatic space, its structure and scientific definitions, in conjunction with the human cognitive experience. It also, examines the ways in which water, and its interdisciplinary applications, have been greatly overlooked in our critical history.

In section one, 'Drowning on Stage', essays by Rose McKenna, Lianne Habinek, Tony Perello, and Maya Wright, explore the understudied connections between the influences of 'watery thinking' and cognitive processes on the Renaissance stage. Rose McKenna's essay discusses the representation of corruption and betrayal throughout Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, by analysing the classical theory of the liquid substances or 'humours' that made up the human body against the growing 'natural' scientific developments of Shakespeare's England. McKenna considers the ecocritical importance of the Thames's inhospitable and stormy waters, along with the hypothetical audience's cognitive thinking in perceiving Hamlet, and the ghost of his father. Described with extensive imagery of pollution and toxicity, ghostly King Hamlet relates his death to his son, likening his poisoning to a city-wide invasion. McKenna argues that 'in this allegory, the poison that killed King Hamlet corrupted both the literal blood of his body and the

royal bloodline, as well as the waterways of the kingdom' (p. 37). Pollution in this sense affects both the human and the natural spaces of Elsinore, and metaphors of toxicity prompt the main action and tragedy of the entire play. McKenna further states that 'the toxic conditions of early modern waterways not only shapes the ways characters think about thinking but also frames their perception of the natural world' (p. 32). This essay, as a result, underscores the toxic nature of both waterways and political structures in Shakespeare's dramas.

Lianne Habinek expands this idea of structuring cognitive processes through watery imagery, by considering the importance of spectatorship in Ophelia's death scene. Habinek first establishes the Lucretian idea of the pleasure experienced by being a spectator of shipwreck, that they experience this through a sense of relief that they are not themselves in danger. Habinek notes that 'in a metaphorical sense, the distance underlines the difference between the safe and the toiling, the solid and the fluid, the known and the uncertain' (p. 48). Through this lens, both Queen Gertude and a hypothetical audience are then examined, in their position as superior, yet flawed, onlookers of the spectacle of Ophelia's death. The simultaneous awed detachment and horrified closeness of the encounter is one that 'tends to lull to sleep our critical awareness' (p. 53). Habinek demonstrates the different versions of Gertrude's recollection of events when relaying it to the other characters, not to mention the different accounts of the Grave Diggers in later scenes. The deviation of Gertrude's perception alludes to the uncertain, toiling, fluid nature of Ophelia's death, occurring both off-stage and immersed in water. The cognitive processes enacted in observing drowning in performance distort and question our reality. Ophelia's agency, Habinek argues, is intrinsic to her watery death.

Tony Perello's essay explores the aspect of 'watery' dreams in *Richard III,* establishing connections between intuition and the 'automaticity' of watery thinking. Perello asks what Shakespeare's plays, which are rooted in Anthropocene-centric concerns, can advise us in our own time of climate crisis. Perello builds on critical ideas such as the 'extended mind theory', that 'points to the crucial difference between brain and mind, opening a pathway for the theory of emotional contagion, which emphasizes the importance of other minds in the human environment in shaping and guiding the ebb and flow of our individual emotional states' (p.70). Discussing inference, intuition, and emotional contagion through human concourse, Perello discusses the turbulent relationship between Richard and Clarence in the play. By exploring the dreams and nightmares of Stanley, Richard, and Clarence, Perello considers the political and emotional implications of each character's actions throughout the play. As a result, Machiavellian scepticism, as well as themes of doubt, control and power dominate the

play, particularly through the waterlogged dreams of Richard himself. Watery dreams in *Richard III* represent much about the internal processes of its characters' ideas and actions that become automatic and reciprocal. Ultimately, it is water that conveys meaning in the cognition of Shakespeare's monarchs.

Maya Wright concludes section one with a similar exploration of Marlowe's *Edward II,* this time exploring the polluted space of a sewer, home to the imprisoned King Edward at the end of the drama. Like Habinek, McKenna, and Perello, Wright highlights the importance of considering watery thinking within these fictional English monarchies. Edward II is yet another figure whose construction shows a deep connection with toxic and polluted water spaces. Wright however argues that 'the grotesquely amphibian, upright body of the tortured king needs to be read against the more mobile, submerged, horizontal swimmers who populate the play's imaginary', such as Gaveston, Isabella and Mortimer, to explore pleasure, sanity, and stateliness (p. 92). The focuses of this essay are wetness in various forms, and utilising imagery 'prevailing anxiety about uprightness' through both horizontal and vertical depictions of men. Wright ultimately argues that 'Thinking with fish and sewage, speaking a language that traces the interpenetration of environments, these characters have to ask where they belong and how they should proceed' (p. 110). As a result, watery thinking, polluted or not, is intrinsic to the cognitive process of identity formation, as well as the hurdles of belonging and community that arise along the way.

Section two, 'Fluid Metaphors', brings together the efforts of scholars Benjamin Bertram, Douglas Clark, and Jennifer Hamilton, to further address the connections between water, sovereignty, and the mind. Benjamin Bertram opens with a discussion of Richard of Gloucester in *Henry VI, Part III,* emphasising that exploring water through the lens of disability studies shows that 'water is enabling at times and disabling at others' (p. 117). Particularly considering his tears in the play, Richard's interior self and external environments are linked by their very watery components. Bertram argues that 'Far from being merely an external manifestation of an internal, self-enclosed cognitive state, tears merge with the rest of the watery world; indeed, water does not respect boundaries between the subjective and the objective, the interior and the exterior' (p. 116). Richard's inability to control his inner 'elemental flows' serves as a mirror to his social climbing antics and develops into a relational nature/human element in his struggle for sovereignty.

Douglas Clark considers 'The sea of the mind in Early Modern Poetry'. Clark discusses the marine imagery that links moral corruption and thought processes to a turbulent, stormy seascape throughout the period. Like Bertram, Clark establishes a

‘communicative medium’ of water, through which poets and playwrights alike attempt to ‘identify the cause and solution of personal discomfort in mental activity’ (pp. 141-2). Exploring the poetry of Arthur Warren primarily, Clark makes efforts to pinpoint the ways in which Early Modern poetry bares the ‘naked mind’ on the page, and how it consistently relies on marine imagery to convey emotions and cognitive turbulence effectively.

Jennifer Hamilton closes the section by exploring the representation of water, sovereignty, and emotion in *King Lear.* Considering the variable social position of Lear’s daughters in the play, Hamilton suggests that ‘Lear cannot find any viable way to express his emotions around his end of life other than for his daughters to, in one way or another, take full and complete responsibility for him and exclusively on his terms’ (p. 159). The methods with which he does so exemplify the constraints of his position as sovereign. Lear’s tears and understanding of the storm around him are the conduits through which Hamilton asserts her argument, one in which ‘masculine invulnerability’ is a condition of rule, and care relies on ‘the obligatory self-sacrifice of women alone’ (p. 160). Rather than previous discussions about the fluidity of watery spaces, Hamilton takes care to assess the potential limitations of such spaces too. Ultimately then, moving ahead of constrictive ‘dualisms’ of nature/human binaries, *King Lear* too explores a space of sovereignty that confronts the ‘limits of the human condition’ (p. 162). It does so, however, through both storms and tears.

In Section three, ‘Forms of Water’, Lowell Duckert, Gwilym Jones, and William Kerwin discuss snow, fog, and ‘speaking water’ respectively. Duckert examines the construction and geometry of snowflakes, through the scientific literature of Johannes Kepler, Olaus Magnus, and Frederick Marten. Duckert contrasts predominantly humoral theories from the period, with his own idea of ‘flake thinking’. This methodology, he argues, demonstrates a yearning of ‘human desires *to* understand: an impulsive projection of pattern onto the world’s messy fluidity’ (p. 181). Making the essay follow the structure of ‘six’ points, as the spokes of a snowflake, Duckert examines the ‘mind-body-environment assemblage’ that forms within the snowflake’s sedimented structure. Early modern studies of snowflakes, Duckert posits, offers us the opportunity to ‘re-think “cognition” itself’, and reveal that our ‘embodied encounters with elemental forces’ offer branches of knowledge that are widely overlooked, and under-appreciated (p. 182).

Gwilym Jones continues the study of water’s varying forms with the connection of fog and metaphors applied to mental states and thinking within early modern England. Exploring the literary work of Shakespeare alongside early modern humoral thinkers,

Jones explores similar territory to Rose McKenna's essay in section one. Jones, however, argues for the importance of exploring 'elemental thinking' and the contradictions within it, noting that 'The relationship between fog and thinking is most obvious in its opposite: when we think without fog, we think clearly' (p. 200). Fog is one of the oldest metaphors for thinking according to Jones, and alongside darkness, this form of water is one inextricably related to the processing of human emotion and conflict. Analysing fog on the Early Modern stage allows Jones to connect with the cultural reception of this metaphor and conclude that 'Rather than a simple inability to focus clearly, a fog in the early modern brain is actively terrifying and detrimental' (p. 204). At the close, through discussing Thomas Middleton's *Triumph of Truth*, the idea of 'conceptual blending' is established as a foundational strategy in the connection of fog and thinking. Jones demonstrates how humans are 'habitually blending concepts and metaphors' (p. 208). This conceptual blending emerges most prominently on stage where the very concept of identity is transformed and shifted. As a result, perception and cognition are intuitively connected to fog, perhaps more so than any other form of water examined so far.

William Kerwin discusses 'seeping memory' in Michael Drayton's *Poly-Olbion,* focusing on the overlooked importance of English rivers and their connection to the construction of memory in past literature. Discussing Lowell Duckert's 'hydropoesis', Kerwin seeks the attachment of river imagery to the very concept of memory, arguing that 'the lands and the rivers, if listened to, offer up a system of human cognition, […] as we all think about where our memories come from, where our memories are kept, and how water can think, remember, and protest' (p. 220). It is, then, through the rivers, that connections between cultural perception and cognitive formations are made.
In section four: 'Submersive Tendencies', Dyani Jones Taff discusses the 'political rage' of the personified Thames River in Hester Pulter's poem 'The Complaint of the Thames'. This makes Taff's essay the first in the collection to analyse the very perception and cognition of a watery body itself, as *Thames* laments the parliamentary conflicts of 1647 London. Racial and class tensions are apparent throughout the poem, such as the charged descriptions of monsters and environments. Taff is careful to point out the socio-political problems in Pulter's choices as poet, albeit within the context of the period. Utilising the work of Kyle Whyte, Taff finishes by offering a solution to confronting these biases: 'perhaps we can instead renew and build "systems of responsibility" and relationships with our human and more than human communities, built on "consent, diplomacy, trust, and redundancy" (p. 251). Like the Thames in the poem, approaching the connections between watery bodies and human ones is something inherently political.

Benjamin D. VanWagoner contributes to this idea of political rage also, discussing jurisdiction 'as a form of oceanic cognition' in John Dryden's *Amboyna, or The Cruelties of the Dutch to the English* (1673). VanWagoner explores how 'Dryden's play is concerned with the political management of oceanic space, oceanic resources, and oceanic peoples' (p. 258). He argues for the importance of analysing the authority of oceanic jurisdiction, and its inherently political nature, stating that 'jurisdiction draws lines beyond which bodies become things' (p. 259). VanWagoner also stresses the importance of reflecting on the political and colonial boundaries drawn in the period, and how literature expresses the tendencies to overlook the authority, and animacy, held in these oceanic spaces. Finally, utilising the work of Glissant, Said, and Hau'ofa, VanWagoner closes by considering the importance of oceanic boundaries for post-colonial thinking and cognitive processes. The environmental and political limitations of the colonial literature, as well as the oceanic barriers expressed within it, expand postcolonial thinking of bodies, performance, and spaces.

Sandra Young takes these ideas further, utilising thinking about the ocean as a cognitive process and decolonial strategy. According to Young, 'oceanic imaginary' persists throughout literature and culture, an imaginary that is paradoxically limitless and confining, depending on the work at hand. It is in considering the intersections between these two conflicting views of watery spaces that Young explores how escaping history's 'linearity' sheds light on the legal and social ramifications on watery spaces in early modern England. Particularly looking at dispossession through characters like Sycorax in William Shakespeare's *The Tempest,* Young argues for a 'critical alignment with the ocean', to allow for deeper understanding of 'histories of injustice' (p. 283). Young states, 'In early modernity the rigid logic of coloniality evolved with the need to control the ocean. The ocean figured as a frontier of sorts, a gateway to a world that seemed to invite exploration. But this depended on the capacity to imagine the ocean as knowable and navigable' (p. 288). It is in this limitation that an underwater archive is overlooked, and knowledge of policy, narrative, and territories are missed, or rather, underrepresented. Young calls for postcolonial Shakespeare studies to approach texts with a new method, governed by oceanic spaces rather than linear historical timelines. To see the ocean through history as linear is to miss the bountiful imaginary of dispossession, injustice, power and narrative through our literary past. The ocean, analysed in this way, essentially becomes a cognitive process in and of itself.

Evelyn Tribble closes the collection with a succinct and thought-provoking afterword, 'Thinking Water'. As she surmises, 'to label a process "cognitive" is not to relegate it to brainbound ratiocination; instead, our authors imagine "thinking" in rich and dynamic coordination with emotions, with the built and natural environment, and with the social

world. Cognition is thus embodied, emotional, and deeply embedded in its cultural and material environments, which change across history and context' (p. 303). Pulling from each of the remarkable scholars in this collection, Tribble pieces a commentary and acknowledgement together that cultivates the most memorable ideas presented in the volume. *Water and Cognition* is a collection that ambitiously furthers its various ecocritical, cognitive, and blue humanities interests. The essays flow nicely into complementary ideas and suggestions for further research. Overall, the collection contributes an interdisciplinary, non-linear, ambitious display of ideas that demonstrate the capabilities of modern humanities research. By thinking about thinking in this way, and casting aside disciplinary or geographical boundaries, there is much that can be explored in the literatures of our past — research that, if given consideration, may indeed form new ways of thinking across our fields in the future.