SPOTLIGHT ON SHAKESPEARE

Shakespeare on the Ecological Surface

Liz Oakley-Brown

Shakespeare
on the Ecological Surface

Shakespeare on the Ecological Surface uses the concept of the 'surface' to examine the relationship between contemporary performance and ecocriticism. Each section looks, in turn, at the 'surfaces' of slick, smoke, sky, steam, soil, slime, snail, silk, skin and stage to build connections between ecocriticism, activism, critical theory, Shakespeare and performance.

While the word 'surface' was never used in Shakespeare's works, Liz Oakley-Brown shows how thinking about Shakespearean surfaces helps readers explore the politics of Elizabethan and Jacobean culture. She also draws surprising parallels with our current political and ecological concerns. The book explores how Shakespeare uses ecological surfaces to help understand other types of surfaces in his plays and poems: characters' public-facing selves; contact zones between characters and the natural world; surfaces upon which words are written; and physical surfaces upon which plays are staged.

This book will be an illuminating read for anyone studying Shakespeare, early modern culture, ecocriticism, performance and activism.

Liz Oakley-Brown is Senior Lecturer in the Department of English Literature and Creative Writing at Lancaster University, UK. Her publications include *The Rituals and Rhetoric of Queenship: Medieval to Early Modern* (co-edited with Louise J. Wilkinson; 2009), *Shakespeare and the Translation of Identity in Early Modern England* (2011) and *Twelfth Night: A Critical Reader* (co-edited with Alison Findlay; 2014).

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LIZ OAKLEY-BROWN

Shakespeare on the Ecological Surface

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This book is dedicated to all the students in the Department of English Literature and Creative Writing at Lancaster University, UK. Your indefatigable passion for reading, thinking, writing and discussion makes everything I do in Higher Education worthwhile.

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Textual note

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Unless otherwise stated, the spelling of unedited early printed sources has been retained. I have modernised i/j; u/v.

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Abbreviations

ODNB	*Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, www.oxforddnb.com/
OED	*Oxford English Dictionary Online*, www.oed.com/

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Introduction

Surface—now and then

Contemporary popular culture is keen to credit Shakespeare, often incorrectly, with the coinage of some English term or another. Instead of celebrating Shakespeare as a point of origin, my book is interested in an omission. *Shakespeare on the Ecological Surface* works out from the curious fact that Shakespearean drama and non-dramatic verse don't use the noun 'surface'. There are words like it—for example, 'superficial' in *Henry VI Part One* (5.7.10) and *Measure for Measure* (3.1.379)—but not 'surface' per se. My book extends awareness of this peculiar gap, an evocative flashpoint which came to light at a conference I co-convened in 2015 on 'Scrutinizing Surfaces in Early Modern Thought'.[1] As a consequence of this linguistic lacuna, three main questions underpin my critical perspective of Shakespeare's plays and poems:

What are the implications of the surfacing of the word 'surface' itself?
How does a consideration of Shakespearean surfaces help to explore premodern cultural politics?
To what extent does thinking about surfaces in Shakespeare's texts and their afterlives put a spotlight on twenty-first century ecological concerns?

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Given all the current evidence for climate collapse, and as my book's title suggests, the third question is the most pressing one. From an openly presentist[2] point of view, I tie my exploration of the term and concept of surface to three areas of twenty-first century scholarship: critical medical humanities, environmental studies and social activism. As *Shakespeare on the Ecological Surface* is broadly interested in the naming of surfaces—the moment when 'surface' seems to become a thing itself—my discussion is also aligned with object studies and what some have seen as a developing field of surface studies.[3] Via one of the most canonical set of texts in Anglophone cultures and societies, my book argues that humans live on, with, among and manipulate surfaces and is organised into ten short sections headed by alliterative keyword case studies—Slick, Smoke, Sky, Steam, Soil, Slime, Snail, Silk, Skin and Stage—as a reminder of the relationality between these apparently disparate but, as I try to suggest, necessarily interconnected things.

When Michel Foucault theorised how invisible networks of power disciplined the body, he famously used Jeremy Bentham's nineteenth-century architectural design of the Panopticon to help explain his concept. 'Power', he argues, 'has its principle not so much in a person as in a certain concerted distribution of bodies, *surfaces*, lights, gazes; in an arrangement whose internal mechanisms produce the relation in which individuals are caught up' (my emphasis).[4] In doing so, Foucault suggests that surfaces are important components of social surveillance. And yet, it's tricky to ascertain what constitutes a surface in the first place.

As part of the twenty-first century's general turn to surfaces, surface studies is framed by discussions such as Isla Forsyth, Hayden Lorimer, Peter Merriman and James Robinson's 'What Are Surfaces?'[5] and Mike Anusas and Cristián Simonetti's

volume of essays *Surfaces: Transformations of Body, Materials and Earth*.[6] Generally underpinned by William Gibson's and Tim Ingold's respective takes on surfaces as zones of perception and becoming, this compelling collection of essays on topics such as 'air, smoke and fumes in Aymara and Maupache rituals', skin and taxidermy, and knitting[7] show this growing field's dynamism:

> Considering surfaces, knowledge of the world is not that of an optical incision through superficiality to the matters of a fixed depth in waiting but rather that of a responsive sensorial encounter with entanglements of life that are ever moving and growing... Dialoguing with these complementary agendas on sensing and mattering, this volume seeks to overcome dichotomies of modern thought by attending to surfaces not as entities on one side of a division but rather as transformative thresholds which manifest different qualities in the meeting of minds, bodies, materials and earth.[8]

Like Anusas and Simonetti, I'm especially interested in troubling modernity's violent hierarchy of surface and depth, but my approach is by way of Shakespeare. In many ways, *Shakespeare on the Ecological Surface* thinks of the author's plays and poems as 'transformative thresholds' produced in a European epoch, foregrounding a 'responsive sensorial encounter with entanglements of life' that take a back seat with the rise of Cartesian dualism and the Enlightenment's general preference for rationality and order.

One of my greatest intellectual debts in exploring Shakespearean surfaces is to Joseph A. Amato's 2013 book *Surfaces: A History*, a critical/creative transhistorical study which looks at 'our relation to surfaces in order to carry out a historical, philosophical, and anthropological meditation

on humans as self-reflecting, self-defining, and self-making creatures'.[9] Along the way, and as a means of considering how 'surfaces, in all their variety, define margins, set down borders, establish grids, and form interfaces' and 'materialize the great juxtaposition between inside and outside', Amato makes two brief but important references to Shakespeare: a quotation from *Hamlet* to exemplify rhetoric's relational capacity to make meaning and a comment on Shakespearean tragedy's ability to show how cultural consensus consolidates meaning and 'turns surfaces into the coin of the realm'.[10] As Amato observes, Shakespeare shows how the slipperiness of meaning in language is held in place by social and political ideologies. My sustained focus on the late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century writer's work takes up Amato's observations and allows me to take a deeper dive into suggestive connections between critical medical humanities, environmental studies, social activism and object studies as well as how they engage with premodern European outlooks.

The overarching idea of my book, then, is that the surfacing of the noun 'surface' in the vernacular marks a shift in England's relationship with the world. My main point is that the Shakespearean texts' avoidance of the word 'surface' is striking when placed against our own period's fascination with it. (A companion piece to my discussion of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English writings and cultures is Cynthia Sundberg Wall's brilliant book *The Prose of Things: Transformation of Description in the Eighteenth Century*, which considers how the later period 'demand[ed] to see the surfaces of their worlds'.[11]) I'm not saying that Shakespeare and his contemporaries didn't think about surfaces or try to theorise them. After all, the first published English translation of Euclid's *The Elements of Geometries* (300 BC) by

Henry Billingsley appeared in 1570 and contains remarkable pop-up illustrations to accompany its discussion of three-dimensional geometry.[12] Rather, I'm interested in the fact that the word itself isn't recorded in the English vernacular until Shakespeare's lifetime (the digitised collection Early English Books Online [EEBO] suggests the earliest date is 1581 while the OED says 1594). I'm also gripped by the idea that the term 'surface' starts to circulate in English at roughly the same time that some scientists suppose that the Anthropocene—the geological epoch describing humankind's impact on the earth's climate and environment—began with the so-called Orbis hypothesis and the change in CO_2 circa 1610.[13]

Drawing particular attention to premodern colonisation's propensity for massacre, Philip John Usher, after Simon L. Lewis and Mark A. Maslin, explains the relationship between those deaths and climate change:

> the arrival of Europeans in the New World in 1492 and the subsequent century of slaughter of indigenous populations—whose numbers fell by approximately fifty million—might serve to mark the beginning of the Anthropocene. The [Orbis] hypothesis turns mainly on the fact that the huge number of deaths resulted in a near cessation of farming, a reduction in fire use for land management, the regeneration of over fifty million hectares of forest, savanna, and grassland, and thus in a significant increase in carbon sequestration.[14]

While Usher's book-lengthy study called *Exterranean: Extraction in the Humanist Anthropocene*, as its title suggests, isn't about emission but withdrawal, this account of the Orbis hypothesis starts to emphasise the devastating effects of asymmetrical

power relations between human and non-human inhabitants of the earth. Kathryn Yusof's *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, 'a meditation on the politics and poetics of abjection that underpin the becoming of the Anthropocene as a material and durational fact in bodies and environments',[15] shows how those fifteenth-century New World encounters contribute to twenty-first century constructions of race and gender. Usher's work doesn't go as far as Yusof's. Nonetheless, Usher's book mindfully breaks apart the hierarchical binary structure of surface and depth that's been in place since Nicholas Steno's geological concept of stratigraphic time[16] in the late seventeenth century. Such foregoing factors mean that the production of Shakespeare's plays and poems coincide with the rise of exploration, excavation and colonial enterprise enabled by social and economic privilege.

Shakespeare on the Ecological Surface doesn't suggest that the avoidance of the word 'surface' in Shakespeare's plays and poems is a conscious lipogramatic exercise. Figures of speech (simile, metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and so on) stand in for 'surface' and as such they are culturally contingent and open to interpretation; Shakespearean drama's non-verbal signs (stage directions, set design, props, clothing) also influence that interpretation. Moreover, sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century culture endorses a relational worldview based on the four elements—earth, air, fire, water—which has little need for concepts of surficial division. Such an elemental experience is found in one of Shakespeare's favourite source texts, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*:

> the endless world contains four generative
> bodies. The two more massive ones of these,
> water and earth, sink under gravity,

> The others, rising weightless and unhindered,
> are air and fire, purer than air. Though set
> apart in space. They form out of each other
> and pass into each other. Earth dissolves
> and thins to liquid. Water vaporizes,
> changing to wind and air. Air rarifies,
> losing its weight, and leaps up high as fire.
> Then they repeat this order in reverse:
> Fire condenses, changing into air,
> the water. Liquid hardens into earth.[17]

Shakespeare's works are thus caught up in a shift from a culture that values joined-up elemental thinking to one that so readily thinks with surfaces that the political freight of the word itself has been overlooked. Surfaces help to sort out the multifarious and complex physical issues of being human in the first place, for example the difference between inaccessible and accessible terrains. We can't do without them, or at least the idea of them, but it's worth keeping in mind that the word 'surface' is held in place by visible and invisible systems of power, knowledge and cultural consensus.

Back in the early 2000s, Gabriel Egan revived E.M.W. Tillyard's 1943 discussion in *The Elizabethan World Picture* about the 'the chain of being' (the hierarchical Christian belief system that ordered the world from God down to plants, rocks and minerals) and put it into conversation with James Lovelock and Lyn Margulis' 1970's Gaia principle (the idea that 'the earth acts like a living organism—that life is part of a self-regulating system, manipulating the physical and chemical environment to maintain the planet as a suitable home for life itself'[18]) to make a case for a historically inflected ecocritical approach to Shakespeare.[19] While the idea of

planetary thought seems more democratic than say a 'chain of being', thinkers such as Bruno Latour have extended Lovelock and Margulis' Gaia principle as a means of troubling concepts of worlding in the first place:

> he who looks at the Earth as a Globe always sees himself as a God. If the sphere is what one wishes to contemplate passively when one is tired of history, how can one manage to trace the connections of the Earth without depicting a sphere? By a movement that turns back on itself, in the form of a *loop.*[20]

Shakespeare's Ulysses provides some notion of just how difficult it is to shift from the comfort of spherical planetary mindsets to other conceptual modes:

> The heavens themselves, the planets and this centre
> Observe degree, priority and place,
> Infixture, course, proportion, season, form,
> Office and custom, in all line of order.
> …
>   O, when degree is shaked,
> Which is the ladder to all high designs,
> Then enterprise is sick. How could communities,
> Degrees in schools and brotherhoods in cities,
> Peaceful commerce from dividable shores,
> The primogenity and due of birth,
> Prerogative of age, crowns, sceptres, laurels,
> But by degree stand in authentic place?
> Take but degree away, untune that string,
> And hark what discord follows. Each thing meets
> In mere oppugnancy. The bounded waters

> Should lift their bosoms higher than the shores
> And make a sop of all this solid globe;
>
> (*Troilus and Cressida* 1.3.85–113)

Amid a passionate 63-line speech about the Greek army's faults and the dangers of anarchy, Ulysses's image of 'sop' ('a lump of soaked bread')[21] comes close to Latour's reckoning of the earth as less of a solid globe than a 'tissue of globabble'.[22]

But it wasn't language that kick-started my critical interest in Shakespearean surfaces. Shakespeare's comedy *As You Like It* is often singled out for its fusion of non-human and human attributes. Far from being a convenient setting for the play's comic business, *As You Like It*'s Forest of Arden is a crucial character in its own right. Along with Duke Senior and the rest of the exiled court, the audience 'Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, / Sermons in stones, and good in everything' (2.1.16–17). And Andrzej Krauze's poster for Tim Albery's Old Vic production of *As You Like It* (May 1989) brilliantly captures the play's dramatisation of translation and transformation.[23] Blending landscape and skinscape, Krauze's drawing probes *As You Like It*'s approach to the surface: the

> boundary condition that comes into being through the active relation of two or more distinct entities or conditions, the interface [which] may be distinguished from the *surface*. The *sur-face*, as a facing above or upon (*sur*-) a given thing, refers first of all back to the thing it surfaces, rather than to a relation between two or more things.[24]

Krauze's poster emphasises *As You Like It*'s playful interest in bringing things together rather than keeping them apart. In

this comedic scenario, 'boundary conditions' are pushed, tested and occasionally collapse.

The same Old Vic season featured two further Shakespearean plays, both interested in bringing humans and the environment into view: *King Lear* (March 1989) and *The Tempest* (October to November 1988). Again, Krauze's posters help us to consider how these adaptations of Shakespeare's generically different works treat surfaces. By contrast with his artwork for Shakespeare's comedy, Krauze's cross-sectional view of *King Lear*'s Dover shows stark demarcations between sea, cliff, vegetation and sky. Such a stratified perspective upholds the tragedy's focus on divisions of class, gender and nationhood, which stem from a sovereign's wish to retire and split his kingdom among his daughters. While two small, slanted lines are suggestive of 4.5's scene with Edgar and Gloucester on the 'chalky bourn' (57) of Dover's cliffs,[25] Krauze's poster depicts the earth's composition as texturised blocks of blue, white and green. At first glance, Krauze's artwork for *The Tempest*, featuring the reassembled fractured skull of a gently weeping ruff-trimmed bird (perhaps emblematic of 'cormorant devouring Time' (*Love's Labour's Lost* 1.1.4)) also bypasses a distinct human form. But there is something undeniably human about Krauze's skeletal image: the ruff works as a synecdoche for Elizabethan England while the small tear nestling in the corner of an eye socket bespeaks humanoid emotion. *The Tempest* reminds us, like Krauze's poster for the play, that 'We are such stuff/ As dreams are made on, and our little life/ Is rounded with a sleep' (4.1.56–8). In the end, humans die. But Krauze's image also recalls plague-masks, ancestral face coverings anticipating the protective layers we were asked to wear at the outbreak of Covid-19: hoped-for protective surfaces between living bodies and corporeal remains.

When I began working on Shakespearean surfaces in 2007,[26] the publication of Emily St. John Mandel's eerily prophetic dystopian novel *Station Eleven* was still seven years away. St. John Mandel's narrative begins with a professional performance of *King Lear* on a winter's night in Toronto with 'The King stood in a pool of blue light, unmoored'[27] as a lethal virus takes hold of North America. Looking back to my first reading of *Station Eleven* in 2014, I couldn't have imagined writing a book on Shakespearean surfaces during a global pandemic. It wasn't until my co-workers and I received swift instruction to leave our offices on Lancaster University's campus in the north west of England on Friday, 21 March 2020 that Covid-19, the by now all-too familiar name for just one strain of coronavirus, took hold of day-to-day life in ways I still can't fully comprehend: hands were washed red-raw; the body's temperature was regularly assessed; anti-bacterial products were spread and sprayed; face masks (fabric or disposable? under or over prescription eyewear?) donned.

The UK's first lockdown (which began on 23 March 2020, three days after we'd been told to vacate our regular places of work) unleashed a sometimes stimulating but often overwhelming opportunity for me to dwell on non-human and human surfaces. The government's daily briefings televised to the UK population between 16 March 2020 and 23 June 2020 habitually opened with the numerical increase in UK death and infection rates over the last 24 hours, sombre statistical reminders of this coronavirus' impact on the domestic population. Graphs compared the rise and fall of the UK's morbidity with the world's. In all efforts to limit the spread of the disease, public and personal surfaces thus became the UK's foci. Questions were asked about the transmission of Covid-19 and surfaces were first in National Health Service (NHS)

England's list of potential fomites.[28] Six months after the UK's lockdown began, the *Telegraph*'s short article 'How long does the coronavirus live on surfaces?' sought expert opinion to answer the question. Plastic, stainless steel, copper, cardboard and fabrics were discussed. According to Bharat Pankhania, our 'mindset' should 'be that everything, everyone, everywhere is contaminated. And whatever you handle is a potential risk'.[29] Two months later, the UK government's 'Hands, Face, Space' public information campaign extended their original surface-focussed brief to amplify the importance of ventilation as a means of infection control.[30] In the winter of 2020, new mutations of the virus appeared. On 21 January 2021, the UK 'had the highest per-capita daily death toll of any other country in the world'.[31] So far, not so good.

Living with Shakespeare's surfaces during the start of the global pandemic was an extraordinary experience. Moving swiftly from a time that carelessly embraced the freedom of journeying between houses, streets, towns and cities, I became used to Google Maps' timeline telling me I'd travelled the total of a 1-mile radius (for daily exercise, food supplies and emergencies only) in four weeks. Professional and personal social interactions were increasingly enabled by corporate conglomeration and digital privilege via platforms whose names (Zoom, Skype, Crowdcast, MicrosoftTeams) are suggestive of the very kinds of physical experience this phase of the pandemic prohibited: travel, space and assembly. Did it help me to know that 'during the 16th century, a young couple in Stratford-upon-Avon, England, lost two of their children to the bubonic plague. The pair barricaded themselves inside to protect their 3-month-old son—William Shakespeare. The legendary playwright's life was shaped by the plague'?[32] It's hard to say. Nonetheless, I agree with James Shapiro that on