Shakespeare and posthumanist theory

Article (Accepted Version)

Stenner, Rachel (2021) Shakespeare and posthumanist theory. Textual Practice. pp. 1-5. ISSN 0950-236X

This version is available from Sussex Research Online: http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/105865/

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies and may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher’s version. Please see the URL above for details on accessing the published version.

Copyright and reuse:
Sussex Research Online is a digital repository of the research output of the University.

Copyright and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable, the material made available in SRO has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

This invaluable and erudite book is the first systematic analysis of posthumanist theory and Shakespeare. It takes a well-deserved place among a cluster of landmark synthesising studies that locate the posthuman in the early modern: Stefan Herbrechter and Ivan Callus’ collection, *Posthumanist Shakespeares* (2012); Jean E. Feerick and Vin Nardizzi’s *The Indistinct Human in Renaissance Literature* (2012); Joseph Campana and Scott Maisano’s *Renaissance Posthumanism* (2016). Building on research by medievalists and by other early modernists including Gabriel Egan, Erica Fudge, and Bruce Boehrer (to name just a few), these writings mark out a field – the study of the posthuman in the premodern – vibrant enough to be recently described by Urvashi Chakravarty as ‘naturalized’. 

Chakravarty goes on to question just what else the idea of naturalisation inscribes: a marginal, exceptional, non-naturalisation, on the *outside*. Early modern race is one area now shaking off that marginality, though posthumanist analyses of this period have yet to take race into account. However, if Raber’s book is a sign, a naturalized field is far from one which has depleted its enquiry. Tightly focused on Shakespeare, and at phenomenal ease with the early modern and theoretical criticism, she walks readers through central areas of posthumanist thinking, demonstrating repeatedly the potential for growth in (to stretch a metaphor) this terrain.

By appearing in the *Arden Shakespeare and Theory* series, *Shakespeare and Posthumanist Theory* nudges its subject closer to the mainstream of current research. It does so in lucid terms amenable to undergraduate and postgraduate readers alike, as well as to advanced researchers wanting a graspable digest. The opening chapter, ‘We Have Never Been Humanist: Genealogies of Posthumanism’ (with its titular riff on Bruno Latour’s *We Have Never Been Modern*), establishes the intellectual histories of contemporary posthumanist thought. While the term is typically first ascribed to Ihab Hassan in 1977, interrogation of the premises of humanism – or the liberal humanist subject, more precisely - filters through from psychoanalysis, Marxism, feminism, post-
structuralism, and postcolonialism. Raber cites Michel Foucault’s melancholic and emblematic image (the last lines of *The Order of Things*) of ‘man’, an ‘invention of a recent date’, softly washing away. Prompted by ‘some event of which we can at the moment do no more than sense the possibility’, Foucault speculates that ‘man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea’. Raber joins the many iterations of this scene in posthumanist theory that ironically begin to posit an origin story for the human under erasure, implicitly shuttling across the centuries to face down Descartes’ *cogito*.

Yet perhaps this is inevitable in a book designed to swiftly survey the scholarship. One of its central tenets is that prior to Descartes, matters were not so neatly defined. Chapter one takes the reader through Latour, Cary Wolfe, N. Katharine Hayles at a swift pace, carefully noting critiques of these thinkers alongside their contributions. Crucially, Raber deals here with the early modern specificity of her topic: ‘where posthumanism is concerned, claiming it for Shakespeare, or Shakespeare for it, might at first blush […] seem counterintuitive - surely the Renaissance is precisely humanism’s grand moment, witnessing the birth of the reasoning agent, that paragon of creation that posthumanism dismantles’ (p. 4). Raber’s central project is to nuance the misconception that Renaissance humanism was, firstly, simply a prequel to Enlightenment humanism and, secondly, that it was hegemonically confident in the perfectibility of people. Raber successfully builds here on the scholarship of other early modernists, including Campana and Maisano, who make the case that posthumanist theorists ‘have largely conflated and confused Renaissance and Enlightenment humanisms so that a singular “humanism” has become almost synonymous with “modernity”’. It is in this important emphasis, which Raber sustains throughout, that the book speaks back to posthumanist theory, as well as being informed by it.

Chapter two, ‘Posthuman Cosmography’, is where the detailed readings of Shakespearean texts get underway. Here Raber argues that in *King Lear* Shakespeare presents characters that show the human emerging from chaos not mastery, in process and not fixed. As a counter to overestimations of early modern confidence in ‘immutable natural law’ (p. 32), Raber describes a Shakespearean
The cosmic norm of the unhinged, chaotic mutation of elements and beings. The particular argument about *King Lear* draws on Timothy Morton to suggest that the play concerns a set of hyperobjects, linked together through the failure of conceptual structures designed to explain natural phenomena. The storm, for example, has a catastrophic effect on Lear himself. As Raber explains, ‘posthumanist theory puts “the human” as a functional category into sceptical abeyance in part through an examination of the vital interconnection with non-human forces and beings that make and unmake individuals and humanity as a whole’ (p. 29). If this position about *King Lear* - the human subject to forces beyond their control - sounds familiar, Raber sees the play’s final refusal of consolation as a posthuman swerve from the solace of reconciliation. There is no cosmic organising principle which would assimilate the unmaking in Lear’s decline.

‘Bodies and Minds’, chapter three, is a superb example of Raber’s ability to convey clearly not only how aspects of the early modern world were understood, but the complex picture of critical approaches to a particular problem (in this case, embodiment). Here she turns to disability theory’s generative relationship with posthumanist theory, because of a shared interest in the way that philosophical and cultural characterisations have been used to establish human exceptionalism. The ensuing discussion of *Titus Andronicus* conducts a complex reading of Lavinia, who represents ‘the most ubiquitous premodern version of embodiment, and the posthuman condition, since both are characterized by penetrability and prosthetic supplementation, by distributing communication (or an expression of “mind”) across other people or instruments’ (p. 73). Whilst the variety of Raber’s own analyses may reveal that nothing as unitary as the posthuman condition pertains, her comments shed new light on Lavinia’s disturbing exemplarity. Moving from *Titus* to *Love’s Labours Lost*, the chapter’s second half attends to the face as the source of intersubjective ethical relations, and Raber finds that the plays stage a difficulty with the ‘material fact of having a face’ (p. 61). The problem for characters seeking stabilisation is that faces promise readability, but they conceal as much as they reveal. This section is one place where the close reading is more intriguing than persuasive. There is, for example, an overly concise articulation of the specifically posthumanist resonance of
the way that *Love’s Labours Lost* rejects ‘traditional humanist sentiments of comedic closure’ (p. 87).

The centrality of animal studies to posthumanism’s development is the focus of chapter four, ‘Neither Fish nor Fowl’. Dwelling on the mythological centaur, Chiron, and his namesake in *Titus Andronicus*, Raber develops here the most powerful reading in the book, arguing that this play, far from celebrating human civilisation, contains no apex hierarchy; nature ‘retains no categories of meaningful difference and is perfectly capable of levelling all’ (p. 113). In this view, there is no aspect of civilisation that can control the violence either of Roman habitus or Rome’s enemies. The governing motif of this chapter is hybridity; Chiron, for example, is the means by which *Titus Andronicus* ‘universalizes hybridity itself as a quintessential condition of being “human”’ (p. 108). Raber rightly, at this point, refers to postcolonial theory’s formulation of hybridity, describing ‘new catalysed or creolized groups, individuals and practices’ (p. 96) alongside the posthuman hybrid: ‘around the edges and within itself, the human subject frays, blurs, and recognizes itself as something other, as multiple’ (p. 94). However, she dismisses too easily the resistant quality of postcolonial hybridity and, what is more, subsumes it under Wolfe’s view that ‘it is the original distinction between human and animal that establishes the binary model through which all Others are created […]: in effect, the animal is the first subaltern’ (p. 96). To avoid the sense of a colonising ontological race to the bottom, more space would need to be given to this conjunction of hybridities. This is particularly significant as Raber suggests that ‘postcolonial mixtures might be said to be derived from the broader process by which “the human” is first established as a thing that exists, and then given qualities like “whiteness”, “civilization”, “masculinity”, “ablebodiedness” and so on’ (p. 96). Decolonial thinkers including Aníbal Quijano and Sylvia Wynter have forcefully made the case for the early modern period’s concatenating racial and colonial exclusions. It is through such processes that early moderns articulated the category of ‘Man’, as Wynter puts it, ‘which overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself’. 6 Wynter’s point is that there is no a
priori early modern human onto which exclusions are projected: the human is made through exclusion.

The final chapter, ‘Techno-Bard’, turns to the history plays, with insightful results. Through the cyborg that is the mounted, armoured knight, Shakespeare posits a degenerate association of human and non-human. The transcorporeal assemblage of knight, horse, and metal suggests that the human is a space in which violent conflict is played out. Furthermore, heroic military nobles, such as Henry V, are associated not with a central coherent ego but with a more complex distributed identity. In this segment of the book, Raber’s readings of the plays are greatly enriched by her analysis of Albrecht Dürer, Giuseppe Archimboldo, and Giovanni Battista Bracelli, and this chapter demonstrates admirably the conflicting impulses within early modern cultural production and thinking on the human. In this respect, it firmly counters the narrative of early modern faith in human perfectibility frequently emblematised by, for example, Leonardo Da Vinci’s *Vitruvian Man* (1490).

In closing, ‘Post-posthumanism? Back to the Future’, considers the double problem of reading Shakespeare through posthumanist theory. Where the playwright has been read, by Harold Bloom and others, as inventing the human, do critics merely repeat the act of exemplarity when they flip the switch and read him as posthuman? Or, ‘are we using a valuable and powerful cultural instrument to transform our relationship to ourselves’ (p. 165)? This question is left unanswered. Another unresolved critique is the fact that ‘some forms of posthumanist practice can obscure or overlook the operations’ (p. 161) of social categories such as race. Whilst in other writings Raber turns back to this question, she shies away from it here.7 Raber’s discussion of the Anthropocene is a case in point. She admits that the Anthropocene continues to be a contested term, but solely on the grounds of whether or not it ‘counts as a true geological period’ (p. 13), going on to argue that it ‘can be viewed as the ultimate anthropocentric concept, elevating human beings above all other life across millennia’ (p. 13). There is no mention of environmental colonialism or critiques based on climate justice, which see climate crisis as a symptom of the extractive and hyper-capitalistic
attitudes and practices of the post-industrial global North, rather than the actions of a universalised *anthropos*.\(^8\) Comparably to Raber’s positioning of hybridity, her engagement of the Anthropocene fails to account for the social and geopolitical complications of the concept.

However, Raber is not alone in this respect. Despite the recent growth in critical race studies, and decolonial approaches to the early modern period, these things have not yet been put into dialogue with early modern posthumanism. This is partly to do, as Chakravarty writes, with the ways in which early modern studies polices its own borders, and what is assimilated as proper early modern research.\(^9\) Yet it is crucial that this work is undertaken. Bringing the period’s own racialized and colonial policing of what and whom constitutes the human to bear on posthumanist critique can only further enrich scholars’ understanding. By accessibly foregrounding posthumanist theory as a vital component of Shakespeare studies, Raber’s excellent book is a large step in the right direction.

Rachel Stenner  
University of Sussex  
rachel.stenner@sussex.ac.uk


3 Chakravarty, 18.


8 A recent and prominent analysis of the term is Dipesh Chakrabarty, ‘Anthropocene Time’, *History and Theory* 57.1 (2018), 5-32. This essay is the written text of a lecture presented the previous year.

9 Chakravarty, 19.