

Matthew Steggle. *Speed and Flight in Shakespeare*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022.

In one of his essays, entitled “Of Vicissitude of Things”, Francis Bacon discusses the general sense of acceleration and instability experienced by him and his contemporaries. Rather than tapping into this general sense of giddiness in the early modern period, Matthew Steggle probes into kinetics, the actual and imagined movement of bodies in space, and he makes us think about how swiftness in general and flying in particular were experienced and conceptualized in Elizabethan and Jacobean England. He claims at the outset of his survey and study that “Shakespeare has what one might call an aesthetic of speed and flight” (2). Steggle frames his observations by purporting that “[t] his proposition seems a very counter-intuitive one. We are accustomed to think of speed as perhaps *the* quintessential marker of modernity, the thing which sets us apart not merely from the early moderns but from everyone before the twentieth century” (2). Pointing to documented experience of speed in domains such as horse-racing, jumping, and combat sports such as fencing alongside observations in archery and ballistics, he exposes this framing to be little more than a straw man. Steggle’s long argument subsequently focuses on the “historical phenomenology” (5) of speed, a concept he borrows from Bruce R. Smith’s investigation of soundscapes in early modern England. He teases out the sense of speed and flight, the sensations that Shakespeare and his contemporaries attached to swift movement and flying, and in doing so he observes that a typical form of engagement with these sensations relied on “extrapolating the speed from the known to the unknown.” (6) Steggle also points out that “Marlowe and Shakespeare are particular innovators” of “spectacular physical displays” with “actors performing impressive feats of activity which showed human bodies moving at speed,” (11) thus working against the generic constraints, eschewed by Seneca and his early modern as well as neoclassical exegetes, of drama as “fundamentally static, verbal artefacts” generally critical of too much “onstage action” (15).

The main chapters of this survey are all informed by a sense of acceleration. With *The Comedy of Errors* at the centre, Steggle traces the increasing on-stage and off-stage speed with which the two central pairs of characters are hurled through space, sometimes assuming witch-like qualities. The comedy, Steggle asserts, serves as a “machine for creating acceleration” (38) teasing out the boundary between human and non-human speed. The focus on *Romeo and Juliet* in the next chapter is on destructive kinetic forces. Steggle highlights the fascination with the “indescrivability of very fast speed” (45) evident in phrases such as ‘o’er my head’ used by the characters, and he identifies a tricolon of “speed, flight, and fall” (52) at the heart of the play

that links it to Gnosticism. With *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Steggle reflects on stage machinery and stage business that create the sense of flying. An entry from Henslow's *Diary* and John H. Astington's interpretation of it serve as a vehicle to imagine the descent and ascent machinery used to whirl around fairies and spirits in that comedy. The chapter on *Richard III* and *Henry V* somewhat diverts from the core focus. Here, the ideas explored are tied to both kinetic and chronological notions of speed: the movement of troops, "speed across ground, in purely geographical terms" (84) and "near-flying horse[s]" (87) are discussed but also the "problem of speed [as] built into the very idea of a history play, since the annalistic, copious material that such a play is working with is always in tension with the tidiness and brevity required to make an intelligible and satisfying drama" (78). The productivity of an approach that teases out the interrelatedness of generic, kinetic and chronological domains is showcased here at the expense of a more stringent line of argument solely factoring in physical movement. With the last two chapters, the penultimate on *Macbeth* and the final on *The Tempest*, Steggle returns to the core idea of his book. In *Macbeth* he sees Paul Virilio's 'picnoleptic' speed effects staged as Macbeth is 'rapt' when seeing the witches, mesmerized by their flight but also imagining his own bodily flight as experiencing a 'rapture', "the act of being carried bodily up to heaven" (103) that chimes with his desire to "somehow collapse time" (104). Finally, Steggle reads *The Tempest*, as "the most sustained exploration of states of extreme speed and flight," (109) as "a sequence of speed effects strung together into a story" (124) Here we return to the mechanics of roped flying and the "subversive and restless force [...] wrapped up in the kinetic energy of Ariel" (125).

*Speed and Flight in Shakespeare* is an impressive survey that raises our awareness of the phenomenology of speed as a concern in early modern England. The examples discussed carefully situate Shakespeare's plays within the field of contemporary texts, ranging from Marston's poems to Jonson's masques. In the brief conclusion, Steggle ties Shakespeare's aesthetics of speed and flight to his reputation as a quick-quilled playwright. While I am left wondering what exactly the subversive force of speed and flight in Shakespeare's plays amounts to, the book is undoubtedly an informative, concise and suggestive record of the flight of Steggle's intellect.

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