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## Reading With The Grain: On Vin Nardizzi's *Wooden Os: Shakespeare's Theatres and England's Trees*

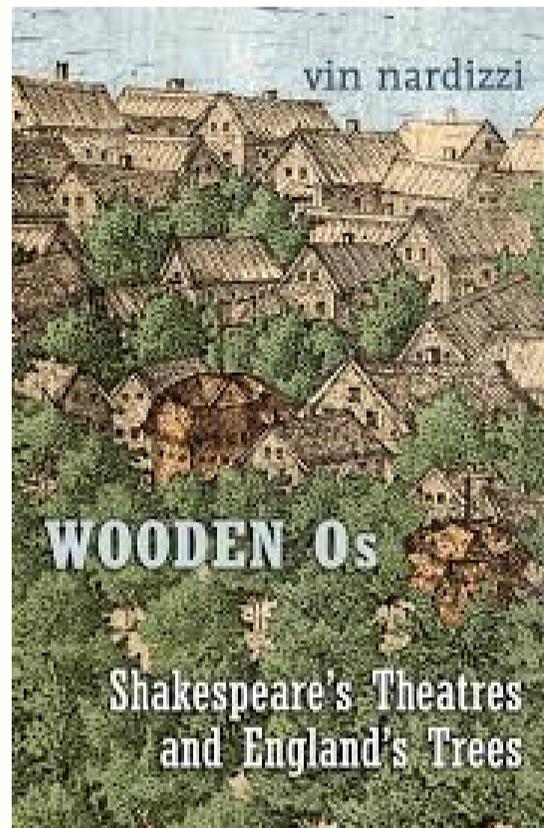
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*We cannot deny that it is a force because we are mixed up with trees however far back we look. We have allied ourselves with them in endless ways. We cannot disentangle our bodies, our houses, our memories, our tools, and our myths from their knots, their bark, and their growth rings. You hesitate because I allow this tree to speak? But our language is already leafy and we all move from the opera to the grave on planks and in boxes. If you don't want to take account of this, you should not have gotten involved with trees in the first place.*

—Bruno Latour, *The Pasteurization of France*



Late into reading Vin Nardizzi's *Wooden Os: Shakespeare's Theatres and England's Trees*, a question occurred to me: What is happening when, as Latour puts it, we readers get “mixed up with trees” (193)? Is it not a matter of reading with the grain, rather than against it—as many of us have grown accustomed to thinking? I mean the literal grain—the very “stuff” of literature: its paper and fiber—but also, of course, the metaphorical grain — its mysterious *écriture*. According to Nardizzi, both senses of the grain were made possible in early modern English theaters by the “untimely materiality” of trees (a phrase Nardizzi borrows from Jonathan Gil Harris; see Harris 2009). By way of their felling and reassembly, England's trees not only provided the timber for building Shakespeare's Globe and other English playhouses; they provided the very language of fantasy. When *As You Like It*'s Rosalind exclaims, “Well, this is the forest of Arden,” this “this” is both imaginary and deictic: it could be a tree prop on stage, or it could just as easily be the wooden playhouse itself (*Wooden Os*, 21). Although Deleuze and Guattari's famous protestation, “We're tired of trees” (15), marked a turn in literary studies away from depth analyses toward the decidedly non-arboreal lines and surfaces of the rhizome, reading with the grain, in Nardizzi's eco-materialist sense, makes room for a reevaluation of what it means to get “involved with trees.” Beyond its historical detail (of which Nardizzi's book is replete), even beyond its close readings of plays (of which there are plenty), the question of getting involved with trees—that is, of allowing their stories, their geographies, their politics, even their fantasies room to speak — strikes me as *Wooden Os*'s greatest contribution to reading after new historicism and other models of critique have, as it were, run out of steam. How far Nardizzi is willing to take this practice of reading with the grain is another question — one that I will return to at the end of this review. For now, let it be said: if you are tired of trees, *Wooden Os* is just the remedy. It will have you wishing Deleuze and Guattari had been kinder to trees.

Following hot on the heels of medieval and early modern criticism's recent forays into animal studies, including most notably Laurie Shannon's recent study, *The Accommodated Animal*, which insists on the more than just figurative role of animals—that is, on their literal, not just allegorical participation — in Shakespearean “cosmopolitics” (Shannon's preferred term to “biopolitics,” which,

in the case of Agamben, excludes animal life [zoē] from the human polis), Nardizzi's *Wooden Os* begins by explicating "the ways that early modern England could not do without 'wood,' in its most capacious" and *most literal* "definitional scope" (7). Indeed, as Nardizzi underlines throughout *Wooden Os*, "Without 'wood,' some early modern witnesses, including the monarch, claimed there could be no England" (7). Highlighting the resource precariousness of ligneous matter resulting from the real and perceived scarcity of trees, Nardizzi lists what is a kind of Borgesian inventory of the myriad ways early modern England depended on domestic and foreign trees to provide for its material welfare. Referencing Oliver Rackham, a historian of British woodlands, Nardizzi writes,

The inventory of items that Rackham classifies under the rubric "timber"—"planks, beams, and gate-posts"—suggests how these large pieces of wood worked literally to support England's people and to demarcate its land. Before the introduction of steel beams in construction and the widespread use of bricks . . . timber reinforced the infrastructure of an early modern England whose population was rapidly increasing and was putting an intense strain on existing institutions and resources. From wharves and bridges to warships, merchant vessels, and "stately Ship[s]" . . . to windmills and other machines employed in industry and agriculture, to "stately House[s]" outfitted with wood panelling . . . and more modest cottages and farmhouses, to roofs of varying sumptuousness, to fortifications for defense, and to resorts of public entertainment, the foremost of which in this study are London's commercial theatres, timber was early modern England's most ubiquitous building material. (7)

And yet, what is important to note here beyond any particular woody item is that undergirding Nardizzi's historical account is the sense that at no point in the series of wood's material iterability is it possible to separate or disentangle nature from culture, *ligna* from *lingua*. From planks to warships, windmills to commercial theaters, the matter of wood was, and still is, active in our designs. To borrow a familiar pun (made more pertinent by the Greek word *hyle*, which means both "matter" and "wood"), the wooden bodies that Nardizzi highlights in his study (trees, stumps, timber, logs, stage props and so on) are indeed bodies that *mattered* - and mattered not just in the restricted sense of a utilitarian society's "standing reserve" (Heidegger 17-18). Whereas some critics might want to limit wood's social efficacy to its use-value for humans, Nardizzi abstains from this anthro-determinacy. In the wooden theater houses that blazoned the landscape of early modern England, not only the human actors on stage but also the wooden set-pieces, props, and architectonics of the playhouse partook of the theater's network of social agencies. "It suffices to say," then, as Nardizzi goes on to posit, "that 'wood' knew no social boundaries" (9).

This, then, is the upside (or should I say "green" side?) of Nardizzi's eco-materialist vision: the inclusion of wooden agencies within theater history, and the intercalation of theater history within environmental history more broadly. But there is also a dark side to Nardizzi's story. As I have mentioned already, *Wooden Os* is deeply rooted in early modern debates over resource scarcity—debates that fueled fantasies of utopia on the one hand, and bioprospecting expeditions for trees to Virginia and the Americas on the other. Between thoughts of utopia and thoughts of colonial conquest, a confluence of fear and frustration about the instability of the English nation made the felt reality of resource scarcity a matter of utmost concern for all levels of society. Hence Nardizzi's proviso: that in contrast to the "green" eco-historical accounts of recent years, which tend toward mostly positive affirmations of early modern environmentalist logics, "This study presents a fuller picture of early modern woodland ecology and its stage representations by contemplating *the darker shades of green* [emphasis added] in the contested, felled, fatal, logged, and razed trees of early modern drama" (28). In other words, Nardizzi's purpose is not to romance an earlier, premodern notion of being-in-the-world over against today's environmentally destructive (il)logics. Instead, invoking a "dark ecology" of the kind theorized by Timothy Morton (see Morton 181-197), Nardizzi advances his study with an eye toward the very real possibility that, for early moderns living in the age known by environmental historians as the "age of wood," deforestation and environmental destructivity not only did take place but in fact yielded a presentiment of an ecology *without* nature—that is, without the material and cultural affordances of trees. *Wooden Os* grapples with these "darker shades" of eco-history and the variety of responses that deforestation elicited both on the stage and off.

In the book's first chapter, Nardizzi continues his analysis of the resource precariousness of wood and timber in early modern England and the untimely reforestation of trees in the English theater. Crosshatching the material history of the Rose playhouse with Robert Greene's *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*, a play centered around (of all things) a golden tree, Nardizzi shows how "*Friar Bacon's* treatment of the stage tree further elaborates its relation to material theatre by representing" the violence associated with "the early modern propaganda campaign against stage playing known as 'antitheatricalism'" (33). According to Nardizzi, this campaign sought the literal "extirpation" of England's theaters (33). The Rose theater (aptly named for such extirpation) thus assumed the same precarious status as the trees from which it was built. "[K]ey[ing] us into the botanical idiom for destruction that *Friar Bacon* shares with texts in this [the antitheatrical] tradition" (33), the play's tree prop takes on a synecdochic relation in Nardizzi's reading to the threat of antitheatricalism on the one hand, and the anxiety over wood shortages on the other. Doubly overdetermined, the stage tree in *Friar Bacon* nevertheless escapes both of these ideological codings. Late in the play, the eponymous character "Bacon 'Vanish[es] the tree'" (32). Such vanishment, Nardizzi argues, not only saves the tree (and by extension, the Rose theater) from the spectacles of violence that many within the play had intended for it; it also "preserves a figure for

the theatre from an aggression that theatre's most vociferous detractors routinely expressed" offstage (33).

Taking these crosshatched meanings of the tree prop beyond England's continental boundaries, Nardizzi goes on to show that intrinsic to *Friar Bacon's* vanishing act, *The Merry Wives of Windsor's* repurposed forests (chapter 2), and the *Spanish Tragedy's* felled pine (chapter 3) was a "colonialist fantasy" in which the "resource dilemma England was enduring, and to which the English theatre industry had contributed," literally "vanish[ed]" from sight — and this time not by means of magic, but by looking westward to the "'virgin' forests" of Virginia (35).

In chapter four, Nardizzi puts this "colonialist fantasy" into context by turning his own gaze westward to Virginia and to the circum-Atlantic environments that underwrite Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. There, he offers the reader a critical genealogy of Caliban's "wooden slavery," or better still, his logs: "Caliban's logs are, of course, not trees," Nardizzi argues. "Rather, in their lumbered form, they point to the prior existence of some measure of woodland on the island" of Shakespeare's play (112). Commenting on the dearth of scholarly attention that has hitherto been paid to Caliban's logs (we are told there are "some thousands" on the island [113]), Nardizzi remarks that the predominate critical interest in Caliban's bravura use of language has overshadowed his actual purpose on the island: to stockpile wood. Consequently, when Caliban throws down his "burden of wood" in act 2, scene 2, critics tend to see this gesture not as statement about literal lumber, but as a dramatic precursor to the speech acts that follow (112). But Caliban's "burden of wood" provides more than just a theatrical dumb show, Nardizzi argues; for it "signals the extensive reach of lumber in and beyond the virtual world of Shakespeare's play" (113).

Noting the coincidence of Arthur Standish's *Commons Complaint* and Shakespeare's *The Tempest* in print and on stage in 1611, Nardizzi argues that Shakespeare's play represents an alternative (and perhaps more popular) solution to the problem of wood scarcity in England: whereas Standish advocates an intensive program of replanting trees domestically, *The Tempest* puts forth a more immediate solution by "cast[ing] the New World 'discovered' across the Atlantic as an abundant storehouse of natural" and exploitable "resources" (113). While "New World" readings of *The Tempest* have become *de rigueur* in literary studies, Nardizzi brilliantly stages the play as a palimpsestic expression of both colonial activities abroad (esp. in Virginia) and domestic concerns at home in the English theater. In the final pages of his final chapter, Nardizzi speculates about "the place of the stage in the promotional literature on the Virginia colony," arguing that Prospero's "house" (that is, his wooden playhouse) "evok[es] another potential use for wood and timber on the island": by converting Caliban's "burden of wood" into a soon-to-be theater, "*The Tempest* counters the antitheatrical tone of the promotional literature associated with Virginia's resettlement . . . and discloses the role of theatre in maintaining power over people and the natural world alike" (133, 115). Between Caliban's New World lumber and Prospero's Old World theater, a myriad of untimely matters pertaining to wood economy, resource dependency, geography, colonialism and resistance, sexuality, slavery, theatricality and antitheatricality—to name only the most salient matters rolled into Caliban's logs—are put into motion.

No wonder, then, that Nardizzi ends his final chapter by describing Prospero's wooden O as a figure (albeit dark) of wood's astonishing "potentiality" (135). For what Nardizzi asserts is this: for early moderns, as for us, the potential to be — or not be — was not a potential restricted to princes or *Daseins*; it was not the case that renaissance self-fashioning only pertained to existential humans. Rather, the potential to be (otherwise) concerned the entire mesh-work of "strange strangers" (Morton's term) that we — we who find ourselves mixed up with trees, always already — are. *Wooden Os* testifies to these woody entanglements of matter in breathtaking detail, making it true what Nardizzi says: its trees know no boundaries.

I began this short essay by asking about reading: it seems to me that *Wooden Os* ought to be read as an example of what it means to read *with* the grain, that is, in intra-active touch with the "things" that inhabit the page. It is a style of reading closely related to what Eileen Joy calls "slow reading," which is a manner of being-with: "In the end," Joy writes, "this [is] what ethics is all about: Slowing down, paying better attention to what is close at hand and always already intimate with us—which is everything" (172). Joy's "ethics" is addressed to readers. But it need not stop at the page. It can be compared to Ian Bogost's idea of "philosophical carpentry," for example, which "entails making things that explain how things make their world" (93). I would like to venture here that *Wooden Os* partakes of this "philosophical carpentry" by slowing down the reader's drive toward human-exemplarity in matters of history and dramatic representation. That trees mattered in and beyond the theaters of Renaissance England—Nardizzi's book leaves no doubt.

And yet I find myself returning again and again to the question of social boundaries. For if it is true that "'wood' knew no social boundaries" in early modern England, it is also true that *Wooden Os* keeps the social and ontological boundaries between human and nonhuman fully intact. Nardizzi's trees are wholly real — even in their most metaphorical registers. And yet this uncanny materiality misses some of the strangeness that Freud, and later Morton, attribute to even the most familiar of uncanny objects. By making *Friar Bacon's* tree prop and Caliban's logs seem utterly familiar to Shakespeare and his contemporaries, the strangeness — or indeed, the inhumanness — of these materials ultimately falls out. But of course, this need not be the case.

Elsewhere Nardizzi (along with Jean Feerick) calls our attention to the "indistinct human" *within* Renaissance humanism—a figure of indistinction that opens "the human" to the hospitality of a difference within the self (Nardizzi and Feerick 1-12). I found myself wondering as I read *Wooden*

Os why this ethics of hospitality to the inhuman within the human seems to come up missing. It's not for a lack of the nonhuman. There's plenty of that. Rather, it's that England's trees remain in some sense all too ready-to-hand in their status as equipment. To speak Heideggerian, their tool-use continues to take center stage. But this raises an important question: what of their unreadiness-to-hand? I'm thinking here of the uncanny trees that populate literary history, from *Dream of the Rood* to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Take Daphne, for example, who to resist Apollo's amorous pursuit transforms her body into a branching laurel. Or take the bleeding trees of Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata*, Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, and Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*. Or to use Nardizzi's own archive, what about Ariel from *The Tempest* — a figure not just of air and fire, but a spirit whose body was once incarcerated within a tree? These uncanny figures (which are more than just figures) tax our understanding of the limits between human and nonhuman by evincing a strangeness *in excess* of their instrumental use—both for Shakespeare and for us. It's not that they know no boundaries. It's that they multiply those boundaries beyond any ordinary understanding of the “social.”

To echo Karl Steel, who recently called for a more heterogeneous “then” and “now” in pre/modern scholarship, I would like to underline the ongoing need for a more heterogeneous “us” in studies about the environment. Reading with the grain involves more than just welcoming nonhuman “others” across the social threshold. It involves recognizing that the threshold between “them” and “us” is already multiple—already rough-grained from the start.

*Wooden Os*'s untimely meditations on trees, wood, lumber and vert take great strides in that direction. Reading it, I'm compelled to say (after Ben Jonson) that it is a study not just of an age — the so-called “wooden age”—but for all time. A heterogeneous time to be sure. For as Nardizzi argues, “we” now (*but how soon is now, really?*) are still mixed up with trees. Our acts — as well as Shakespeare's—are written in their growth rings. For better and for worse.

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Steven Swarbrick is a PhD Candidate in the Department of English at Brown University. He has published articles on Milton's plants and Shakespeare's animals. Currently, he is at work on a dissertation about how and why different literary forms de-nature the human-centric sense with which Renaissance texts are usually discussed elsewhere. Tracing a literary trajectory starting with Spenser and continuing through Raleigh to Milton, key points of saturation for the project include theories of affect and vulnerability, sex and disability, ecology and posthumanism.

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