Green Worlds: Shakespeare’s Plays and Early Modern Imagery

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While Iago's famous words equating jealousy to a “green-eyed monster” (3.3.170) or Portia's rather similar allusion to “green-eyed jealousy” (The Merchant of Venice, 3.2.110) clearly associate green with bilious envy, Cleopatra's reference to her own “salad days” (Antony and Cleopatra, 1.5.72-74) or Ophelia's portrayal as “a green girl” (Hamlet, 1.3.101) tend to equate 'greenness' with innocence and inconstancy and with the slightly foolish, but probably amendable, inexperience of youth. More generally, the natural sphere in A Midsummer Night's Dream or As You Like It, the pastoral scenes in The Winter's Tale, or the naked island in The Tempest, all provide us with a light vision of easy-going, free worlds as opposed to the artifice of the conventional, stifling court. Yet, green worlds in Shakespeare may also prove treacherous. The Biblical image of the “green and gilded snake” (4.3.108) hidden in the peaceful orchard and about to kill Oliver sleeping in the shade of an aged oak in As You Like It, which finds a striking echo in the image of Old Hamlet stung by his serpent-like brother in his orchard, effectively deconstructs the image of idyllic Arcadias so as to make the audience uneasy and suggest the looming presence of evil. In the same way, in A Midsummer Night's Dream, the mysterious forest near Athens, far from being a comfortable refuge, conceals dangers, traps and nightmarish mazes. These are visions of changing and transient worlds, alternatively light and dark, beautiful and treacherous, which actually correspond to the way the colour green itself was seen at the time.

Interestingly enough, Jean Robertet's L'Exposition des couleurs (c. 1435-1502) is a poetic, metaphorical and moral classification which provides us with a vision of light, gay green:
“À l'esmeralde ressemble précieuse, / Me delectant en parfaite vertur, / Mal seant (suis) avec noire couleur / Et n'appartiens qu'à personne joyeuse” (Robertet in Pastoureau 2014, 130). A watercolour illustration representing the allegorical personifications of green and yellow also explicitly equates the former with “joy” and the latter with “joissance”, or else prosperity, wealth and the pleasure of worldly possessions.
(Pastoureaux 2014, 131). Now, if such a positive symbolism was still current during the
Renaissance, the meaning of green cannot be oversimplified as it could also signify evil.
For instance, in *The Last Judgment* stained glass by the glass-painter Engrand le Prince (c.
1520) adorning the Saint-Nicolas chapel in Saint-Etienne Church in Beauvais, a
frightening devil appears in the form of a bulging-eyed, fanged and fiery-looking
greenish dragon. At the same time, tales of green-eyed poisonous basilisks killing at one
single gaze or of strange, threatening green-adorned knights flourished. Thus, the colour
green gradually became ambivalent. The vocabulary of dyeing itself evolved,
progressively distinguishing between *vert gai*, or ‘gay green’, with its vibrant and light
hues, and *vert perdu*, or ‘lost green’, with its dull, greenish or brownish shades. These
contrasting shades and their ensuing symbolical, light and dark veins have since then
coexisted in textual imagery and iconography. Drawing from various sources such as
Shakespeare’s plays, popular imagery or Renaissance paintings, I thus intend to analyse a
few examples partaking of the ‘gay green’ vein as well as of the ‘lost green’ one in order to
show to what extent the coexistence of and constant oscillation between the two trends is
suggestive of mutable and transient early modern worlds.

1. “[S]alad days”: green as a symbol of inconstancy
and mutability

In *The Story of Art*, Ernst H. Gombrich asserts that colour has long been used in painting
mainly to create impressions or convey symbolical meanings rather than merely
represent the real. In the same way, he adds that colour for Cinquecento Venetian
painters was then seen as a mere “additional adornment for the picture after it had been
drawn to the panel” (Gombrich 248), not so much used for the sake of an exact
representation of reality as for aesthetic purposes. The highly influential Venetian artist
Giovanni Bellini, for instance, is known to have made “a happy use” of colour and light
mainly to “unify his pictures” (Gombrich 250). Here, I would like to argue that such forms
of colour symbolism not only prevailed in the art of painting, but also in popular and
literary imagery.

Green has been the subject of various interpretations according to times and places. The
Greeks, Pastoureau explains, could either see green as *glaukos*, a “weak, washed-out,
desaturated color” or *chloros*, the borders between green and yellow being then indistinct,
or even light *prasinos*, the colour of leek. It became “a middle color” for the early
Christians before it was promoted as a privileged, festive “courtly color” between the 11
th and 14th centuries (Pastoureaux 2014, 15, 40, 53). Green became increasingly present in
daily life, gradually taking on more important, complex connotations, suggesting in turn
beauty, danger and evil, or disorder and inconstancy. From the Middle Ages onwards, the
association of green and yellow turned out to be interpreted as a sign of mental disorder
and lunacy, as shown by the striking allegory of “The Moon personified”, a Limoges 11th-
century enamel representing the all-influential celestial body as a strange, white-faced
being displaying huge horns, wearing green and yellow garments and holding two flaring
torches in the night. The moving chariot in which she sits suggests the perpetual
movement of time. But the powerful planet is also presented as a disorderly and
extravagant (or lunatic) being. Such radical visions endured. An apparently similar
representation can be detected in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, as Titania mentions “the
governess of floods / pale in anger” (2.1.103-04), whose changing mood is able to generate
and destroy the rhythm of the seasons (2.111-12), thereby leading to the utmost confusion ("[...] and the mazed world, / By their increase, now knows not which is which", 2.1.113-14). However, in spite of its ominous tones, Titania's speech still belongs to the comic register, and the allusion to the 'Moon personified' in her tirade is merely suggestive of reversible cosmic disorders. Green, for Shakespeare, is indeed the mark of the comic whims of youth.\textsuperscript{6}

Cleopatra's allusion to her "salad days" (1.5.72), as well as Polonius's hint at Ophelia's 'greenness', evoke the fickleness of youth but do not convey any sense of a disturbing flaw. In the same way, when in King John, Cardinal Pandulph exclaims to Lewis, Dauphin of France, "How green you are and fresh in this old world!" (3.3.145), green seems equated with soft inconsistency, more moving than really disruptive. The slightly ridiculous and foolish immaturity of youth is certainly not able to challenge mature certainties or disrupt the established moral order. The images partake of the comic rather than of the serious mode, and they belong to the \textit{vert gai} mood of comedy.\textsuperscript{7}

That is not surprising if we remember that light green, in the medieval period, was the colour of chivalry, often seen on coats of arms and in tournaments. In courtly literature, it appeared not only as "the emblematic color for the plant world but also the color of youth and love" (Pastoureau 2014, 53), the very colour of elegant courtly love or \textit{fin'amor}. It may even have been linked to pregnancy, thus conveying the optimistic prospect of life, birth and joy. In Jan Van Eyck's famous \textit{Betrothal of the Arnolfini} (1434), one can notice that the possibly pregnant bride is dressed in a long green dress.\textsuperscript{8} The newly restored \textit{Visitation} by Pontormo (1528-29) shows the happy encounter between the Virgin and Saint Elizabeth. Both are pregnant and clad in long blue and green gowns. These elements are all evocative of a gay green "a joyous colour [...] (\textit{color ridens} [...] ), meaning a color that cheered and lit up the surfaces on which it appeared" (Pastoureau 2014, 57).

Gay green is often found in early modern English imagery. Cesare Ripa's \textit{Iconologia} (1611)\textsuperscript{9} explicitly links green to good omen ("Le Bon Augure") and to a prospect of abundance.\textsuperscript{10} On the contrary, bad omens were represented by an old man clad in garments of the colour of dead leaves. Coincidentally, Veronese's paintings, which first began to arrive in England in the early years of the 17th century, resort to the same devices.\textsuperscript{11} The painter's green, tending on almond green, is light, shimmering and sparkled with golden notes, as he uses shades of greens often mixed with gold. This 'triumph of colour' effect is blatant in the famous \textit{Lucretia} (1580-85),\textsuperscript{12} which depicts "a deserted heroine, virtuous, brave and magnificent" (Salomon 200), and shows her suicide after she has been raped by Roman Sextus. The woman, who is "opulently bejewelled", appears "draped in a rich dark green cloth finely trimmed in pink, a shimmering piece of lighter green fabric [...] [T]he curtain behind her is decorated with patterns of flowers and pomegranates on a green background" (Salomon 199). Paradoxically used to refer to Lucretia's unnatural death, Veronese's light green, so blatantly associated with gold, flowers or lush natural motifs, stands as the very colour of elegance and refinement and a powerful example of the \textit{vert gai} mood even in tragic circumstances.
2. Gay green (*vert gai*) as a festive colour: youth, spring and fertility

The expression “gay green” actually appeared at the end of the 14th century, in one of Charles d’Orleans’s ballads evoking the May festivities and marking the 1st of May as the beginning of a cycle of gallantry, leisure and festivity:

Thus the trees are covered  
With blossoms and the fields a gay green,  
To make lovelier the loveliest holiday  
The first day of May […]  
Let us go to the woods to gather the May […]  
(Ballad 68 in Pastoureau 2014, 69)

This may be due to the fact that, after all, green is the colour of spring or “ver”, referred to as “primevère” in modern French or as “la reverdie” in ancient French, which means “the return of spring”. As Claude-Gilbert Dubois puts it, this represents the absolute beginning of the cycle and the privileged moment when nature appears adorned with its green garments. Sandro Botticelli’s *Primavera* (c. 1478) displays for example an exuberant use of light, joyful or ‘gay green’ decorative motifs. Here, flowers and foliage lush motifs evoke spring festivities. This painting, like the *Birth of Venus* (c. 1485) showing the divinity miraculously rising from an all light-green sea, conveys a powerful sense of nature’s beauty and harmony.

Coincidentally, such sense of nature’s beauty and harmony may be found in the pastoral spring scenes of Shakespeare’s *Winter’s Tale*. If green as a colour is not evoked here as such, the sheep-shearing scenes in Bohemia, in act 4 of the play, may be taken as powerful examples of Shakespeare’s jolly, green world, where harmony prevails. The whole tonality partakes of a light, gay green (*colour ridens*) mood. Florizel (whose name suggests the flowering of the natural world) appears “dressed as Doricles a countryman” and Perdita “as Queen of the Feast” or “the mistres o’ th’ feast” (4.4.68). According to Polixenes, she is the fair “shepherdess” able to create universal harmony (4.4.77-79), and one who “dances featly” (4.4.177) among shepherds and shepherdesses. Perdita has been costumed by Florizel as Flora, the goddess of flowers, and she is seen handing flowers around. In these joyful festivities, one can certainly see an evocation of the exuberant spring rituals taking place “throughout Europe, Pagan holiday exalting the awakening of nature” (Pastoureau 2014, 70). Spring and May had been celebrated as early as the 15th century, as is testified by the *Très Riches Heures* (1413-1416) illuminated by the Limbourg Brothers for the Duke Jean de Berry. This richly decorated book of hours shows farmers working in a field. Each month represents the main farming activity of the moment (harvesting, hunting, or sowing), except for the two months of April and May that represent festivities involving all social categories, peasants and nobles alike. May in particular was a month of courtesy and gallantry (Pastoureau 2014, 68-71) and the first of May actually marked the beginning of festivities. This was when all the participants had to “s’esmayer”; that is to say, “wear and plant the mai”, or else wear crowns and necklaces made of flowers, leaves and small branches. The *Très Riches Heures* illustration for the month of May shows sixteen figures, mainly from the nobility: thirteen men clad in bright blue cloaks and three women wearing elegant green gowns. The characters all seem in total harmony with nature, and the background of the scenery is also all green.
and blue. The princely cortege proceeds at the edge of a forest, and all can be seen ‘wearing the mai’, displaying necklaces, crowns, leaves or branches and thus signalling the beginnings of the festivities, even if this was not meant to be a realistic representation (Gombrich 163). Indeed, colours are heightened and stylized so as to enhance the beauty of the place and the merriment of the moment in a fairly naive manner. Shakespeare probably did not know the Très Riches Heures, but The Winter’s Tale’s pastoral scenes, with their songs and dances, their garlands and profusion of flowers, are suffused with a light happiness and suggest a lush, bountiful and fertile nature. Polixenes and Camillo, the two royals or ‘knights of courtesy’ — such a royal intrusion into the pastoral was frequent, Orgel remarks as he alludes to Spenser’s The Faerie Queene (“Introduction”, 43) — are indeed welcome by Queen Perdita with “flowers of middle summer” (4.4.107). As Perdita the “gentle maiden” seemingly “too noble for this place” (4.4.158) is turned into Flora, the goddess of the seasons, of spring flowers and of flowering plants (especially those bearing fruits), she also becomes the goddess of fertility.19

Now, during the early modern period, in addition to the “wearing the mai”, one also practised the “planting the mai” ritual. A young man uprooted a bush and had to “replant it before the door or the window of one you wished to honor” (Pastoureau 2014, 69), for instance a beloved and marriageable girl. Given that, in Shakespeare’s play, Florizel himself has costumed Perdita as Flora, thus deliberately displaying his choice to all, his behaviour may indirectly recall the ‘planting of mai’ ritual meant to disclose one’s love to the world, and the whole scene may suggest the happy prospect of betrothal.20

The gay green-spring-Bohemian festivities have often been said to evoke an idealised golden age of innocence or courtesy and as such, to act as an antithesis to the coercive Sicilian court. Yet the lush, bright May games presented by Shakespeare may also appear tainted, sullied or ‘desaturated’ deep down. The very name of the goddess Flora, Orgel argues, “does more than reflect Florizel’s name” (“Introduction”, 44-5). It also alludes to the Ovidian myth of Flora, which is probably conveyed in Boticelli’s Primavera and which tells of a simple nymph named Chloris, who was loved, pursued and finally raped by west wind Zephyrus. This allusion to male sexual violence echoes Perdita’s hints at male coercion as she mentions, in her introductive speech, the rape of Proserpina by the underworld King Dis (2.1.119). Shakespeare’s idyllic pastoral is thus interspersed with sombre notes, gay green being tainted with dark hues, and lost green looming in the distance.

The forest may be regarded as another powerful green world trope. The gay green mood is well present in the magic forest of A Midsummer Night’s Dream where, Harold F. Brooks argues, Shakespeare evokes the beauty of the natural setting from the start, even “before the wood is reached” (“Introduction” to the Arden Edition, xcl). In the opening scene, Helena regards Hermia’s voice as a major component of her friend’s beauty:

[...] your tongue’s sweet air
More tuneable than lark to shepherd’s ear
When wheat is green, when hawthorn buds appear.
(1.1.183-5)

In Helena’s speech, the “hawthorn buds” and “green wheat” springtime nature images convey a sense of the beautiful and the bountiful, the greenness of wheat being suggestive of a prospect of abundance.
Similarly, the forest of Arden in *As You Like It* first appears as a haven for the banished Duke Senior, and is thus a festive counterpart of Duke Frederick’s oppressive court:

_Hath not old custom made this life more sweet_  
_Than that of painted pomp? Are not these woods_  
_More free from perils than the envious court?_  
(2.1.2-4)

No wonder if in “these woods”, the romance between the two shepherds Silvius and Phoebe freely unfolds as a counterpoint to the more sophisticated Rosalind/Ganymede and Orlando love affair. But if the green worlds of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *As You Like It* are indeed vested with the symbolical power of representing youth, free love and poetry as opposed to the grim constraints of the court, both Arden and the mazy forest of *A Midsummer’s Night Dream* conceal ultimate dangers. Titania herself acknowledges that the forest’s intricacies conceal “quaint” traps for mere mortals, easily lost “in the wanton green” (2.1.98-100). In the same way, Arden proves not so much a pleasant place as an ultimately threatening one. Orlando discovers his brother Oliver peacefully “sleeping on his back” in the shade of a tree, but in mortal danger as “[a]bout his neck / A green and gilded snake has wreathed itself [...]” (4.3.108-10). He is even about to be attacked by a lioness concealed in the wild bush. Such Biblical images suggestive of “death, fall or paradise lost” (Laroque 95) find a powerful echo in the cruel nightmare tormenting Hermia in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*:

_Methought a serpent ate my heart away,_  
_And you sat smiling at his cruel prey._  
_[…]_  
_Either death or you I’ll find immediately._  
(2.2.155-56; 162)

Images of the *silva* as a mysterious, ambivalent place, both a refuge and a realm of mutability, are actually frequent in the iconography or literary imagery of the era, and they permeate Shakespeare’s works, even his latest ones. According to François Laroque for example, the ivy image in *The Tempest* suggests that green world tropes may be seen as the very emblems of treachery. The once light and gay green worlds of nature have now taken on darker, more disquieting hues suggestive of ambivalence. Green, in the early modern era, thus gradually connoted either danger and death, or transience and mutability.

3. Ambivalent green mazes, oscillations

Arthurian legends and tales, where green is fully present as early as the second half of the 12th century, may also tell us of ambivalent places or characters. Strange knights were said to appear and bar people’s way. For instance if one saw his way barred by a knight, one could read his destiny by the colour he wore: if it was white, the knight brought protection, if it was vermilion, the knight came with bad intentions. A black knight signalled a hero, and a green knight was a young character “whose audacious and insolent behavior [would] disrupt the established order” (Pastoureau 2014, 80) in a more or less dangerous way. This clearly shows that, in the late Middle Ages, the vision of green evolved. This once admired shade (at the time of chivalry and courtesy) progressively took on another hue. It definitely lost its noble standing and began to be associated with all that was changeable or capricious:
As it was chemically unstable, it was naturally associated with what was symbolically unstable: childhood, youth, love, beauty, luck, hope, fortune, destiny. By the same token, it appeared like an ambiguous, disturbing, and even dangerous colour. (ibid., 84)

19 Green also was the colour of chance, “of the Goddess Fortune, often represented in late medieval images wearing a green or striped dress” (ibid., 105). The inconstant, unpredictable figure could be seen accompanied by her two brothers, Heur (Happiness, chance, luck), an elegant young man all dressed in light green, and Meseur (Unhappiness, misfortune, sadness), a rustic peasant dressed in gray and conspicuously raising a menacing clue ready to strike.

20 The same kind of ambivalence can be traced in some of Shakespeare's comic characters, such as the ballad-singing Autolycus (The Winter's Tale) or the sylvan Puck (A Midsummer's Night Dream). Both belong to the unconventional green worlds situated far from stifling conventional courts and are seen constantly oscillating between joyful impishness and frank transgression. Boasting of his own dishonesty after having concealed the lovers' elopement, Autolycus is a comic transgressor introducing disorder, even though he is not an altogether negative character since he is also a bringer of luck. As to the impish, “shrewd and knavish sprite” or “sweet Puck” (2.1.40) Robin Goodfellow, he is described as a “merry wanderer of the night” (2.1.43) prone to frighten the maidens and mislead night wanderers. He is the elf, sylvan or positive spirit of the forest acting both as the benevolent magician able to generate passion with “a little western flower — [...] / [...] love-in-idleness” (2.1.166-68) and as the lovers' tormentor. Both Autolycus the rogue and Puck the sylvan or 'savage' stand as the marginal, but influential green characters living in the outskirts of society, and whose insolent behaviours (like the legendary green knights') may occasionally disrupt the harmony of the conventional world. Both characters are impish and joyful, ultimately meaning more good than harm, and as such they may evoke the “leafy man” conspicuously disguised as a plant, or the “mossy man” / “green man” (Pastoureau 2014, 70) who, during the pagan holidays taking place in Europe to celebrate the 21st March spring equinox, was known to generate noise and disorder to disrupt the ordinary course of days and proclaim the end of winter. Mischievous and Janus-like Puck, in particular, reveals two main features of greenness: that of the natural, positive green world savage able to generate love, and that of the inexperience and inconsistency of 'salad days'. Here, green reflects or inflects Shakespeare's playtext with tinges of ambivalence. In sum, in courtly romances and in early modern plays alike, green worlds are more often than not synonymous with (comic) transgression, disorder and instability.

21 Such deceitful magic also infuses The Tempest’s mysterious island, where Prospero, the master of liberal arts, conjures up false tempests and drolleries. As Caliban, the monster sometimes turned poet, asserts, the island is a sense-confusing realm of sounds and airs, of ambivalence and false appearances (3.2.138-39). Colours, here, are uncertain, as the doubts expressed by the ship-wrecked Neapolitans reveal: the island may indeed be ‘green’ or ‘greenish’, or rather ‘tawny’, or else brownish and suggestive of the autumnal season. When Gonzalo remarks, “How lush and lusty the grass looks! / How green!” (2.1.57-58), the treacherous Antonio bluntly answers that “[t]he ground indeed is tawny” (2.1.59), only to be immediately corrected by the mild Sebastian, “With an eye of green in’t” (2.1.60). These interpretative oscillations convey a measure of doubt and uncertainty, and show that perceptions, on the island, are all relative and elusive. Here, hues become as transient, capricious and changeable as sounds, and the strange new
The image of arch-evil implied in Iago's definition of jealousy as a "green-eyed monster" in *Othello* (3.3.170), or in Portia's similar allusion to "green-eyed jealousy" in *The Merchant of Venice* (3.2.110), clearly associates green with deceit and bilious envy. Far from being innovative, these images may be drawn from the bulk of a past imagery and a long tradition of associating green with evil. The witches’ greenness, for instance, was entirely negative, unlike that of nymphs, elves or leaf spirits. In *Le Sabbat des sorcières*, Carlo Ginzburg mentions the fact that black and green animals supposedly followed the witches when the latter went to the Sabbath late at night (136). Demonic creatures were also said to be associated with nature: in a famous trial held in Mantua in the 15th century, several people affirmed that they had seen a nightly deity, the *domina ludii*, who could reveal "the power of plants and herbs ("potentiam herbarum et naturam animalium", 136).^28^ The not-so-Shakespearean image of the "green-eyed" monster also correlates with early modern popular sayings or superstitions, and it is worth noting here that green eyes, today valued for their beauty, supposedly revealed "bad character, a false and deceitful spirit, a life of pleasure and debauchery" (Pastoureau 2014, 100-01). As a consequence, all devilish animals were thought to have green eyes. The devil himself was often represented with green eyes, while some dragons were supposed to have one green, and one yellow eye, this very difference being interpreted as a sign of utmost treachery. *Vairons* or "wall-eyed" animals were regarded as unreliable or, still worse, treacherous beasts (*ibid*). The basilisk, able to kill a man at one gaze, had green eyes. In *The Winter's Tale*, we find such an allusion as Camillo mentions the presence of an infectious, strange disease, and Polixenes protests of his innocence:

> How caught of me?
> Make me not sighted like the basilisk.
> I have looked on thousands, who have sped the better
> By my regard, but killed none so.
> (1.2.388-90)

So, in the play, the reference to Leontes’s green coat (mentioned above) and the oblique hint at the murderous green-eyed basilisk reflect a dual green world oscillating between joy and evil.

In fact, green was seen as a dangerous colour because early illuminators used natural pigments (e.g. earth greens, malachite, plant greens) as well as copper greens, *i.e.* artificial pigments that were brilliant but very corrosive. On the stage, it has always been considered a suspicious colour. Actors and comedians would not wear green clothes said to bring bad luck. The legend says that Molière died on stage wearing a green garment, and this colour is still shunned by actors today. The real, technical reason that may explain such distrust was that the actors’ make-up mixtures probably contained *vertdegris* obtained by mixing copper and vinegar. We now know that this is a highly poisonous substance, which probably caused several deaths at the time. On top of that, green was also considered as a changing, unreliable and ‘false’ colour by the dyers themselves. On
fabric, vert gai could soon become vert perdu, i.e. dull or desaturated, in a matter of a few weeks. Unsurprisingly, deceivers and hypocrites, disorderly or simply strange people, could also be referred to as “divers”, 32

Green figures had not always been figures of evil, however, but mere figures of threat, as in the famous 13th-century legend of the Green Knight, an alliterative text written in verse by an unknown writer. 33 As the supernatural knight appears to be a cynically threatening, but an ultimately benevolent forgiver rather than a devilish representative of black magic (or goetia, used to contact demonic spirits), one could perhaps draw an interesting parallel with the figure of the almighty, despotic Prospero ordering the logs chores ordeal in order to test Ferdinand’s best spirit before handing his beloved daughter over to the young man:

If I have too austerely punished you,
Your compensation make amends, […]
[…]
[… all thy vexations
Were but my trials of thy love, and thou
Hast strangely stood the test here, afore Heaven,
[…]
(4.1.1-7)

In both cases, the two figures are ambivalent, but morality and honour are basically at stake. Incidentally, it must be noticed that, as he vests himself with the power to restrain the youth’s propensity to sexual disorder, Prospero means to lead the lovers onto the path of maturity, away from the misrule of salad days’ impetuosity, i.e. away from the “green impatience of the flesh” (Pastoureau 2014, 71):

If thou dost break her virgin-knot before
All sanctimonious ceremonies may
With full and holy rite be ministered,
No sweet aspersion shall the heavens let fall
To make this contract grow; but barren hate,
[…]
(4.1.15-9)

This also partakes of a utilitarian policy, since the respect of virginity leads to prospects of happiness and abundance. 34 The moral contract, or pact of honour, between father and son ( chastity versus ‘Meseur’, or unhappiness), happens to be the necessary preliminary ritual of containment for the effective protection of morals and honour. Due retribution should then follow. The pact (more ruthlessly) imposed by the Greene Knight on Gawain is of the same ethical nature.

5. Self-conscious mannerism, or green as the colour of the mind

In this part, I will finally consider some artistic oscillations between light gay green and green’s lost hues as self-conscious forms of ambivalence. The way artists have considered green greatly changed with the advent of new scientific discoveries. Aristotle’s classification was kept as a reference for long, and green was perceived as a mixture of blue and black. It was, therefore, a ‘middle color’ situated half way through the palette, between red and blue. One does not know when exactly the mixture of blue and yellow became known as, according to Pastoureau, it is only clearly attested in 18th-century
treatises. If early modern artists generally relied on traditional pigments such as earth greens, malachite and artificial copper greens softened with honey, the mixture probably existed before, and many painters must have experimentally superimposed layers of blue and yellow (Pastoureau 2014, 140-42). Against all odds, it was also possible to taint paper in green as Cennino Cennini explains in his 1437 book Il Libro Dell’ Arte, and especially in chapter XVI, “How the Green Tint is Made on Paper for Drawing; and The Way to Temper It”: “When you want to tint a kid parchment, or a sheet of paper, take as much as half a nut of terre-verte; a little ocher, half as much as that [...]” (Cennini 2009, n.p.). Yet, in all likelihood, dyers and painters had to wait for Isaac Newton’s prism discovery in 1665-66 in order to conceive and use such a mixture in a systematic way (Pastoureau 2014, 142-44). The new classification of purple, indigo, blue, green, yellow, orange and red then imposed itself. Green was still situated in the middle of the palette as a ‘middle’ and therefore ambiguous colour. It somehow remained a suspicious shade in the social and religious sphere of the time.

That is not entirely surprising if we consider the long-lasting influence of the Reformation. 16th-century Protestants like Philipp Melanchthon would consider green - or any other vivid colour for that matter - as ‘dishonest’, and they advocated instead the use back or brown clothes as well as the use of white to decorate churches. However, quattrocento and cinquecento artists mostly praised green. Catholic painters obviously saw it as a symbol of renewal and a source of light. More surprisingly, the German artist Hans Baldung Grien (c. 1484 – 1545) was called Grün because of his predilection for green pigments. Incidentally, in his Adoration of the Magi (Dessau, Anhalt Art Gallery, 1510), Grien represents Africans in striped clothes, which means that the very stripes once symbolical for mischievous varietas had now become a sign of novelty. Generally speaking, in 16th-century Europe, the frequent use of shimmering, light and golden greens are examples of the bella maniera resting upon the aesthetic principles of sprezzatura and grazia. Not only does sprezzatura represent the elegant complexities and intricacies of lines and contours (Falguières 76), it also suggests the artificial quality of the light, as well as the luxury and elegance of clothes. So, ultimately, chromatic or poetic variations of green could also highlight a mannerist, self-conscious form of stylization. Mannerist art was indeed prone to create metaphorical distance by means of several meta-artistic devices, as shown by the literally and metaphorically self-reflexive Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror (1523-24). According to Gian Paolo Lomazzo’s Idea del tempio della pittura (1590), art should be based on personal aesthetics (Arasse 466) and reflect the artist’s disegno interno, his inner eye or ‘mind’s eye’. Green, therefore, could ultimately be a pretext to artifice.

In Shakespeare’s green worlds, one can certainly detect a mannerist touch. The oscillations and chromatic shifts between gay green and lost green shades may illustrate the ambivalences of transient worlds as well as the hesitations of the self in its difficult quest for identity. The quaint mazes and ‘wanton green’ images of A Midsummer’s Night Dream represent a kind of metaphorical figura serpentinata and stand for the lovers’ confusion. In later plays, the cornucopia images associated with natural green worlds paradoxically connote a form of artificiality. In the Masque offered by Prospero to the young lovers in act 4 of The Tempest, Ceres, the goddess of earth and agriculture, conjures up images of a lush and bountiful nature (“on this short-grassed green”, 4.1.83; “on this green land”, 4.1.130-33), but her blessings to the lovers are crafted in a highly sophisticated and wrought-out language which actually highlights Shakespeare’s poetic
artifice. Here as elsewhere, art reveals self-conscious processes of symbolization. Such processes are made particularly blatant in Giuseppe Arcimboldo’s portrait of Rudolf II as *Vertumnus* (1590–91), which shows a composite head made of all sorts of fruits, flowers, greeneries and vegetal elements. Such profusion is suggestive of a bounteous nature and implicitly equates the reign of Rudolf with one of peace, harmony and prosperity. As such, it announces a new Golden Age and eternal spring (DaCosta Kaufmann 217). But this excessive use of nature also reveals a trend to create a playful distance with reality and the wish to create a beautiful *concetto*. Whether it be in highly stylized medieval illuminations, old tales, popular legends or in Shakespeare’s dramatic imagery, artifice is all.

**Conclusion**

So, in early modern textual or iconographic representations, the colour green ultimately provides us with metaphorical visions and represents the illusion of reality rather than reality itself, this in order to reflect the artist’s *disegno interno*. The ‘gay green’, the playfulness and the sense of abundance characterizing Arcimboldo’s *Vertumnus* may be equated with the green world of *A Midsummer’s Night Dream*. However, if these *cornucopia* images undoubtedly partake of a gay green mood, ultimately, they are also deeply ironic and disturbing at the same time. In Shakespeare’s play, Titania’s love is a sheer illusion created by Oberon’s and Puck’s magic. It is a beautiful artifice, one basically of the same wrought-out nature as the one displayed in the portrait of Rudolf, where the ostentatious *vis comica* device, Arasse argues, also stands as an ironic counterpoint to a typically mannerist glorification (432). I finally want to argue, therefore, that the green factor present in both these (too) ostentatiously joyful spheres may ultimately aim at deconstructing the real, as well as at introducing darker hues in a seemingly light-headed comic world. While green, in early modern England, can hardly exist in one-piece worlds, it is fully exploited in worlds where artifice and ambivalence are given pride of place.

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**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


NOTES

1. All Shakespeare quotations refer to Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor’s one volume Oxford edition.

2. “The painters of the Middle Ages were no more concerned about the ‘real’ colours of things than they were about their real shape. In their miniatures, enamel work and panel paintings, they loved to spread out the purest and most precious colours they could get — with shining gold and flawless ultramarine blue as a favourite combination” (Gombrich 248).

3. i.e. as verdâtre.

4. There were undoubtedly pessimistic visions still prevailing among early modern Europeans — visions of an unstable world ridden with turmoil, inconsistency and disturbing images (Greenblatt 267). Montaigne, in his essay “Du repentir”, offers his readers a striking vision of the world’s ontological uncertainty: “Le monde n’est qu’une branloire pérenne. Toutes choses y branlent sans cesse : la terre, les rochers du Caucase, les pyramides d’Egypte, et du branle public et du leur. La constance même n’est autre chose qu’un branle plus languissant” (Essays III, 13, 1999, 1102).

5. Jean Robertet’s poem may be found in an early manuscript at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. The “Moon Personified” enamel was probably found in Limoges and may be seen today at the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art.

6. According to Pastoureau, “it was very often a changeable color, fickle and frivolous, in the image of youth itself” (2014, 71).

7. In The Winter’s Tale, when Leontes remembers his young days, he says: “Metheoughts I did recoil / Twenty-three years, and saw myself unbreeched, / In my green velvet coat; my dagger muzzled, / Lest it should bite its master, […].” (1.2.156-9). Green, here, is also associated with youth and, obliquely, with a form of playfulness, and it is thus seen in a light way. Light hues are once again prevailing on the sombre, lost green vein.

8. This portrait of Giovanni di Nicolao Arnolfini and his wife can be viewed online. See the following website: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arnolfini_Portrait#/media/File:Van_Eyck_-_Arnolfini_Portrait.jpg (date accessed: 3 April 2015). Interestingly, on the National Gallery’s website, it is asserted that “the wife is not pregnant […] but holding up her full-skirted dress in the contemporary fashion” — a not entirely satisfactory explanation (http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/jan-van-eyck-the-arnolfini-portrait, date accessed: 3 April 2015). This painting could also be the memorial portrait of an already dead wife, and the green shade of the woman’s dress may symbolize the couple’s desire to have heirs (all the more so as the dog, in the painting, can be associated with lust).

9. The first English edition of Ripa’s book of emblems, however, appeared in 1709. Yet Ripa’s book testifies to an important European literary tradition surrounding emblematic devices — a tradition which dates back to the 16th century.


11. Veronese, Annie-Sophie Molinié writes, was not only a master of green, but also a master of light and bright hues: “maître de la couleur claire et de la lumière” (39).

12. Now exhibited at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, the painting can be accessed online. See the following website: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lucretia_(Veronese)#/media/File:Veronese.Lucretia01.jpg (date accessed: 4 April 2015).
13. “Le caractère d’absolu commencement que prend la saison où la nature revêt un habit vert” (Dubois 51).
14. The Allegory of Spring or Primavera is exhibited in the Uffizi Gallery (Florence). See the following website: http://www.uffizi.org/artworks/la-primavera-allegory-of-spring-by-sandro-botticelli/ (date accessed: 4 April 2015).
15. The painting probably refers to 5th tale drawn from Ovid’s Fasti, which narrows the story of Zephyrus stealing away a nymph called Chloris, whom he eventually marries and transforms into the Goddess of Spring. The name “Chloris” connects with the Greek word for the colour green, khloros, which also happens to be the root of the word “chlorophyll”.
16. Also on display at the Uffizi Galley, The Birth of Venus can be viewed online. See the website: http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/0b/Sandro_Botticelli_-_La_nascita_di_Venere_-_Google_Art_Project_-_edited.jpg (date accessed: 4 April 2015).
17. “I would I had some flowers o’th’ spring that might / Become your time of day; [...] O Proserpina, / For the flowers now that, frightened, thou let’s fall / From Dis’s wagon! — daffodils, [...]” (4.4.114-18).
18. For instance they had to wear a hat made of plants branches or ferns, or in any case display any ostensible sign of greenery in order to celebrate the most beautiful month of the year. This was a primordial ritual, and “not to show any element of green (“être pris sans verde”) [...] neither plant or textile [...], exposed one to the object of mockery” (Pastoureau 2014, 69).
19. The joyful festivities may here recall other Pagan rituals like those celebrating Maia, the goddess of fertility and divinity of May.
20. There were many such vert gai images of youth, hope and fertility, which were associated with the green world of nature. Ripa represents Nature as a naked woman, holding flowers as a means of pointing to the truth: “[…] par le moyen de cette profession la Verité est mise en evidence, & le mensonge estouffé sous elle” (102-03, Part 1).
21. Pastoureau asserts that “the forest is always a disturbing, mysterious place of strange encounters and temporary metamorphoses [...] (sīlva or forest, sīlvarīcus means savages), where one goes to flee the world and society, hence Merlin the Wizard, [the] literary hero [...]” (2014, 84).
22. “[…] now he was / The ivy which had hid my princely trunk, / And sucked my verdure out on’ it” (1.2.85-7).
23. “[…] les tropes du monde vert sont ici l’emblème de la trahison de celui qui embrasse pour mieux étouffer” (Laroque 95-96).
24. “I hold it the more knavery to conceal it; and therein am I constant to my profession” (4.4.682-83).
25. For further details, see Orgel, “Introduction” to The Winter’s Tale, 52-53.
26. For further explanations on Gonzalo’s exclamation, see Ayami Oki-Siekierczak’s article, “‘How green!’: The Meanings of Green in Early Modern England and in The Tempest”, which is also part of the present collection of essays.
27. Witches were also said to be busy concocting greenish-coloured poison.
28. The dubious woman from Mantua, Carlo Ginzburg explains (136), recalls another mysterious lady mentioned in Milanese trials at the end of the 14th century, and who was also said to teach her disciples the virtues of herbs at night. These are occurrences of green as associated with evil. Such legendary images from the past may have come to influence early modern English literature.
29. Such as, for example, “grey eyes to paradise, black eyes to purgatory, green eyes to hell” (Pastoureau 2014, 100-01).
30. According to Arthur Tilley, “we know from the inventory made after Molière’s death that in the part of M. Jourdain he wore a striped dressing-gown lined with orange and green silk, that in those of Orgon and Harpagon he wore black, and that Alceste’s costume consisted of a doublet and breeches of grey brocade striped with gold thread and silk, lined with watered silk and decked with green ribbons (‘l’homme aux rubans verts’), a vest of gold brocade and silk stockings” (Tilley 304-05).

31. Incidentally, Pastoureau notices that the colour green is associated with poisoning in German: “En allemand, on parle de *Giftgrün*, vert poison!” (Pastoureau and Simonet 53).

32. Indeed, diversity — or “evil varietas” (Pastoureau 2013b, 17) — was regarded as suspicious and distrustful. No wonder if many people believed that the devil wore striped or checked clothes.

33. The legend tells us about the nephew to King Arthur at the court of Camelot, Sir Gawain, and his memorable encounter with a mysterious knight, an awe-arising, gigantic being, clad in green, bearing a green shield and green weapons and whose skin is also green, making him look like some sort of supernatural being. He attacks Gawain who is able to behead him, but the knight retrieves his head and gives him an appointment for the next year before the Green Chapel. Later on, in a castle, the protagonist meets a lady who tries to seduce him, but he resists and only accepts three kisses and a green belt as a token of love. The belt is supposed to protect him from danger. One year later, the Green Knight threatens Gawain with a scythe, pretending to decapitate him three times, only to reveal, finally, that he is the lady temptress’s husband, and he lets him safe. Readers thus understand that this was but a harsh ordeal of honour, the knight using his supernatural powers merely to test the sense of honour of the Knight of the Round Table.

34. Stephen Orgel speaks of “the promise of infinite bounty within a hegemonic order” (“Introduction” to *The Tempest*, 49).

35. This suspicious technique entailed the general depreciation of the colour green already mentioned earlier in this essay.

36. The painting can be viewed online. See the following website: http://media-2.web.britannica.com/eb-media/95/132395-004-BCCF2308.jpg (date accessed: 4 April 2015). The exotic striped cloak of the African is partly green, and the kings’ caps are also green.

37. Grazia may be defined as the general elegance of the whole (Falguières 77). See, too, Arasse 422: “À la différence de la grazia qui visait à faire oublier la pratique de son élaboration […], la venustà se réclame de son propre artifice — au point qu’on pourrait l’appeler une grazia di maniera, une grâce qui donne à voir sa ‘belle manière’, l’arbitraire de sa propre aisance”.

38. Parmigianino’s self-portrait can be seen online. See for example the following website: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Self-portrait_in_a_Convex_Mirror#/media/File:Parmigianino_Selfportrait.jpg (date accessed: 3 April 2015).

39. Arcimboldo’s portrait can also be accessed online. See for example the following website: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Giuseppe_Arcimboldo#/media/File:Giuseppe_Arcimboldo_-_Rudolf_II_of_Habsburg_as_Vertumnus_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg (date accessed: 3 April 2015). The all-powerful but melancholy Holy Roman Emperor and King of Bohemia (1552-1612), famous for indulging in alchemy and occult arts, is here represented as the almighty god of all seasons as well as a god of elements. This is a panegyric to enhance the grandeur of a King of Nature (Arasse 432).

40. Such is the case, for instance, in Beccafumi’s paintings where very light, almost naive, apple-green tones (Falguières 67) seem to deconstruct reality.

41. Significantly, Titania orders Bottom to be fed from the bounteous fruits of nature: “With purple grapes, green figs, and mulberries” (3.2.159).
ABSTRACTS

If Iago's famous words to Othello defining jealousy as “the green-eyed monster” (3.3.170) clearly associate green with bilious envy, Cleopatra’s reference to her “salad days” (Antony and Cleopatra, 1.5.72) tends to equate ‘greenness’ with fresh innocence. This paper will seek to explore how such fluctuations of meanings correlate with the varied and contradictory visions of nature, youth, and decay prevailing at the time.

Significantly, in Jean Robertet’s L'exposition des couleurs (c. 1435-1502), green could serve as an allegory of both vice and virtue, evil and joy, and thus also represent transience and versatility. Once the colour of chivalry, it came to be disparaged, but Vert gai’s vibrant hues and vert perdu’s darker ones still coexisted in proverbs, plays or works of art. Shakespeare’s worlds, even in the very heart of pastoral comedies (A Midsummer Night’s Dream, The Winter’s Tale, As You Like It or The Tempest), reveal the same propensity to oscillate between the lightness of ‘gay green’ and the darker, disquieting vein of ‘lost green’. Being transient, changeable or threatening, green worlds are the very realms of ambivalence.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Shakespeare, vert gai, vert perdu, diableries, mutabilité

Keywords: gay green, lost green, devils, mutability

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