

Representations of the Color Green in Shakespeare

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The color symbolism in English Renaissance literature is no longer innovating topic for students of literary history,¹ however, figurative meaning of colors in literary works from the Middle Ages to the sixteenth century deserves further research for the understanding of complicated changing symbolism of colors. As Don Camerron Allen points out, the English poets learned continental color symbolism, and applied it to their works. He lists four treatises which serves as the main stock of the color imagery for the English writers: Alciatus' *Emblemata*, Giovanni de Rinaldi' s *Il mostrossimo mostro* (1592), Fulvio Pellegrino' s *Significato de' Colori e di' Mazzolli* (1593), a commentary on a popular sonnet; and a *Trattato dei Colori di Sicille Araldo del Alfonso d' Aragona*.² Among these, Sicille Araldo is one of the most influential writings on colors, which Cesare Ripa consulted when he compiled *Iconologia*.³ Jean Courtois' s *Le Blason des Couleurs*, the French version of Sicille Araldo, was written in French in 1435-58. It was first published in 1495 in Paris, and the enlarged edition was published in the beginning of sixteenth century. In France the book was reprinted at least fourteen times by the end of the sixteenth century.⁴ The book also became popular in Italy during the sixteenth century where it was reprinted six times. These Italian and French treatises discuss colors in terms of their physical substance and psychological effect. Colors are not just colors, but different colors were associated with different human sentiments. Each color has had several figurative meanings from classical times, and was related to each other to represent inward passions, virtues and vices. As physical substance colors were made from minerals, plants and animals

to be used as dyestuff and pigments in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, so the range of hues available as well as stability of dyes were naturally limited. To early modern eyes, color was unstable in both human and natural world.⁵ Especially, shades of greens in those days, for example, sap-green and verdigris derived from copper salts are apt to turn brown; verditer not only losses in saturation but changes in hue. While the humanistic concern to match colors to nature placed a greater demand on green than on any other color,⁶ there was no stable and pure green. It cannot be ascertained to what extent these writings were used by the Elizabethan writers, but the symbolic usages of colors, especially of green in Shakespeare is worth investigating. Since green is chemically and symbolically most unstable among basic six colors as Michel Pastoureau points out,⁷ we can find interesting metaphorical usage of the color compared with the Continental examples.

Nowadays, green is the most popular color for most people: green dial, green party, green school, green card, green tourism and green light etc. Associated with ecology the color green has overwhelmed our dairy life. Green has healing power for eyes, and surely greenery calms our exhausted minds. Green plant is indispensable in every offices and homes to supply oxygen. It is abundantly seen around us. With increasing concern to environmental issues, green also gained an important place in Shakespearean criticism, and ecocritical analysis, seen in *Green Shakespeare* and *Ecocriticism and Shakespeare* tries to apply ecocriticism to Shakespearean plays from the political, or activist viewpoints.⁸ In these recent scholarship, green as a color just means greenery in nature, and its symbolic connotation does not become the focus of argument. Of course, green primarily signifies the color of foliage as *OED* states, and so has naturally been associated with spring, youth, joy, beauty, wanton humor and thus gaiety in love.⁹ Citing the authority of Isidore of Seville's seventh-century *Etymologiae*, Gerard Legh, in his *The Accedence of Armorie* (1562, 68, 76, 97, 1612) sums up the opinion of 'all authors' in declaring that green 'is much comfortable to the sight of man, and of all colours moste joyful to the hurt' (sig.B4)¹⁰

Especially early spring, verdure has been the symbol of hope; however, at the same time, the color represents the eventual disappointment since verdure soon fades away. Green can signal both fortunate and sinister aspects of the thing. Pastoreau, in his *Dictionary of Colors* lists the complicated symbolic meanings of green (vert) with the emphasis on ill aspects of this color: 1. Couleur de destin, de la chance et la malchance, de la fortune, de l'argent, du hazard, de l'esperance 2. Couleur de la nature, de l'ecologie, de l'hygiene, de la santé, de la fraicheur. 3. Couleur de la jeunesse, de la seve qui lla monte, de libertinage. 4. Couleur could de la permission, de la liberte. 5. Couleur du Diable et de l'etrange. 6. Couleur du acide, qui pique et empoisonne.¹¹ Among these classifications, green as a color of permission has appeared in the last century, because it is based on green light of the 'go' sign which we Japanese often say 'blue' instead of 'green'. Green which signifies ecology, hygiene, and health appeared and became popular also in the last century. Green showing youth and wanton humor, and green associated with sour taste (such as green apple) has not changed their meanings through ages. Furthermore, green has been a special color for young lovers, and was associated with Venus which the Romans greatly appreciated.¹² The color was thus associated with the goddess who represents youth, spring time, beauty and joy in the Western literature and arts. Poets often use green figuratively to express love. For example, Italian poet, Antonio degli Alberti (1360?-1415) describes a woman wearing the green dress, implying that she is especially dear to the poet:

Qual donna fu gia mai pi ù sotto il sole
 Che luccesse, appo questa sora un' ombra,
 Una seca erba possa infra li fiori:
 Quand' ella appar fra l' altre donne il giorno,
 Vestita tutta di color di verde,
 Mottra Diana esser venuta in terra.¹³

Also in England, when Spenser appraises Eliza, the queen of

shepherdess in April in *The Shepheardes Calender*, he makes her sit upon the grassie greene:

“See, where she sits upon the grassie greene,
 (O seemly sight)
Yclad in Scarlot like a mayden Queene,
 And Ermine white.
Upon her head a Cremosin coronet,
With Damaske roses and Daffadillies set:
 Bayleaves betweene,
 And Primroses greene
Embellish the sweete Violet. (ll. 55–64)

Colin Cloute, the persona of Spenser himself, is not a fortunate shepherd all the time; however, he seems to be successful when he creates his own image of Eliza at this moment. Along with other vivid colors, ‘green’ twice used in the above (one is a noun representing the color of grass, and the other is an adjective for primroses which are not yet in their full bloom) intensifies a fresh, hopeful, and joyful sentiment, which might unite his quest for literary fame and court favor.¹⁴ Green seems to have been thought especially suitable for young maidens to whom according to Nashe, it was customary to give green gowns in celebration of the coming of spring. The color was associated in England, as it was on the Continent, with love and consequently with joy.¹⁵ In *The Merry Wives of Winsor*, Mistress Page ‘turn’ d her daughter into green’ to deceive her husband and Dr. Caius (V. v. 201).¹⁶ When Ann changes the color of her dress, she can finally marry Fenton. The choice of the color of the dress matches the happy ending of youth’s love. Armade in *Love’s Labor’s Lost*, tells that ‘Green indeed is the color of lovers’ (I. ii. 86). The Doctor in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, who tries to comfort Jailer’s daughter, advises the Wooer, ‘Sing to her such green songs of love as she says Palamon hath sung in prison’ (IV. iii. 86). As Heywood records, ‘All things is gay that is green’.¹⁷

Green which symbolizes joyful love, however, connotes the another aspect of love in the English literary tradition; lechery, inconstancy and infidelity. Following the French models. Chaucer visualizes his 'inconstant' women in green clothing:

Madame, for your newfangelnesse
Many a servaunt have ye put out of grace.
I take my leve of your unstedfastnesse,
Ye can not love ful half yeer in a place,
In stede of blew, thus may ye were al grene. ('Against Women
Inconstant', ll.1-7)

The fickleness of women is shown in green, not in blue. Blue is related to jealousy in the medieval color symbolism, and was considered as a mean color. These two colors had a special function in color symbolism as Huizinga discusses in his *Herfsttij der Middeleeuwen*.¹⁸ Both colors have shown ambivalent aspects in the European cultural history, though they are primarily concerned with love. As for blue, Pastoreau proves that blue gradually established its status as the noblest color by the late Middle Ages. It represents Mary, King Arthur and French kings, and so symbolizes fidelity, peace, and other virtuous aspects of love.¹⁹ In Shakespeare, blue is also a color of nobleness and celestial sky. For example, Prospero uses azure (blight bleu) for the sky, and green for the ocean: 'And t' wixt the green sea and the azur' d vault / Set roaring war:' (*The Tempest*, V. i. 43-44) Spenser describes Lechery dressed in green (*The Faerie Queene*, I, iv, 25.1), while his Speranza is in blue:

Her younger sister, that Speranza hight
Was clad in blue, that her beseemed well. (*F.Q.* I. x. 14, 1-2)

While Spenser retains the virtuous meaning of blue, green which suggests the fickle nature of the characters keeps appearing in the

English Renaissance literature. I quoted the passage from *Love's Labor's Lost* to show how green represented happy love; however, it also suggests the betrayal of a woman at the same time. Jestering his foolish master, Armado, Moss lists great men in love such as Sampson:

Arm: O well-knit Sampson, strong-jointed Samson! ... I am in love too.

Who was Sampson's love, my dear Moth?

Moth: A woman, master.

Arm: Of what complexion?

Moth: Of all the four, or the thre, or the two, or one of the four.

Arm: Tell me precisely of what complexion.

Moth: Of the sea-water green, sir.

Arm: Is that One of the four complexion?

Moth: As I have read, sir, and the best of them, too.

Arm: Green indeed is the color of lovers; but to have a love of that color, methinks Sampson had small reason for it. He surely affected her for her wit.

Moth: It was so, sir, for she had a green wit. (I. ii. 72-89)

Moth's speech above indicates Delilah's disloyalty using the color green. We can see both sides of the symbolic meanings of green here. According to *the Riverside Shakespeare*, the note on 'green wit' says 'immature intelligence' (183); however, fickle, disloyal character of the woman could be suggested in the usage of green. As I shall see later, the English poets describe the color of the sea as green. Ever changing water of the sea suggests unstable, inconstant nature, and the repetition of green reflects the fickleness of the woman. There is another famous example of green which signifies a forlorn love: an English ballad 'Greensleeves'. The lady who had received many gifts before she received greensleeves finally leaves the singer. The ballad's entry in the Stationer's Register was on September 3, 1580, and with its tune, in Bacon's terms, it has an affinity with melancholy that 'feeds the disposition' of the spirits that the tune finds.²⁰ Green faded away most

easily even in the eighteenth century because coloring medium could not make pigment stable for a long time. This color was often associated with transient, unstable nature of characters in the medieval and Renaissance literature, and might add the melancholic humor to them.

Moreover, there is a disease relating to such ill aspect of green. It is called greensickness or chlorosis, an anaemic disease which mostly affects young women about the age of puberty and gives a pale or greenish tinge to the complexion. Relating this sickness with the color green, Shakespeare uses this to describe a nature of moon in *Romeo and Juliet*. Romeo, finding Juliet on the balcony, compares her beauty to the sun, and criticizes the moon:

Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon,

.

Be not her maid, since she is envious;

Her vestal livery is but sick and green,

And none but fools do wear it; cast it off. (II. ii. 4-9)

Though this sickness is mostly of a young woman, Shakespeare relates the color green to the moon. Both the moon and this color share the changeable nature. Denouncing the envious moon, the poet seems to suggest the young lover's steady fidelity, the quality opposite to that which the moon and the color green are invested. The quotation also indicates that this color was assumed rather eccentric as yellow was. According to Pastoureau, yellow represented more obviously the color of madness, sickness and eccentricity at least from the thirteenth century onward.²¹ In Shakespeare, Viola or Cesario describes a woman who never confessed her love as follows: she pin'd in thought, / And with a green and yellow melancholy / She sate like Patience on a monument, / Smiling at grief.' (*Twelfth Night* II. iv. 112-15) In the Elizabethan literature, such physical symptoms are appropriate for melancholic lovers including greensickness. They have no appetite and sleep badly. Their eyes are 'hollow, and sunke into their head, dry, and

without teares; yet always twinkling with a kind of smiling looke' (Babb136). Their skin is pale and curiously discolored. A lover's pallor, which is due to corrupt humours, is not 'simple Decoloration... But rather a mixt Colour of White, & Yellow; or of White, Yellow, & Green'.²² Shakespeare seems to be intensifying love-sickness of Viola, who cannot express her true sentiment to the Duke. Expressing melancholy not with black but with green and yellow, the poet suggests that the melancholy Viola refers to is not a common one but a womanly and bizarre one, for it is Cesario who appears on stage suffering from green sickness, a disease of young women.

Furthermore, we should pay attention to the green which is regarded as a color of fortune, both good and ill. According to Pastoureau, this figurative usage is partly based on the unstableness of the pigment of green, but more importantly, green was symbolically regarded as the color of water. The usual color of water is blue; however, water was mostly illustrated as green during the early modern England. *OED* ('green' adj.b) records the first example that uses green to represent the sea from a medieval anonymous poetry, *Chaucer's Dreame* (ca. 1500): 'Sailing...waves green and high'. (l.1267) Since it seems that water came to be perceived as the color blue sometime between the fifteenth century and the seventeenth century in the Europe,²³ Shakespeare often uses green as the adjective for Neptune or the sea. For example, when Oberon sees the daybreak light pouring into the sea, he describes that 'Opening on Neptune with fair blessed beams, / Turns into yellow gold his salt green streams.' (*Midsummer Night Dream* III. ii. 392-93).²⁴ The most striking one is from *Macbeth*. Macbeth expresses his anguish just after he killed Duncan :

Will great Neptune's ocean wash this blood
Clean from my hand? No; this my hand will rather
The multitudinous seas incarnadine,
Making the green one red. (II. ii, 57-60)

Here, the contrast of color between red and green exaggerates the cruelty of the deed. Not only in poetry, but in the contemporary charts and maps such as a portolan chart, the oceans were colored with green. The portolan nautical chart, which was first made in the thirteenth century Italy, was the most popular chart for the Mediterranean sea trade during the age of exploration.²⁵ It is actually very difficult to draw a borderline between green and blue. These colors were sometimes considered as the same color since the classical age, and the English

was no exception. Chaucer describes Cressida's 'fresh and fair' hue changing 'pale and grene' at a moment she leaves to the Greek camp. (*Troilus and Criseyde*, IV. 1.1154) Pale and green is a set phrase the medieval poets use to express loss of colors by sorrow. The color pale green comes from 'cloron' as recorded by Democritus, which is the source of a chlorosis, the other name of greensickness. Shakespeare also uses pale to suggest unhealthy condition: Ophelia illustrates Hamlet's unusual appearance as 'Pale as his shirt' (*Hamlet*, II. i. 78). One of the English emblemist, Henry Peacham illustrates his image of Inconstantia 'in gowne of palie greene' [fig. 1].²⁶ The main source for his personifications is Ripa, and the color of her gown in Ripa is torqino. Pale green, which is translated from Ripa's torqino, might be a mixture of green and blue in Peacham. Associated with the fickleness, the range of peculiar evilness which color green covers seems to expand.

LIB. I.
AVREA SORS REGVM EST, ET VELLE,
ET POSSE BEARE.

Symb. XXIII.



fig. 1



INCONSTANCIE with fickle foote doth stand,
 Vpon a *Crab*, in gowne of palie greene,
 A shining *Cresfaunt* shewing in her hand,
 Which as her selfe, is changing ever fene:
 That cullour light, she borrowes from the *Sea*,
 Whose waues continue, never at a stay .
 Forward, and backward, *Cancer* keeps his pace,
 Tis inconstant man, so doubtfull in his waies,
 The private life, one while will most embrace,
 In travaile then, he listes to spend his dayes:
 Which was the *Kitchin*, that he makes a *Tower*,
 Then downe goes all together in an hower .



fig. 2

Among symbolic and figurative representations of green in Shakespeare, the most profound usage of green is the green associated with jealousy. Jealousy or envy is one of the passions to which melancholy persons are especially prone.²⁷ In symbolic revel, it is mostly represented with 'bleu' in French, and 'torqino' in Italian. Ripa dresses his Envy in torqino that represents the color of waves because the state of mind of an envious person is always unsettled as waves. Does the torqino correspond to the green in Shakespeare? There are only

two examples in Shakespeare in which he unites green and jealousy. One is in *The Merchant of Venice*, and the other is in *Othello*, both taking place in Venice. The sea plays an important role in both plays. The tempest breaks both Antonio's and Turks' fleet, crucially changing characters' fortunes. One of the most interesting shift in the Renaissance iconography is that *Fortuna* became to be depicted as sailing a boat in the sea. *Fortuna*, revived with the humanistic movement, was an surprisingly popular figure in the Renaissance literature and arts. Flourishing in Italy from about 1460, there are two types of the goddess in Renaissance iconography. [fig. 2]²⁸ One is essentially derivative of the antique Fortune, a Roman matron with a rudder and a cornucopia, and the other is a neo-mythical *Fortuna*, a young naked woman standing on shore. She also holds a sail or veil swelling with the wind from the sea. One reason why she is accompanied by nautical, seafaring images is

that in contemporary Italian, 'Fortuna' meant not only 'chance' and 'wealth' but also 'storm'. With the increasing progress of Renaissance navigation and sea trade which brings men enormous wealth or loss, *Fortuna* was often related with the sea.²⁹ As Fulluehn in *Henry IV* describes, Shakespeare knew the iconography of *Fortuna* very well. Among her various qualities, the caprice of her favor gains the great popularity since antiquity.³⁰ Her fickleness suits the ever changing waves, and dramatists often ascribe the cause of vicious plot to her malice. Both *Fortuna* and the sea share ever changeable nature, and that inconsistency fits the arbitrary nature of a jealous man. Learned writers in the Elizabethan time loosely classified jealousy as a melancholic disorder. As I mentioned before, green is the hue for a melancholic person, and a melancholic person is a jealous one: in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, for example, Ford's jealousy is a 'distemper' (III. iii. 230, III. v. 80, IV. ii. 28), and his wife accuses him of 'melancholy' (II. i. 155). Being excessively suspicious, the jealous man is absurd and highly whimsical.³¹ As jealousy and melancholy aggravate each other in a vicious cycle, 'green-ey' d' suggests endlessly inconstant state of mind as ever moving waves. Shakespeare does not use torqino or turquoise as a color, and we cannot know what color he exactly means when he uses the word 'green'. While torqino, whether greenish blue or bluish green, includes wide range of hue, it is possible that Shakespeare associates jealousy with the color green because it symbolizes the vicious aspect of love as well as ever changing waves. These features of this color contribute to illustrating jealousy with color green. Finally, a monster, a devil, spirits and fairies are often described green.³² Green can be a color representing the bizzare and the eccentric. Shakesperare's 'green eye' d monster' really unifies uncomfortable aspects of green.

Shakespeare figuratively uses the color green in various way. Though color symbolism naturally varies according to each regions and peoples, we can observe that the same color can signal both good and ill nature of the characters in poetry and plays. Especially, the figurative expression of the color green becomes complicated when it is related to

melancholy and jealousy. At the same time, Shakespeare describes both the sea and melancholy as green. Jealousy with the green eyes unifies the traditional description of the sea and the popular concept of the Renaissance fortune, and melancholy.

Notes

1. For example, articles on Shakespeare and color exist from the latter half of the 19th century: 'Shakespeare's Color Names', *The New York Times* (March 2, 1879), 4.
2. Don Cameron Allen, 'Symbolic Color in the Literature of the English Renaissance', *Philological Quarterly* XV (1936), 82–83.
3. See Aki Ito, 'Which color do they wear? *Iconologia* and Color Symbolism in Sixteenth-Century Italy', *Humanities: Christianity and Culture*, vol. 35 (2004).
4. For detailed informations of Sicil's manuscripts and editions, see Aki Ito and Yosiko Tokui trans, *Le Blason des Couleurs* (Tokyo: Yushokan, 2009), 107–20.
5. Bruce R. Smith, *The Key of Green: Passion and Perception in Renaissance Culture* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 60.
6. Smith, *op. cit.*, 65.
7. Michel Pastoureau, *Dictionnaire des couleurs de notre temps: Symbolique et societe* (Paris: Christine Bonneton, 1999), 219.
8. See Gabriel Egan, *Green Shakespeare: From Ecopolitics to Ecocriticism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), and Simon C. Estok, *Ecocriticism and Shakespeare: Reading Ecophobia* (New York: Palgrave, Macmillan, 2011).
9. See Sicille's *Le Blason des Couleurs* for the symbolic meanings of green, for example.
10. Quoted in Smith, *op. cit.*, 63.
11. Pastoureau, *Dictionnaire des couleurs de notre temps: Symbolique et Societe* (Paris: Bonneton, 1999), 221–22.
12. See John Gage, *Color and Culture: Practice and Meaning from antiquity to abstraction* (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 1999), 11–27. There are eleven words in Latin which means green.
13. Antonio degli Alberti, Sestina, I, 13–18 in *Poeti minori del Trecento*, a cura di Natalino Sapegno, Ricciardi, Milano-Napoli, 1952, p.232, quoted in Aki Ito, *Sikisai no Kairou (La Galleria dei colori, Arina-shobou, 2002)*, 176. Ito

refers to many examples of green clothes which mean joy, hope and love in the continental medieval and Renaissance literary works of Boccaccio, Dante, Petrarch and others.

14. Colin Burrow, *Edmond Spenser* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1996), 48.
15. Allen, *op. cit.*, 86.
16. Quotations from Shakespeare are from *The Riverside Shakespeare* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).
17. Allen, *op. cit.*, 86.
18. Johan Huizinga, *Herfsttij der Middeleeuwen*, 1919, trans. Kouiti Horikoshi (Tokyo: Chuoukouron, 1967), 497.
19. Pastoureau, *Bleu: histoire d'une couleur*, trans. by Eri Matsumura and Tsuyosi Matsumura (Tokyo: Chikuma shobo, 2005), 82-3.
20. Green, *op. cit.*, 180. For the detailed discussion of this ballad, see Green, *op. cit.*, 178-81.
21. See 'Jaune' in *Dictionnaire*, 135-36.
22. Babb, *op. cit.*, 136. Lawrence Babb refers to this quotation as the explanation of 'the green and yellow melancholy'.
23. Pastoureau, *Dictionnaire*, 109.
24. We find more examples in *Midsummer Night Dream* (IV. Iv. 28) and *Antony and Cleopatra* (IV. xiv. 58).
25. Pastoureau, *histoire*, 203.
26. Henry Peacham, *Minerva Britanna, London 1632*. The English Experience 407 (Amsterdam, New York: Da Capo Press, 1971), 147.
27. Babb, *op. cit.*, 141, 97.
28. Achille Bocchi, *Symbolicarum quaestionum de Universo Genere, ... Libri quinque*, (Bologna: Apud Societatem Typographiae Bononiensis, 1574) symb. XXIII.
29. For the changing iconography of Fortune, see Frederick Kiefer, *Fortune and Elizabethan Tragedy* (The Huntington Library, 1983), ch.1.
30. There have been numerous works on *Fortuna*, but cf. especially Jean Delumeau, *Le Peche et la Peur: La culpabilisation en Occident (XIII-XVIII siècles)*, trans. by Yasuo Sano, et al. (Tokyo: Shinhyoron, 2004), 301-30), which discusses *Fortuna* as most feared in the Renaissance.
31. Babb, *op. cit.*, 173.
32. See Pastoureau, *Dictionnaire*, 222.

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