

Phebe Jensen. *Astrology, Almanacs, and the Early Modern English Calendar*. New York: Routledge, 2021, xxiv + 322 pp. + 103 illus. \$160.00. Review by M. G. AUNE, CALIFORNIA UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA.

As they problem-solve their approach to performing *Pyramus and Thisbe*, the Rude Mechanicals in *Midsummer Night's Dream* decide to rely on actual moonlight to illuminate their play. But will the moon shine that night? Peter Quince produces an almanac and announces that it will. Readers, performers, and editors take it for granted that an almanac is a book containing astronomical and astrological information and give it little thought otherwise. But as Phebe Jensen points out, Quince's almanac was more than a calendar. It provided, "astrological, astronomical, historical, agricultural, medical and ... religious information" intended to help the reader understand and use the calendars (2). And so, it is fitting that the man who has done all the work to organize his friends into an acting company would also be the one who carries such an encyclopedic work with him and knows how to use it.

Why then is so comparatively little known about early modern almanacs and calendars? Jensen, professor of English at Utah State University and author of *Religion and Revelry in Shakespeare's Festive World* (2009) as well as articles on early modern astronomy, provides several ideas. First, even in the early modern period, the unreliability of cheap printed almanacs was well known. That bias persists as we delight in mocking weather forecasts, despite their increasing sophistication. More immediately, "almanacs are hard for a modern reader to decipher" (4). They are often marvelous visual objects with intricate charts and images, but without a grounding in early modern astrology, very difficult to understand. What is more, as Jensen points out, accessibility is limited. While Early English Books Online has done tremendous service in making thousands of texts available, no almanacs are included in the fully searchable format—a "digital invisibility cloak" covers them (5). The third and related impediment to the study of almanacs and calendars is the relative lack of scholarship on early modern astrology, especially in literary studies.

*Astrology, Almanacs, and the Early Modern English Calendar* seeks to rectify these deficiencies and provides an immensely helpful and accessible guide for reading and understanding almanacs and calendars. Jensen divides her book into three sections, Backgrounds, How to Read an Early Modern Almanac, and Early Modern Calendars. Each part is further subdivided into chapters, which are compiled of sections, detailed in the table of contents. As a result, from the first page it is very easy to navigate and make use of the book.

Part one is a kind of textbook that explains astrology, calendars, almanacs, and other publications. Terminology is carefully defined, the sequence of sections incrementally builds, and Jensen regularly pauses to reiterate important ideas. The scope of material reaches back to Ptolemy and forward into the seventeenth century and covers a variety of forms of prognostication. Not just astral bodies and the moon were used to make predictions, but also Biblical events such as the punishments of the Egyptians in the Old Testament. A paragraph on brontology, prognostication based on thunderstorms, sent me to *King Lear* to reconsider Lear's raging against the "all-shaking thunder." Each section also includes material on printing and publication, reminding the reader of the materiality of the books and how it shaped their consumption. The section concludes with an overview of the controversies and contemporary criticisms of almanacs, especially from writers practicing natural philosophy.

Part two delivers on its title, providing the reader with the tools to read almanacs critically. Almanacs organized a tremendous amount of information that so typically had a uniform format, and Jensen uses it as the structure for this section, but all the while reminding her reader that the genre was constantly evolving. Half the section is given over to prognostications—the sections of almanacs that are perhaps the most difficult for modern readers to interpret. Here, the sketches of astrology provided in part one is especially useful as they provided the basis for the predictions of weather, astronomical movements, tides, and other important information. Here, the section on materiality usefully uses and contributes to the growing scholarship on books as "interactional objects" (13).

Part three provides a kind of model calendar that draws on an extensive range of almanacs and related materials such as engravings,

tapestries, and stained-glass windows. It takes the reader through the four seasons, the days of the week, and the twelve months. The various motifs, such as allegories, astrological symbols, medical and agricultural information, and historical backgrounds associated with each time period are described with numerous examples and illustrations. As a reference, this is likely to be the most useful section of the book. For readers looking into particular seasons or months of the year, the book provides a simple roadmap to locating relevant information. With Beatrice's promise in *Much Ado About Nothing* to avoid love's madness until "a hot January" (1.1.74) in mind, the reader learns from this section that January was seen as an especially important month in predicting a year's weather; it was also associated with Janus. While this information does not dramatically reconfigure the play or Beatrice's character, it gives insight into how Shakespeare's audiences might have understood her joke and appreciated her warning to Benedick.

The book is deeply researched and exceptionally well-cited. The primary bibliography is extensive and requires its own guide to use because of the complicated nature of almanacs. Helpfully, almanacs and calendars are listed separately, as are primers and religious texts. The secondary bibliography reiterates the interdisciplinary nature of the book, ranging from history to literature to art history to theology to science and medicine. A separate index of saints and holy days is also included.

Especially pleasing and helpful are the numerous illustrations, including photographs by the author, color images from books, tapestries, wall paintings, and needlework. Jensen also acquired dozens of color images from libraries around the world. All told, the book contains more than one hundred, high quality illustrations.

At the beginning of the book, Jensen writes, "[c]alendars are man-made systems that divide up the unruly cycles of the natural world..." (1). It is fair to say that her book divides up and makes accessible the unruly and important mass of early modern almanacs and calendars. The book is very well organized, deeply researched, and easy to use. It rewards a casual browse as one reads Shakespeare and also deserves space on the reference shelf of every research and university library.