

## ≡ Book Review ≡

**Ecocriticism and Shakespeare: Reading Ecophobia.** By Simon C. Estok (Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), x + 182 pp. £52.00 cloth.

‘Ecocriticism’ is literary criticism informed by ecological concerns. Applied to Shakespeare, this new discipline has produced less literary criticism than one might hope, and much introspection about itself as a school of thought. This book does nothing to redress the balance, indeed it makes matters worse by dilating at length and illogically about the need to theorize the discipline and compounds this fault with factual errors, weak writing, unimaginative literary criticism, and misdirected ecological passion. I will take each failing in turn.

Simon Estok believes that Lear’s daughters “finally thrust him” (23) into the natural world, but they do not: in the Folio version Regan says “I’ll receive him gladly, | But not one follower” and Goneril agrees “So am I purposed” (2.2.464–65), and in the quarto Cornwall speaks the latter line to the same effect: Lear is welcome if alone. This is not merely a slip of the typing finger: Estok repeats that Lear is “locked out by his daughters” (25). Important differences between early editions pass unnoticed, so that Estok reports Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* ending with the protagonist’s “limbs all torn asunder” (36); well, only in the revised 1616 B text. Estok makes the surprising claim that “Caliban is evidently vegetarian” (53), apparently not noticing (although he refers to them later on [104]) the marmosets that Caliban snares (2.2.169). Errors occur even in the most definite statements such as “Caliban remains a...monster (all forty-six uses of the word in this play refer to him)” (105). No, Antonio’s “O, ’twas a din to fright a monster’s ear” (2.1.319) does not.

Latin tags give Estok particular trouble: he misuses *sine qua non* as if it meant ‘epitome’ (60, 102), and *a priori* as if it meant

‘prior’ (40). Verbal tics mar the prose, from the occasional “front and center” to mean ‘important’ (35, 40, 64) to fully thirty sentences using “If ...” to introduce and presume agreement with a questionable premiss, such as “If we recognize meat consumption...to be the final stage of male desire” (53). Few readers will grant this claim at first blush and women who eat meat might feel maligned by it. Estok is blind to ambiguities in his writing, as in “Lear...kills the person who hanged his youngest and, as Jonathan Dollimore correctly interprets (193), *boasts* about it (5.3.275)” (31). Who boasted? Checking the source it turns out to be Lear, not the hangman, and hence not a subtle insight requiring the great critic’s support, but a well-known element of the plot.

Estok brings to ecocriticism his notion of ecophobia, meaning “a pathological aversion toward nature” (128 n. 2), intended to align the new discipline with other interest-driven critical schools like queer theory (against homophobia) and feminism (against gynophobia). It must be galling that just when Estok thought he had coined ‘ecophobia’ it occurred to someone else who was first into print (128 n. 5); unfortunately, the footnote asserting Estok’s priority is quite garbled. The offered examples of ecophobia are broad: city sanitation officers’ extermination of pests and vermin, the landscaping of gardens, trimmed poodles being kept as pets, and the illnesses of self-starvation and self-harm or ‘cutting’ (4). Viewed through this new lens, the image of Shakespeare’s achievement is blurred and the literary criticism here holds no surprises for a reader familiar with the plays. Lear “is a mess, inside and out” (22) and is concerned with space in that he asks “where am I?” when he wakes up (29); he “knows Cordelia no better by the end of the play than in the first act; he merely knows his other two daughters better” (30). No concessions are made to the traditionalists touched by Lear asking for Cordelia’s forgiveness because he

recognizes now that she was right and he was wrong in the first Act.

Estok's chapter on *Coriolanus* concludes that the hero "clearly needs a different kind of home, a different kind of mother, and a different kind of past," "is essentially selfish and concerned only with what his people can do for him," and "is unable to integrate, to show or accept pity, or to offer or listen to speech...[which] spells his undoing" (43). Such commentary would attract little credit in an undergraduate essay, which is what Estok's writing starts to look like as he cites non-refereed websites (littering his prose with their URLs) to support uncontroversial claims. Agreed: classifying certain plants as weeds reflects human interests not biological facts, but surely an ecocritic could develop that point to acknowledge that the same is true of all kinds of pollution. Opportunities to draw connections across Shakespeare's works are repeatedly missed. Yes, Edmund in *King Lear* "seems an unnatural thing...[and] represents disorder" (25) but then how come Shakespeare, in *King John*, created an attractive bastard in virtually the same social position? From the chapter on *2 Henry VI* and *2 Henry IV* we learn that disease in the body is likened to disease in the state and that images of nature's inhospitability feature in dramatizations of rebellion. There is little real literary criticism here and in its place are repeated assertions that ecophobia is manifest in the plays' images of untamed nature being dangerous to humans. What little criticism there is tests the reader's indulgence, as when Estok finds that the men with their heads beneath their shoulders in Othello's wooing stories, his suffocation of Desdemona, and perhaps his throttling of the turbaned Turk are all "symbolic decapitations" (70).

The defining aspect of ecophobia, according to Estok, is our human fear of nature's unpredictability, and hence *Hamlet's* images of rotting are ecophobic because of rot's "imagined unpredictability" (87). I should have said the play rightly insists upon the utter predictability of human rot, most obviously in the business with the skull. Staking an ecologically informed critical practice on pervasive unpredictability is a risky strategy since of course humanity's greatest threat comes from the depressingly predictable consequences of CO<sub>2</sub> emission. On

ecology generally, Estok is misguided, as when he asserts that in Shakespeare's time "the environment, globally, was in much better shape than it is now" (91). By what measure could such a statement be supported? No one environmental condition is inherently better than another, and while some things are now worse for humans, others are surely better; the frosts of the Maunder Minimum were pretty tough. To avoid the ecocritic's cardinal sin of anthropocentrism one has to acknowledge that for certain life-forms there has never been a better time to be alive. To viruses and bacteria international travel has brought a golden age of opportunities for spreading themselves across the globe. Despite himself, Estok posits a value-free notion of environmental well-being by decrying the atmospheric pollution of early modern cities, but pollution is a cultural construct not a given: oxygen is toxic to many life-forms and for millions of years life on Earth thrived without it. An ecocritic slaying the dragon of anthropocentrism should notice such things.

Estok ends by reflecting that an aphorism displayed in the Library of Congress encapsulates a mindset that has led to "environment horrors." It reads "the earth belongs always to the living generation [who]...may manage it then and what proceeds from it as they please during their usufruct" (123). Since a usufruct is a right of *temporary* possession dependent upon doing no harm so that the property may be passed on intact, ecocritics should rather congratulate the Library of Congress for its radical insistence that we possess the world only in trust for future generations. Estok's misreading of this aphorism is symptomatic of his wider misreadings of Shakespeare and ecological theory and practice. He appears more interested in discussing ecocriticism as a school within the academic profession than in doing criticism. Each chapter is short (average length 15 pages), and once Estok has set the scene by showing what is at stake in the various preceding debates, there is (intentionally?) little space left to develop an original critical argument of his own. Each chapter ends just as the reader is settling herself for an extended engagement with the play(s) at hand. Ecocriticism will attract few new adherents if it cannot generate compelling literary critical

insights unavailable by previous means. Contrary to the assumptions of the 'slow' movement (which has spread from food to criticism) there is not much time left to achieve this.

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