

■ Review of *Ecocritical Shakespeare: Reading Ecophobia* by Simon C. Estok

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Simon C. Estok is most well known among ecocritics and other literary scholars today for his development of the concept of “ecophobia,” now a promontory in the expanding and still quite uneven critical terrain of ecocriticism, a subdisciplinary area of literary and cultural studies that underwent explosive growth over the past three decades and continues to expand today. Estok first garnered significant notice for “ecophobia” in an essay titled “Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness: Ecocriticism and Ecophobia,” published in *ISLE*, the flagship journal for ecocriticism in the United States. In that writing, the first in the 2009 spring issue of *ISLE*, Estok accounts for the split in ecocriticism between scholars open to and those resistant to theory. Citing the work of some of the most important ecocritics today including Lawrence Buell, Neil Evernden, Greta Gaard, Greg Garrard, Karl Kroeber, Glen Love, Serpil Oppermann, Dana Phillips, Rebecca Raglon, Catriona Sandilands, and Scott Slovic, Estok argues that the initial receptivity of ecocriticism to a wide and diverse range of environmental readings of texts as well as its activist base hampered the efforts to theorize it. Its strongest supporters were especially critical of post-

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structuralism, an area of literary theory and criticism that was very fashionable at the time. They claimed poststructuralism had closed literary and cultural studies off from material and political realities and they called for the rejection of theory, poststructuralist theory in particular, and a reengagement with the “natural environment,” or a “resurgence of the real” (Estok, “Theorizing” 204). The discipline has since seen more scholars including Estok argue for the relevance of poststructuralist thought to the ecocritical enterprise.¹ They argue that to engage in ecocriticism by holding that language, signs, and words are only derivatives of the physical objects they stand in for is as unsatisfactory as to engage in ecocriticism by asserting that everything in the world is mere mirage, immaterial, and linguistic construct (Estok, “Theorizing” 205). Citing William Chaloupka and McGregor R. Cawley, Estok points out that “nature” and “environment” are “first and foremost . . . [artifacts] of language” and can be “anything but direct and literal” (qtd. in Estok 205). Citing Robinson Jeffers scholar Peter Quigley, he also notes that “after poststructuralism,” one can no longer “take a term like ‘nature’ at face value” (qtd. in Estok, “Theorizing” 205).

In his monograph *Ecocriticism and Shakespeare: Reading Ecophobia*, Estok expands on the argument of “Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness,” reading “ecophobia” against the work of William Shakespeare. In doing so, he adds to and builds on earlier ecocritical studies of Shakespeare, a hypercanonical author, as it were, who has become the main focus for a small but growing number of ecocritics. Estok’s original contribution is not that he is the first to read Shakespeare from an ecocritical perspective. As he acknowledges, scholars who precede him in this respect include Bruce Boehrer, Gabriel Egan, Sharon O’Dair, Karen L. Raber, and Robert Watson. Other scholars, those who specialize in ecocriticism and early modern English if not Shakespeare per se, also have contributed significantly to Shakespeare ecocriticism. The latter group includes Todd Andrew Borlik, Thomas Hallock, and Ivo Kamps.² Estok’s main contri-

¹ These scholars include: William Cronin, editor of the important collection of essays *Uncommon Ground* (1996); David Mazel, author of *American Literary Environmentalism* (2000), SueEllen Campbell, author of the early important essay “The Land and Language of Desire: Where Deep Ecology and Post-Structuralism Meet” (1996); and Dana Phillips, whose essay “Ecocriticism, Literary Theory, and the Truth of Ecology” (1999), also an early important writing, lambasts “the anti-theoretical spirit of ecocriticism” (578) and ecocritics’ treatment of literary theory “as if it were a noxious weed” (589). Another early important figure in this history is the ecofeminist scholar Karla Ambruster, author of “Blurring Boundaries in Ursula Le Guin’s ‘Buffalo Gals, Won’t You Come Out Tonight’: A Poststructuralist Approach to Ecofeminist Ecocriticism” (1996). For a very useful overview and defence of poststructural ecocriticism, discusses most of the aforementioned scholars, see also Serpil Oppermann’s essay “Theorizing Ecocriticism: Toward a Postmodern Ecocritical Practice” (2012).

² See the Works Cited at the end of this article for relevant studies by these scholars. Two other important studies worth mentioning (and also listed in the Works Cited) are Lynne Bruckner and

tribution to Shakespeare ecocriticism is that he is more openly and pronouncedly critical of the plays and other writings attributed to Shakespeare, or less diffident about suggesting that the writings are fundamentally anthropocentrically flawed. Although many readers might find it hardly surprising to be told that Shakespeare and his contemporaries disliked and feared the natural world, Estok is the only Shakespeare ecocritic who has ventured to make this argument in relatively straightforward and unapologetic terms. Other Shakespeare ecocritics work more towards defending or explaining as elaborate irony or other rhetorical ruse the profoundly disturbing and deep-seated anthropocentrism that informs Shakespeare's plays. Estok takes a discernibly adversarial stance towards his main subject, as I read his arguments; however, he does so mainly to emphasize that the environmental crises that we face today as a species are the consequence of our denial or unwillingness to confront the roles that our most venerated texts have played in giving rise to these crises. A second no less substantial contribution that Estok makes to Shakespeare ecocriticism is found in his "confluent theorizing." Drawing on and combining quite different critical theories and practices, namely feminism, postcolonialism, and queer theory, he adds to existing understandings of the ecocritical terms of anthropocentrism, ecophobia, speciesism, and so forth. As he argues, environmental prejudice is ideologically inextricable from other institutionalized forms of prejudice and cannot be fully addressed or understood without addressing these other prejudices.

The first chapter of *Ecocriticism and Shakespeare: Reading Ecophobia* is launched upon the arguments found in "Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness: Ecocriticism and Ecophobia." As with the earlier writing, in *Ecocriticism and Shakespeare* Estok critiques both the anti-environmental radical constructivist position (which undercuts anachronistic hard-fast distinctions between natural and cultural design, human and nonhuman being, natural and unnatural things, and so forth) and the pro-environmental conservative position and its continued dependence on binary distinctions. "Doing Ecocriticism with Shakespeare: An Introduction," is followed by a close reading of *King Lear* (Chapter 2), *Coriolanus* (Chapter 3), *2 Henry VI* and *2 Henry IV* (Chapter 4), and *Othello* and *Pericles* (Chapter 5). Estok situates *King Lear* in the body of criticism that addresses the role that nature is given in the play, in particular the role of weather, and the influence on the play of "the actual weather of Shakespeare's England" (13). (From approximately 1560 to 1600, Europe experienced a Little Ice Age of "cooler and stormier [weather], later wine harvests, and

Dan Brayton's edited collection *Ecocritical Shakespeare* (published in the same year that Estok's book appeared in print) and Vin Nardizzi's *Wooden Os: Shakespeare's Theatres and England's Trees* (2013).

considerably stronger winds than those of the twentieth century” [21].) As Estok argues, the tragic events of the play are tied to the representation of weather (and of the natural world as a whole) as deeply hostile to human society because it is unpredictable (23). Chapter 3, “*Coriolanus* and Ecocriticism: A Study in Confluent Theorizing,” forges connections between other scholars’ queer theory readings of *Coriolanus* and Estok’s ecocritical argument, which is that the homophobic isolation of Coriolanus is “deeply bound up with ecophobic issues” (33). In *Coriolanus*, nature is negatively constructed as both a “viciously punitive source of authority” and “a space of weeds” of which Coriolanus represents the most sickening species. Nature and “the space of [Coriolanus’s and Aufidius’s] love itself” is “a dangerous [space], an uninhabitable space, a space neither of heterosexual marriage nor of same-sex friendship, a contemptible space. . .” (35).

It cannot tolerate the fierce individualism that so tragically characterizes Coriolanus or the position of sexual minority into which he finally thinks he will have the consolation of escaping. In the end, there is no escape: nature wins, and it is a very dangerous and consuming nature. (47)

In Chapter 4, “Pushing the Limits of Ecocriticism: Environment and Social Resistance in *2 Henry VI* and *2 Henry IV*,” Estok continues some of the arguments that he sets up in the previous chapter and introduces the issue of class. His main point with respect to the first play is that rebellion, particularly class struggle, is deprecatingly painted in the play in the language of flora and fauna: “the association of rebels and malcontents of one sort or another with flora and fauna is repeatedly enforced throughout the play” (51). As part of such representation, the play also “subverts” a popular radical vegetarian environmental ethics (53) even while it seems to endorse this ethics. Ultimately, it contains this ethics, catering to “a larger [meat-eating] tradition that silences arguments against the use of animals for food for human consumption” (54). Similarly, Estok reads *2 Henry IV* as a text that participates in and endorses a powerful conservative ideology that constructs political rebellion as both nature and a form of disease, or social and moral decay. “[Nature] offers a vast resource through which [both *2 Henry VI* and *2 Henry IV*] define social and physical dis-ease, and through which these in turn define the environment” (64). The plays position “rebels outside the realm of the moral consideration that at the time was accorded only to unambiguously human subjects” (64). Whilst they “succeed at least in challenging boundaries, regardless of how poorly [politically rebellious figures] may fare at being rebels, and regardless of how well the plays fare as subversive drama,” they leave their readers with the sense that engaging in political rebellion, and questioning prevalent beliefs that weeds are aberrations of nature

and do not belong in it, are morally suspect enterprises (64). This said, the plays also “do suggest possibilities for ecocriticism far outside of its traditional grounds” (64). Because “so very much of our thinking about class and social hierarchy is structured by ecophobia and the way [in which] we lay value on, commodify, and hierarchize nature,” when we engage in environmental justice, we also engage in social justice (64).

The focus of Chapter 5, “Monstrosity in *Othello* and *Pericles*: Race, Gender, and Ecophobia,” is the “dramatic dehumanizations” that *Othello* and *Pericles* stage along “the axes of race and gender” as well as the axis of nature (68-69). The colonial projections of monstrosity and cannibalism on the non-English other are inseparable from the de-naturalizing of nature, or the representation of nature as alien and monstrous. In “[w]riting monsters,” both *Othello* and *Pericles* imagine “unpredictability and agency in nature” and so open “a space for a variety of discursive disciplinary actions against such imagined unpredictability and agency” (68). In the instance of *Othello*, sixteenth-century discourses of monstrosity, or the discourses that “spectacularized corporeal difference,” can be productively understood, as Estok argues, as the reflection of the difficulties that “the early moderns had in defining the precise boundaries of nature” (69). Bestialized (and feminized), Othello’s body is represented as a “*terra incognita*,” a yet unnamed and uncontrolled territory on which competing definitions of humanity are mapped out (75). His race and his association as a “non-English other” with the non-human “other” of nature are “less a contestation . . . of the period’s boundaries than a conning of them” because, “[u]ltimately, the ‘fraud’ is revealed” (75) and the political and physical environment is regained and re-circumscribed. In *Pericles*, the discourse of cannibalism as well as that of gender and race not only blur “the boundaries of ‘nature’ and ‘culture,’” but also reflect ecophobic attitudes toward the natural world (79). As with *Othello* and many of the other plays, *Pericles* betrays humans’ double stance towards the natural world. In perceiving and constructing it as indefinable (and therefore monstrous), it has “discursive utility” for us: “keeping it ambiguous means keeping it perpetually useful. It is a slave that will do any job, whether it is in support of homophobic discourse or as resource for furnishing repose from corrupt civilization” (81).

In Chapter 6, “Disgust, Metaphor, Women: Ecophobic Confluences,” Estok draws on feminist and ecofeminist theory to analyze *The Winter’s Tale* and its reductive treatment of both women and the environment in either/or terms of good and bad (93). No middle ground, variegation, or ambiguity is permitted to either women or the environment. The latter is either “a vicious space of bears and wolves, or else a beautiful place of fertility and abundance” (93).

Women are “liars, shrews, and lechers all,” or else “chaste, guiltless, or otherwise guileless” (93). Citing the work of Karen J. Warren, one of many ecofeminists whose research concerns “the important connections between how one treats women, people of color, and the underclass on one hand and how one treats the nonhuman natural environment on the other” (Warren qtd. in Estok), Estok observes that “it seems partial at best to conduct ecocritical investigations outside of feminist frameworks . . . all ecocriticism must, by its nature, be feminist” (88). (He also notes that there are important differences between ecofeminism and ecocriticism. In choosing the former, “we privilege the social”; in choosing the latter, “we subordinate feminism and make it a topic for inclusion rather than a primary topic” [88].) His main argument is that one can find very little justification for either the misogyny in the play or its corollary, the rendition of the natural world as either mere diversion or deeply deceptive. Analyzing the exceptional scenes in the play which describe Perdita growing up under the care of her shepherd stepfather in a pastoral setting, Estok argues that whilst these scenes “certainly . . . [are] a stark contrast to the sterile and life-denying court of Leontes,” they function as mere “interlude”:

Perdita, as her name implies, is lost, and the fold to which she ultimately returns does not have sheep in it; she ultimately returns to Sicilia, and the play’s pastoral interlude remains just an interlude. Nature is a place to go and visit, but living there permanently is not something that people of class do. (96)

In Chapter 7, “Staging Exotica and Ecophobia,” Estok examines the ideological links between madness and “exoticism,” or *difference*. Estok argues that these repeatedly serve more to re-inscribe than to undercut pervasive prejudicial norms and practices in Shakespeare’s time: the “corporeal norm on which madness is written as material deformity” is “gendered, sexualized, classed, and raced” (100). Perhaps the least well organized of the nine chapters, “Staging Exotica and Ecophobia” covers important critical terrain nonetheless. Drawing on postcolonial theory, Estok analyzes early modern understandings and constructions of madness and difference in the contexts of *The Tempest* and *The Merchant of Venice*. He ties the issue of the denial of rights to the natural world to the issue of subjugation of New World peoples. Just as they enslaved and commodified New World human populations, Old World powers extended moral consideration to New World environments in terms of their aesthetic and commercial value only (109).

Chapter 8, “The Ecocritical Unconscious: Early Modern Sleep as ‘Go-Between,’” looks at the function of sleep in early modern literary contexts including Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* and John Webster’s *The White Devil*. Estok’s argument here is that sleep in early modern culture betokens bestiality, the dis-

ruption of humans' superior place in the "natural order" of things and, according to sleep's associations with "night" and "darkness," "the flipside of everything good in nature" or "indeed . . . much that constitutes an abhorred nature" (111). This penultimate chapter, as Estok admits, is mostly "thematic" ecocriticism and might be criticized for falling short of the "activist" ecocriticism that he aims for and advocates in the earlier chapters and appreciably distinguished "the embryonic stages of ecocritical endeavor," when ecocriticism first emerged as a critical practice in literature and cultural studies (119). While thematic ecocriticism is necessary insofar as it can pave the way for conceptual and ideological frameworks that challenge inequity and injustice under older frameworks, a stronger form of ecocriticism is one that is "activist" or involves reading and teaching literature with the aim of directly addressing environmental problems in the world "we daily breathe and smell and feel when we walk outside," that "rains on us, starves or feeds us, drowns or burns us," and which "exists before our discursive constructions of it" (124). Thus, in the last short chapter, "Coda: Ecocriticism on the Lip of a Lion," Estok returns to a more activist stance, emphasizing that ecocriticism must be more than thematic, must be theorized, and must be theorized such that it contributes to social change and extends beyond narrow and insular academic ambitions.

Ecocriticism and Shakespeare: Reading Ecophobia is the first in a new series, "Literature, Cultures, and the Environment," devoted to, in the words of the series' distinguished editor Ursula K. Heise, the inquiry of "how ideas of nature and environmental concerns are expressed in different cultural contexts and at different historical moments" (i). Estok covers an immense and impressive range of early modern literary texts and literary criticism in the arguments that he brings to bear on Shakespeare. This is by far the book's greatest strength and qualifies it as an essential reference source for anyone wishing to study or teach Shakespeare ecocritically. Readers should not be put off by the many, often dizzying directions the citations take or by Estok's habit of refusing to supply answers to the plethora of questions that he asks. His main, repeated argument is clear: Shakespeare's plays evidence very disturbing or, simply put, very wrong, attitudes towards the natural world; these attitudes persist today and are in part the legacy of ideas disseminated through literature; and if ecocritics are to succeed in asking people to question longstanding dismissive attitudes towards the world (as "world" refers to older so-called natural environments), they must practice ecocriticism by both theorizing the discipline more and recognizing that the "ethical paradigm" ecophobia (125) is inseparable from other kinds of institutionalized and codified hatreds such as prejudice against minority groups—for example, immigrant communities, ethnic minorities, women, and homosexuals.

The sub-discipline of literary and cultural studies of ecocriticism continues to draw students and scholars, as attested to by the spectacular increase in the number of international conferences and panels. Nonetheless, there is still resistance to it. I would argue that the categorical omission of it in such staple texts of undergraduate and graduate English Literature courses as *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* reflects ongoing condescension to the natural world and even ongoing ecophobia, or the “irrational and groundless fear or hatred of the natural world” (*Ecocriticism and Shakespeare* 4). The Norton editors might argue, in keeping with Estok, that ecocriticism is yet too theoretically thin an area of literary theory and criticism. The serious issue of the increasingly hemmed in, roped round, and straitjacketed natural world (environments that are not over-determined by human forces or agencies) is the proverbial elephant sitting on, or rather crashing through, “the front porch” of the present century. It is so large that it cannot be ignored yet tiptoed around because it in effect asks us to question our most fundamental beliefs about the rights of humans. Estok’s *Ecocriticism and Shakespeare* is one of a small but growing number of studies that is putting pressure on ecocritics to make this issue more prominent by theorizing ecocriticism such that it will, hopefully, in time, fundamentally change our conduct on the planet and our relations with other planetary species and systems.

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