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REVIEW ARTICLE

Compost and Sea Change: Ecology and Early Modern Literature

Randall Martin, *Shakespeare and Ecology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

Steve Mentz, *Shipwreck Modernity: Ecologies of Globalization, 1550–1719* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

Jennifer Munroe, Edward J. Geisweidt and Lynne Bruckner (eds), *Ecological Approaches to Early Modern English Texts: A Field Guide to Reading and Teaching* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015).

Ecology, ecologies, ecological: the relatively new field of ecocriticism approaches early modern literature from an environmental perspective, exploring the relationships between humans and non-humans (animals, plants, minerals) in historical textual sources. All three books reviewed here are grounded in the assumption that an understanding of historical relations between humans and the natural environment is key to comprehending our current complex ecological problems; all three conceive of this connection between historical ecologies and the present crisis in their own ways. In their introduction, the editors of the field guide *Ecological Approaches to Early Modern English Texts* pause their exploration of the landscape of ecocritical readings of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century texts to pose this underlying question, 'How are we to approach early modern ecologies, and to what end?' (p. 6). These three books explore the relevance of early modern literature for today's ecological

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crisis, as well as the relevance of ecological perspectives to early modern literature.

A prevalent approach to early modern ecologies is the recognition that many of the problems the planet faces today were experienced already in seventeenth-century England. We may think of air pollution, deforestation, rapid urbanization and overpopulation as troubles of the industrial age, but early modern Londoners were already intimately familiar with these problems. The opening pages of Randall Martin's *Shakespeare and Ecology* invite readers familiar with the story of how Shakespeare's Globe Theatre (1599) was built from the oak timbers of the stealthily dismantled The Theatre (1576) to reconsider this anecdote from the perspective of the early modern environmental crisis. The Burbages' thrifty recycling of The Theatre's timber was prompted by a steep rise in the price of wood and timber (96 per cent since 1576), an inflation caused by the deforestation of southern England. The soaring price of wood led to a switch of fuel in early modern London: households and industry turned to sea coal, mined on the coasts of northern England and Scotland. Shakespeare registers this energy transition in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, where Mistress Quickly takes pride in her comfortably heated rooms and invites her guest to sit 'at the latter end of a sea-coal fire' (1.4.7–8). The widespread use of sea coal led to the next environmental crisis, however, as this type of fuel had a much higher sulphur content than wood, leading to heavy smog and acid rain in London. Mistress Quickly's household thrift would have reminded Londoners of the trade-offs that came with deforestation and the shift to sea coal. As Martin puts it, 'the origins of human-generated climate change today lie partly in the shift to fossil fuel that began in Shakespeare's England' (p. 3).

This new awareness of the limits of natural resources prompted early modern authors to rethink human relationships to the natural environment. If a view of the early modern period as the start of 'ecological modernity' shapes a teleological line between the sixteenth century and ours, a more cyclical approach unearths alternative modes of interrelating with non-humans in historical textual sources. Martin combines a rich knowledge of ecological science and environmentalism with an innovative and thorough exploration of the traces of such alternative ecologies in Shakespeare's works. He explores deforestation and environmental activism in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *The Tempest*, casts Rosalind in *As You Like It* as a bioregional sustainable farmer who perceives 'phenomenological connectivity and wider ecological time frames' that reach beyond profit-driven agriculture (p. 76), and shows how gunpowder figures as an impairment of sustainable cultivation in the

history plays and *Macbeth*. In the final chapter, Martin considers worms in *Hamlet* and finds evidence of a view of human and non-human life as enmeshed in 'shared cycles of reproduction, death, and metabiotic regeneration' (p. 141). Hamlet's philosophy of worms expresses an entanglement of human and non-human animals which would later be displaced by Enlightenment philosophy's categorical separation of humans from other creatures, but which has now been rediscovered in animal studies and posthumanism. For Hamlet, the worms' perspective allows him to see his personal loss and grief within wider structures of ecological sustainability, inviting him to think 'beyond short-term tragedy to long-term tragicomedy' (p. 136). For twenty-first-century readers, this cyclical composting of ecological world views similarly offers a glimmer of hope in times of environmental crisis.

Steve Mentz's stimulating and playful *Shipwreck Modernity: Ecologies of Globalization, 1550–1719* on a more conceptual level also approaches early modern ecologies as a beacon for the present. Writing against the radical rupture and anthropocentrism entailed in both 'early modernity' and 'the Anthropocene' – the era of human-made impact on the earth's biosphere – he proposes the experience of shipwreck as a trope to rethink our experience of the current time frame as well as our thinking in terms of radical ruptures. Whereas ecological approaches are often 'green' in their focus on plant and animal life (and green is the predominant colour on these books' covers), Mentz practices 'blue cultural studies' in focusing on encounters with the ocean – 'the most powerful nonhuman actor in history' (p. 2). If the ships that sailed across oceans in the early modern period are a sign of the Anthropocene since ocean-going ships generated a global ecology in which animals, plants, viruses and cultures were distributed across the world, then Mentz coins the name *Naufragocene* – the age of shipwrecks – as an alternative. Rather than the radical rupture and sea change of modernity, his trope suggests a messier model of historical and ecological change. The age of shipwrecks is not a master narrative but a disorderly set of complex narrative patterns that organize the human experience of the non-human environment.

Like Martin, Mentz refers to this non-linear model of history as a 'less orderly image of accumulation and composture … : all things recombine in new forms' (p. 9). The Anthropocene is itself a shipwreck, Mentz argues: it is a period in which the stable ground beneath our feet disappears, eliciting 'the sudden shocking awareness that the vessels that have carried us this far are coming to pieces under our feet' (p. 163). *Shipwreck Modernity* traces a micro-genre of shipwreck stories which ranges from the classical period to Herman Melville, Primo Levi and beyond;

from poetry and plays to printed illustrations and captains' journals. Mentz distinguishes three phases in shipwreck narratives: shock, immersion and broken or remade continuity. After the initial shock comes immersion, an experience that 'puts all forms of order into suspension', a moment of radical openness and disorientation that for Mentz models the 'moment when ecological disorder makes itself felt on the flesh' (p. 1). Narrative functions as a tool of salvage, as a means to 'dry out' the experience of immersion, to assign it a place in larger contexts. As Mentz puts it, 'accommodating disorder as order is something literature does well' (p. 4). Yet it is the state of immersion, the experience in the moment, which offers a glimpse of the possibilities for changing our relations to the environment. At the close of the book, Mentz lifts his readers out of the immersive experience of shipwreck, bringing them on land and leaving them to dry on the beach with seven 'shipwrecked ecological truths' (p. 180). The first of these is the notion that 'catastrophes are opportunities': immersion into the terrifying reality of climate change offers a chance to reimagine human relationships with the non-human environment: 'going into the ocean makes it possible, sometimes, to emerge changed' (p. 32).

Ecological Approaches to Early Modern English Texts: A Field Guide to Reading and Teaching not only is an extremely valuable vade mecum for the ecocritical scholar because of its lucid and up-to-date introductions to the texts and methodologies of reading and teaching ecocritically, but also contains a section that explicitly addresses the question of how to relate early modern ecologies to our present predicament. If this generous and inclusive volume as a whole explores the roles of materialism, concepts of agency, feminism and queer studies, and pedagogy in ecological literary studies, its first section focuses on what the editors call 'the presentist/historicist debate' (p. 7). Robert N. Watson considers the interweaving of ecocritical education with environmental politics as 'profoundly counterproductive' (p. 17) and proposes that despite the urgency of climate action, ecocritics should transmit to their students a tolerance and even passion for the unresolved and the convoluted – an attitude that perhaps resembles Mentz's concept of immersion or Donna Haraway's 'staying with the trouble'. Ken Hiltner warns that past issues that may seem distinctly modern and familiar may have been interpreted very differently in the early modern period. He cautions that we might recognize contemporary environmental attitudes like Christian stewardship in early modern texts, but that they might still be quite different if analysed in their historical context. Jennifer Munroe in a forceful contribution argues that the turn to posthumanism, materialism and the agency of 'things' in ecocriticism

threatens to ignore the power relations that undergird human practice. She urges scholars to incorporate the ongoing work of materialist feminism and ecofeminism to attend to 'that which does not speak or is otherwise silenced by attempts to erase the complexities and contradictions of everyday life, which are finally not simply reducible to "matter"' (p. 47). This valuable volume thus demonstrates that there are multiple and conflicting approaches to early modern literature: the field has become increasingly complex. Martin compares literary ecocriticism with ecology in this sense: both are strategically heterogeneous in concept and non-exclusionary in method (p. 7). Jennifer Munroe, Edward J. Geisweidt and Lynne Bruckner's field guide embraces this complexity, showing the reader the biodiversity of green and blue literary studies. Their question of how we are to approach early modern ecologies, then, has multiple answers that resonate with issues of historiography, environmental change and relations between humans and non-humans. Whether viewed as 'ecological modernity' or as part of a messier process of composting, transformation and regeneration, the literature of the early modern period is a fertile source for the exploration of the seeds of our ecological crisis, as well as an archive of alternative ecological world views.

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