



PROJECT MUSE®

Green Shakespeare: From Ecopolitics to Ecocriticism (review)

Mark Taylor

Renaissance Quarterly, Volume 60, Number 1, Spring 2007, pp. 314-316
(Review)

Published by Renaissance Society of America



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/212692>

on Shakespeare collection aims to supply “short, powerful ‘cutting edge’ accounts of and comments on new developments” in Shakespeare studies, and to “either ‘apply’ theory, or broaden and adapt it in order to connect with concrete teaching concerns” (ii). *Hamlet’s Heirs* is definitely a short and powerful book which deals with new developments in both Shakespeare studies and the modern world at large: however, while it is an intriguing read for a mature scholar and a good challenge for a graduate student, it is too complex for use on the undergraduate level. It may be intended as part of the “second tier” of the Accents series: as the publisher indicates, “In addition to affordable, ‘adoptable’ titles aimed at modular undergraduate courses, it will include a number of research-based books. Spirited and committed, these second-tier volumes advocate radical change rather than stolidly reinforcing the status quo” (ii). According to Hawkes, “These volumes will . . . offer a platform for the work of the liveliest younger scholars and teachers at their most outspoken and provocative. Committed and contentious, they will be reporting from the forefront of current critical activity and will have something new to say” (ix). In this case, Charnes is quite successful: *Hamlet’s Heirs* brilliantly questions and challenges pervasive assumptions and business as usual in the arenas of both literary theory and contemporary politics.

RACHEL WIFALL

St. Peter’s College, New Jersey

Gabriel Egan. *Green Shakespeare: From Ecopolitics to Ecocriticism*.

Accents on Shakespeare. New York: Routledge, 2006. xii + 204 pp. index. illus. bibl. \$110 (cl), \$36.95 (pbk). ISBN: 0-415-32295-2 (cl), 0-415-32296-0 (pbk).

The concerns of this important book are implied by its title and subtitle. At the beginning of *Green Shakespeare*, having posited an “impending ecological disaster facing humankind” — an issue nowhere addressed in papers presented at the Shakespeare Association of America meeting in Bermuda in 2005 — Gabriel Egan writes, “It is an ambition of this book to place it [the impending disaster] there [on the agenda of future Shakespeare conferences and studies] and to show that our understanding of Shakespeare and our understanding of Green politics have overlapping concerns and can be mutually sustaining” (1). At the end, Egan writes, “It is a matter of urgency that new ways of thinking about humankind’s relations with the Earth are put to use, for disrupting the self-persisting habits of thought under which industrial capitalism emerged and flourished is the most important intellectual project for the twenty-first century” (175). Egan’s purpose thus is to read Shakespeare in an entirely new context. I hope he succeeds in his purpose and that his book will be widely read and its lessons understood.

The identities of Egan’s adversaries and allies in his enterprise could scarcely have been predicted. Probably no critic now writing about Shakespeare (and also about the Romantic poets) is better known for his ecological sympathies than Jonathan Bate, yet Egan finds “risible sentimentality” in Bate’s argument that

"reading about wandering as lonely as a cloud might fruitfully offer a recreational escape from urban life, that poems 'may create for the mind the same kind of re-creational space that a park creates for the body'" (41: Egan is quoting Bate's *The Song of the Earth* [2000], 64). On the contrary, E. M. W. Tillyard, often found perfectly risible these days himself, is taken most seriously by Egan. For Tillyard, the "resolution to find correspondences everywhere was a large part of the great medieval striving after unity; it was pushed to extreme lengths by Paracelsus and his like; and it survived in its main outlines past the age of Elizabeth" (*The Elizabethan World Picture* [1961], 83–84). Egan writes, "From the new perspectives provided by holograms, fractals, and genetics, Tillyard's version of an alleged Elizabethan concern for macrocosmic/microcosmic correspondences [for example, 'the mind is like an ocean because it is microcosmic, it contains all the bounty of the seas in little,' *The Elizabethan World Picture*, 83] looks considerably less naive than critics have given him (and, indeed, the Elizabethans) credit for. Such correspondences [for example, between the shards of a smashed-glass hologram and the unbroken original, whose image is preserved fully in the fragments] are how the world is, and as we shall see, they are the bases for sophisticated analogical thinking that we must not dismiss out of hand" (26). "[T]he latest materialist explanations," Egan writes, "return us to ways of thinking [like those of Tillyard] that have long been dismissed as mere superstition, and demand that we take the old ideas seriously" (134). Egan reads Shakespeare so as to emphasize correspondences between the imagined worlds of the plays and the real world. He objects to Bate's tendency to use a literary text (for example, to make readers contented with a rural landscape from which they are in fact absent) rather than to understand the homologous nature of the literary and the real.

Plays discussed at some length in *Green Shakespeare* include, in this order: *Coriolanus*, *Henry V*, *Macbeth*, *As You Like It*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, *King Lear*, and *The Tempest*. Alert to recent scholarship and criticism, Egan incorporates many editions of the plays, from a 1597 quarto of *Richard III* to a Cambridge edition of *The Tempest* published in 2000. (It is not always clear, however, which edition he is quoting from at a particular moment, and when he quotes from the Oxford edition of Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, I wish he had suppressed some of its persistent annoyances such as "the forest of Ardenne" for "the forest of Arden" in *As You Like It*. "Arden" is the word in the First Folio and also, as a matter of fact, in Thomas Lodge's *Rosalynde*, Shakespeare's source for his play.)

Here, from *The Tempest* and *The Winter's Tale*, are examples of the kinds of things Egan does, although his arguments are developed with far more subtlety than my brief summaries can suggest. *The Tempest* pays much attention to wood in scattered allusions to the plant world, and perhaps especially in the form of the logs that Caliban and then Ferdinand spend much time carrying and stacking for Prospero. Ferdinand comments, "I must remove / Some thousands of these logs and pile them up, / Upon a sore injunction" (3.1.9–11): that is, the disagreeable command of Prospero. Egan writes, "This recurrent arboreal imagery has a very

real point in the play, for Prospero's main activity since his arrival on the island has been its deforestation" (155). "What, then," he asks, "would an early audience have understood from all this deforestation? The answer appears to be colonization" (156–57), and he shows how willful deforestation, to deny hiding places to the "rebels," accompanied the Elizabethan colonization of Ireland. Caliban's "carrying of logs is not only a menial duty but also a mark that the world from which he comes is being destroyed" (169).

Egan attends carefully to the words "climate" and "weather" in *The Winter's Tale* — the second appearing six times, including the compound "weather-bitten" and the plural "weathers," more than in any other play. Characteristically, the season of Sicilia is winter, notwithstanding its geographical whereabouts in the world. The oracle's proclamation, after Perdita's exile, that "the king shall live without an heir if that which is lost be not found" (3.2.133–34) announces an inconvenient truth of perpetual winter — of death and of a landscape blighted beyond recuperation — unless the child is recovered. The child, of course, is recovered and returned to Sicilia by her Bohemian lover Florizel. About the play's final act, Egan comments, "in inadvertently bringing Perdita back to Sicilia, Florizel has allegorically brought the weather of spring with him. Understood in just the way that Geoffrey Bullough rejected . . . [as] 'a fertility myth' . . . *The Winter's Tale* is archetypally Green in its insistence that human productive capacities and the Earth's are interdependent" (128). Shakespeare's point is that human folly and blindness nearly killed the world of Sicilia, but that goodness, wisdom, and innocence were able to restore it. May planet Earth be so lucky.

MARK TAYLOR

Manhattan College

Katherine Romack and James Fitzmaurice, eds. *Cavendish and Shakespeare, Interconnections*.

Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2006. xii + 218 pp. index. illus. \$89.95. ISBN: 0-7546-5453-2.

As editors Katherine Romack and James Fitzmaurice remark, Margaret Cavendish (1623–73) published the "first sustained evaluation of Shakespeare as playwright" (2) in her *Sociable Letters*. In letter 162 Cavendish recalls her early passion for Shakespeare, when "I only was in Love with three Dead Men," Caesar, Ovid and "our Countryman Shakespeare, for his Comical and Tragical Humour." Letter 123 praises Shakespeare's ability to inhabit characters so that "as one would think he were Really the Coward he feigns, so one would think he were the most Valiant and Experienced Souldier" and that "he had been metamorphosed from a Man to a Woman." The ten essays in *Cavendish and Shakespeare, Interconnections* explore Cavendish's complex relationship with her countryman's dramatic works, considering ways her plays and other writings both appropriate and revise Shakespearean characters, genres, and political positions.