Book Review

Theis, Jeffrey. Writing the Forest in Early Modern England: A Sylvan Pastoral Nation. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne UP, 2009.

From a holistic understanding of the sylvan tradition to a comprehensive study of forest law in 16th and 17th century England, and then, remarkably, leading to an intricate speculation on how "the English forest" helped a people "know themselves and the world," Jeffrey Theis's book, Writing the Forest in Early Modern England, makes for a thought-provoking read (xii). His reflections on the coexistence of the English forest with humanity during the early modern period are insightful as are his reflections on the connections between shifting politics and the sylvan pastoral. Deeply entrenched in the ecocritical conversation, Theis builds and expands on the work of some the heavy-hitters, like Sylvia Bowerbank and Keith Thomas, to aid in his argument. The only downside of this book lies in the limited discussion of ecofeminism, which makes the treatment of gender construction and the surrounding environment feel overly simplified. Yet, the reader may overlook this weakness because this book deals more extensively with the overall politics of the time period.

While the intended audience for this book will most likely be a scholarly reader, particularly one that enjoys the criticism of Milton ,Shakespeare, and ecocriticism, the structure and analysis of this book is clear enough for a general audience. The clarity of Theis's assertions is palpable because of the organization of the content. Theis divides the book into two parts with the first section analyzing Shakespeare's, As You Like It, A Midsummer Night's Dream, and the Merry Wives of Windsor, in conjunction with the sylvan pastoral. The latter half of the book addresses a much more historical/political analysis of forest law in the 17th century, employing several authors to prove his points, such as Marvell and Milton.

The chronological framing of this book aids the reader by initially setting up the intricate ideas of the sylvan pastoral and forest law in the more familiar texts of Shakespeare, thereby creating a foundation for the complicated investigation that occurs in the later chapters. This statement, however, does not suggest that Theis's book ever addresses a simplistic topic. The meaning of forests in the culture can never clearly be defined. In fact, "this book asserts that sylvan pastoral becomes a dynamic literary mode that establishes England as a sylvan nation deeply aware of its contradictory relationships to the forest environment" (32). In this context, the ever-changing forest reveals not only that the forest changes physically, as a result of enclosure acts or hierarchal poaching rights, but also that the forest comes to mean different things to different people and is used to uphold certain ideas during the time period.

This argument is not new, but Theis sets up an original position by stating that in "Shakespeare's sylvan world [there] is decidedly more muddled-sylvan scenes [that does] not reveal a static view on English culture; rather, [it presents] definitions of nature, individualism, and society as commingled and alterable" (xiii). With the idea that the forest, or rather the position of the forest is alterable, Theis supports this claim by means of familiar Shakespearean characters, like Rosalind, who views the forest as a place to change her status, or the characters from A Midsummer Nights Dream who employ the forest to "facilitate their control over nature" (91). As insinuated frequently, the forest in this sense can be a liminal zone. Yet, Theis takes this line of reasoning a step further by arguing that "the intersections and conflict between inner and outer landscapes" depends upon the individual and the "larger culture's environmental imagination" (27). In other words, the point of view of the character and their position in the society will reflect their relation to the forest.

What is surprising about Theis's logic here is that he does not treat Shakespeare's plays as a single unit that can describe merely one way of interpreting the forest. Instead, Theis navigates the complex relationship between human beings and the forest during this time by showing the complexity of this issue in the plays. Moreover, not all of the plays share

the same motivation. Theis claims that the Merry Wives "...depiction [of the forest] has a much higher fidelity to late sixteenth and seventeenth century English woodlands..." than Shakespeare's other plays (121).Thereby, Theis reinforces his clear ideas on the notion that English nationalism, as seen through a Sylvan light, changes depending on the situation of the person or the political environment.

All of these ideas lead to the major question in this book: Who owns the forest? For example, his interpretation of Midsummer Nights Dream suggests that all characters are trespassers in the wood¾the fairies, the commoners, and the monarchy all use the forest for their separate ends, but no one is really native to the forest. Theis does a brilliant job of assessing multiple points of view with this question. He shows how the forest can be seen as a refuge from 'civilization' but also how the forest is often a key player in keeping a sovereign in power. One can see this interesting idea explained through the use of Theis's texts, especially Milton. In fact, one of the more interesting ideas Theis asserts is the notion that Milton's Paradise Lost "redefined pastoral protection" as the forest becomes not just a location with "physical boundaries" for comfort but more so "a mental construct" in which Adam and Eve "use to defend themselves" (275). Theis's fluid rhetoric and astute examples truly exhibit the changing definitions and uses of the forest by the culture and how the mind of its people are intertwined as Theis so eloquently states: "sylvan pastoral and its offspring demonstrate that society is inextricably linked to the natural world, and its potential for change and alteration is to be matched only by nature's own fecundity" (289).

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