

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

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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.

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