

François-Xavier Gleyzon. *Shakespeare's Spiral: Tracing the Snail in King Lear and Renaissance Painting*.

Lanham: University Press of America, Inc., 2010. xxiii + 254 pp. index. illus. tpls. bibl. \$40. ISBN: 978-0-7618-4137-1.

The book's aim, as indicated in the subtitle, is only apparently modest if not minute, since the snail appears only once in *King Lear*, in the moment when we learn from the Fool "why a snail has a house" (5.1.26). As for the illustrations, thirty-four in number, in various media and ranging in time from Rogier van der Weyden to Robert Smithson, only two illustrate the motif of the snail in Renaissance painting, Giovanni Bellini's *The Allegory of Falsehood*, and an *Annunciation* by Francesco Del Cossa. Of the latter, after acknowledging that

there is no satisfactory explanation of Del Cossa's snail (as an attribute of the Virgin, or in any other iconographic sense), the author finds that its "disturbing presence might suggest a particular way of looking, a place of ent35ry [*sic*] for the inevitable gaze, in which the space represented is only a representation of an event that cannot be represented" (36). However, having examined the "fine detail in Shakespeare's work" through the lens of contemporary theory, Gleyzon tell us that the "question posed by this study" — i.e., why a snail? — "came to me almost in spite of myself, singular and delicate, spellbound and spellbinding, in an elsewhere altogether near, so near that it had to be sought *here, down here*, at ground level, at text level." The object of his inspection may seem "Almost invisible, or even insignificant" (xii). Nonetheless, the "object/subject" of the study, "coiled, involuted, *curled up*" will prove to be "original, necessary and unique" (xii). In order to achieve this perspective, Gleyzon shifts the scene of Shakespeare criticism to a "*theatrum philosophicum*" peopled not by Shakespeareans (intermittently engaged) or art historians (few present) but by an imposing cast of theoretical, mostly French, collaborators — Lacan, Derrida, Lyotard, Bachelard, Deleuze, and more, but also including Freud, Benjamin, Bloch, and Nietzsche (xx).

Not every reader, and here I would include readers with season tickets to the philosophical theater of contemporary theory, will be as spellbound as the author. As a representative example of the style and substance of his argument, here is Gleyzon on Lear's absent queen, in a paragraph headed "~~Queen Real~~ or What One Could not Behold." The not-really-absent ~~Queen~~ "opens up in one felled [*sic*] swoop a whole feminine scenography" (167). The "question of the feminine . . . does not cease to haunt the text of the tragedy in the same way we work our way up Ariadne's thread for it is through a course of reading and analysis that we have indeed managed to follow (i.e., Aradne's) thread and go *backwards* along those tangled ways and localize the whole topos of primitive and archaic womanhood in/with Lear: the *Quondam Queene, Past Queen, or Queen Real*. And is it also in the articulation between what could be designated as mythical 'préhistoire' and our own 'post-histoire' critique of this Queen that all her power of irradiation has been exercised and unleashed on/in the world of the tragedy of *Lear*?" (167–68). The answer is presumably, yes, by way of an excursion into the figure of Medusa, who is not a snail save perhaps in the curls of her snaky locks.

This passage comes from the third part of the study on the "Medusa-Snail," which follows the second part on the "spiral" (snail-shaped, but not a snail), which follows the first part on the snail proper. The book does not so much delve down to the "ground level" of *Lear* as it uses *Lear* as grounds for a "Dazzling/Darkening" (45) display of theoretical dexterity in which one finds the actors in Gleyzon's philosophical theatre mostly talking among themselves. Overall, the book thus reflects the penchant of a critic more comfortable with, and arguably more interested in, poststructuralist French thought than in Shakespeare. The impression left by the tortuous exercise of following Ariadne's thread through Gleyzon's labyrinth is that, unlike such critics as Fineman or Kahn who manage to use theory to illuminate Shakespeare, and Shakespeare to illuminate theory,

Gleyzon seems overly concerned with putting himself in the spotlight as the book's most spellbinding performer.

Either the author or his copyeditor seems to have slipped in examining the fine detail of *Shakespeare's Spiral*: "ent35ry"? Perhaps this was let pass as a possible critical neologism, the specter of page 35 suddenly haunting the middle of a word, making its re-"en[35]try" on page 36.

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