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Todd A. Borlik, *Ecocriticism and Early Modern English Literature: Green Pastures* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 279pp.

In this groundbreaking book, Todd Borlik convincingly demonstrates that an ecocritical perspective can help us better understand the English early modern period, its literary production, and what might appropriately be called its environmental ethics. Furthermore, Borlik suggests that ecocriticism—and 21st century environmentalism—might benefit from close examination of early modern texts written by William Shakespeare, Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser, John Milton, and their lesser known contemporaries. Challenging the assumption that nature writing begins with the Romantics, *Ecocriticism and Early Modern English Literature* uncovers in 16th and 17th century poetry, drama, and prose a profound concern with the non-human environment and with the place of people within it. As Borlik's wide-ranging study attests, "Elizabethan attitudes toward the natural world were [...] far more multifaceted, and even at times more conservation-oriented, than has generally been recognized" (3).

For Borlik, the early modern period warrants "special scrutiny as one of the most pivotal moments in the environmental history of the planet" (6). Poised on the brink of modernity, early moderns witnessed unprecedented capitalist growth, colonial expansion, the Protestant Reformation, and the advent of modern science. Studying early modern literature, therefore, can not only help us identify the roots of our own environmental crises but can also offer "alternative modes of conceptualizing and engaging with the environment" (9). Building on book-length studies by Gabriel Egan and Robert Watson, Borlik takes seriously early modern thinkers' investment in nature, an analytical category often critiqued by new historicists as a means of naturalizing monarchical power and buttressing hierarchies of gender, race, and class. Resisting this critical commonplace, Borlik observes that early modern renderings of the natural world escape Enlightenment categories of human/nonhuman, culture/nature, science/religion, and that they therefore may be of use to ecocritics as we attempt to "unthink" Enlightenment epistemology and its environmentally destructive legacy. Additionally, Borlik offers the tantalizing suggestion that the early modern dialectic between nature and culture might help us bridge the theoretical divide between post-structuralism's emphasis on discourse and ecocriticism's emphasis on the material world. For the early moderns, nature shapes people and societies, but it in turn is shaped by social constructions, what the early moderns called "art." It is to the period's

representative art, therefore, with its interplay of form and material substance, that Borlik turns in order to uncover an early modern environmental ethos.

Borlik's approach is extraordinarily fruitful. Drawing on a diverse archive, Borlik situates early modern texts within environmental contexts that resonate with our present moment: climate change, food shortages, the enclosure of farm land, the timber industry's depletion of the forests, and pollutive coal mining. Borlik makes the case, for instance, that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* mediates anxieties about crop failure resulting from the Little Ice Age, and, in another convincing chapter, suggests that *Hamlet* evinces concern with food ethics. Borlik also calls attention to less canonical texts, arguing that Spenser's *The Shepheardes Calender* channels the ecological energies of the almanac and that Michael Drayton's *Poly-Olbion* chronicles "an environmental history of the English landscape" (102), registering a proto-environmentalist protest against early capitalist resource extraction. Such fresh readings showcase the benefits of Borlik's effort to "expand[...] the myopic focus on discourses of power to situate the human subject in the vaster matrix of non-human nature" (110). In so doing, Borlik reminds us that early modern life was profoundly shaped by natural and agricultural rhythms. Furthermore, he suggests that early modern depictions of natural beauty, animism, and fertility often worked to cultivate values of temperance and stewardship.

One of Borlik's most important contributions is his re-evaluation of the Renaissance pastoral, a genre much maligned as a socially conservative celebration of human dominance over landscapes. Countering this received view, Borlik maintains that "early modern authors employ pastoral as a rhetorical stage for ethical debate and social critique, utilizing it as a tool to gauge both the individual's place in society and, correlatively, mankind's niche in the natural world" (138). Borlik suggests, moreover, that early modern articulations of an organic, animistic universe might direct current environmentalists toward more interconnected, ecological modes of thinking. This generous interpretation of the pastoral creates productive dissonance with more critical new historicist readings; there are moments, however, when the project would have benefited from a fuller exploration of this dissonance. For instance, Borlik notes that early modern authors often profited from colonial resource extraction and, elsewhere, that conservationist impulses often aligned with a desire to preserve aristocratic culture. He does not, however, fully explore the implications of these observations. Doing so may have complicated his analysis of the pastoral and may have called attention to the tensions inherent in an environmentalist ethos that arose in tandem with (and not always in complete opposition to) accelerated environmental destruction.

More generally, *Ecocriticism and Early Modern Literature* leaves room for further research connecting its ecocritical insights to scholarship on early modern race, gender, and social class. Ideas about nature were central to early modern negotiations of identity, as the category of the human emerged in contradistinction to that of non-human nature and as certain subjects—namely women, the poor, and racial and ethnic "others"—were conceived of as closer to nature than others. While Borlik's study does not address all of these issues, it makes great strides toward establishing early modern

ecocriticism as a sub-field and lays the foundation for further exploration. With its critical acumen and deep archive, this book will be valuable to early modernists, to ecocritics, and to anyone interested in the history of environmental thought.