

Jeffrey Theis. *Writing the Forest in Early Modern England: A Sylvan Pastoral Nation*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2009. xv + 368 pp. + 5 illus. \$60.00. Review by DONOVAN SHERMAN, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, IRVINE.

A passage midway into Jeffrey Theis's *Writing the Forest in Early Modern England* poetically exemplifies its broader contention that early modern literary and cultural studies elides the palpable presence of the forest. Traditional readings of Shakespeare, Theis begins, "never get to the heart of the forest itself; its material, symbolic, and theatrical qualities invite but then reject any clarifying and unifying vision;" as a result, like "*Macbeth's* Birnam Wood, Shakespeare's forests are a moving target" (95). The passage acts as an encapsulating manifesto for the book as a whole, which seeks to hit the moving target of the forest, in all its mercurial and slippery incarnations, as a literal and figurative force of nature in constant dialogue with culture. Theis attempts to remedy scholarship's verdant myopia by coining its titular term, "sylvan pastoral," which operates as a twofold construct: first, as a historical gateway to help illuminate how forest policy in early modernity shapes the literature; and second, as a theoretical framework that complicates the foundations of interpretation itself, an always-excessive presence that blurs the legibility of its contours. He is strongest when these two aims are balanced, which, unfortunately, occurs only occasionally and on a small scale, rather than on the fundamental level suggested by Theis's provocative arguments; the broad critical overhaul that the sylvan pastoral demands becomes lost amidst a web of vague assertions, repetitions, and contradictions. What results from this inconsistency is an infidelity to the very aims Theis proposes; while several close readings offer scholarly interest, the heart of the forest remains largely undiscovered.

*Writing the Forest* is structured around readings of texts that move roughly chronologically, starting with the Shakespearean era, moving through the civil war, and ending in the Restoration. First, however, Theis offers an introduction to structure his claims. This section reveals refreshing, at times radical, theses on the sylvan pastoral, but it also establishes the book's contradictory theoretical foundations. In elucidating his concerns, Theis distinguishes the sylvan pastoral from

the pastoral genre as a whole, along with its critics; he claims that the influential pastoral scholar Paul Alpers “largely discounts nature as a genuine focus of pastoral,” whereas “sylvan pastoral brings nature to the foreground as the tangled topography of the wood demands the attention of pastoral characters.” Immediately following this intriguing statement, however, Theis notes that, as opposed to the shepherds that Alpers studies, the essence of sylvan pastoral’s characters “dialectically evolves out of their attempt to create a place for themselves in the wood” (25). The language subtly shifts the focus from nature—the topic supposedly ignored by Alpers—back to human beings, whose transformations and placements are the real emphasis. In other words, Theis maintains human exceptionalism even as he asserts that nature should be given primacy. This maneuver—the privileging of the human, while simultaneously gesturing toward a new hermeneutics of nature—is indicative of a larger a pattern; elsewhere, Theis states that definitions of the forest offer “contrasting ideas about one’s place in nature, and how that position either facilitates or diminishes *the individual’s and his or her culture’s* capacity to change” (42, emphasis mine). The human, not the forest, remains the “genuine focus.” At times he attempts to move beyond a human-based dialectic, as when he notes that throughout “Western history, nature and culture have been seen in a dialectical opposition with each influencing the other, but too often critics neglect that English forests are not opposed to culture and civilization” (28). Here, contradicting his earlier claim about Alpers’s pastoral characters, sylvan pastoral in fact seems to erase the dialectical boundaries of humanity and nature; as such, it appears aligned with the post-humanist theory of critics such as Donna Haraway, Michel Serres, and, in early modern studies specifically, Laurie Shannon and Julian Yates, which proposes the inseparability of humans from their environment. Yet for every attempt to erase this boundary, there are several more to reify it, retreating to a Hegelian interpretation of human-centered change, as when he describes social and natural worlds “dialectically engaging each other so that society cannot be realized without the forest” (94). Is the relationship of humanity to nature, in sylvan pastoral, dialectical or not? Actually bringing nature to the foreground would propose a new typology of nature-based criticism; while this task is enormously ambitious, it is

the task Theis has given himself. An opportunity to propose a new interpretative scheme is lost in favor of vagueness with a veneer of critical invigoration.

Once the chapters proper begin, the book is on much surer footing, coupling close readings with fascinating historical research. While the inconsistencies of the introduction still obfuscate the larger aims of these critiques, they individually offer more modest, but nonetheless well-researched and productive, interventions. The first section contains chapters on Shakespearean plays, *As You Like It*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. The first of these finds surprising resonance between the migration of the court to the forest and larger historical patterns of migration in the period. Furthermore, by suggesting that the woods, like the stage, operate as a dynamic site of role-playing and subjective change, Theis traces interdisciplinary connections between performance studies and nature criticism. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* provides an especially apposite area for examination, and Theis is particularly acute in noting that all "places of human and fairy habitation that might carve out an ordered, protective space within the forest are displaced just outside the forest the audience sees" (115), once again conjoining theatrical and fantastical space. A reading of *Merry Wives* supplies the strongest entry in the book by studying the practice of poaching as both material fact and metaphor of iconoclasm and liminality; details of greyhound permits and forest rights legislation texture the play's characters and illuminate new narrative currents, although one wishes Theis pursued the tossed-off observation that a lustful Falstaff allows "distinctions between man and animal" to "collapse as lust makes transgression possible" (143). All in all, a rethinking of the forest in Shakespeare as a forest is an elegant intervention on extant discourses.

The following sections survey poetry that, Theis asserts, registers the "trauma" of the civil war in the vocabulary of sylvan pastoral. Centering on the ambivalence of tree imagery, specifically, Theis notes that "sylvan pastoral decentralizes the currency of the royal oak to diffuse its literary, economic, and ideological value across the broader forest of the nation" (159). This decentralization leads to the appropriation of arboreal imagery by writers as varied as the political radical Gerrard Winstanley, the poet Andrew Marvell, and the novel-

ist and historiographer James Howell. The trees these writers deploy, Theis argues, are both signals of the era's actual forestry policy and ambivalent royal symbols, suggesting both the natural agency and ideological weakness of the monarchy. As with his chapters on Shakespeare, Theis is strongest here when he focuses his critique, as with his treatment of Marvell's "Upon Appleton House" as a reclamation of the pastoral genre from a territory of Horatian peace to an unsettled environment charged with specters of war. The section closes with a consideration of John Evelyn's *Sylva*, a "polymorphous work" whose instability reflects sacral and economic tensions of the forest's iconicity: "In one moment Evelyn depicts the English woodland as a sacred grove, set apart from a corrupt world, and in another moment he lists myriad secular uses of timber products" (238). While the sylvan pastoral might seem to be the last place to see symptoms of war's damage, Theis persuasively argues, it in fact captures the ripples of horror with uncanny power.

The final section, on Milton, rehearses many of the ideas found earlier in the book, and is generally stronger in reading *A Mask Presented at Ludlow Castle* than contending with *Paradise Lost*; the latter seems to overpower Theis's strategies and demand a larger engagement with its sylvan qualities. While capable of lovely turns of phrase, as when he notes that Milton's pastoral is "a blueprint of engagement with the world" (259), several subsections hobble the main thrust of his argument, notably an unsubstantiated digression on the multiple uses of the word "purlieu." While the briefness of Theis's treatment of the *Paradise Lost* seems an odd note to end his work on, it also seems endemic of *Writing the Forest's* ambition, which attempts to limn a theoretical terrain even as it defines it. This automorphic quality provides much of the book's propulsive energy, but also comprises of its structural limitations. While individual chapters can provide helpful interlocutors for scholars of the works under discussion, or nature critics in general, the book as a whole too often seems a victim of the myriad complications essential to the definition of its subject. As with the confounding properties of the sylvan pastoral itself, it seems that efforts to map anew a particularly tangled thicket of cultural texts can leave the reader feeling somewhat lost and occa-

sionally frustrated—albeit with an ineffable sense of having absorbed something significant.

Ernest Gilman. *Plague Writing in Early Modern England*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009. xi + 256 pp. index. bibl. \$35.00. Review by JOHN GIBBS.

Bubonic plague's endemicity in early modern England placed London at perpetual risk of epidemic. In the seventeenth century, the plague appeared annually but with minimal impact in the City and its liberties. However, in 1603, 1625 and 1665, London's Weekly Bill of Mortality did record the minimum of forty plague deaths the city government required to recognize plague as an epidemic. Epidemics generated a tremendous amount of print matter—broadsides, religious and medical tracts, satire and philosophy—all a part of the plague discourse ostensibly designed to help its residents recognize, interpret and survive the epidemic. In *Plague Writing in Early Modern England*, Ernest Gilman examines the matrix of such texts actively engaged in constructing the dominant ideology of plague in seventeenth-century England before adroitly engaging modern trauma theory to re-imagine familiar works by Ben Jonson, John Donne, Samuel Pepys and Daniel Defoe as texts negotiating an unremitting cultural anxiety over the threat of epidemic.

Consequent to Reformation iconoclasm, early modern England was deprived of the popular rituals that reinforced plague's identity as a universal punishment, the severity and duration of which could be influenced by communal religious observation. Plague epidemic, Gilman contends, was thereafter an event bereft of ritual and defined almost exclusively by language. The cultural certainty and consolation provided by traditional religious ideology was replaced with a stark, analytical theodicy allied with the pragmatic and sometimes contradictory interpretations of an urban epidemic offered by the nascent medical establishment. The combined religious and medical plague discourse sanctioned by the State replaced coherency with enigma. "It would be increasingly difficult, and ultimately impossible," observes Gilman, "for most people to reconcile logically or theologically the