



Theis, Jeffrey S. *Writing the Forest in Early Modern England: a Sylvan Pastoral Nation*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 2009.

Theis's study on *Writing the Forest in Early Modern England* develops a two-fold argument. In the first section, Theis analyzes and, in the process of doing so, complicates traditional definitions of the Sylvan Pastoral. After establishing a clear definition of the genre, the second part of *Writing the Forest* contextualizes the use of the Sylvan Pastoral within competing historical landscapes. As Theis points out, depending on the social and political alignment of a particular author, the image of the forest changes. He thoroughly outlines the implications these various landscapes had on the English Civil War, specifically identifying how diverse descriptions of forests could define English society in different social and political fashions.

Part one suggests that the Sylvan Pastoral struggles to define itself against its rich allegorical history. Romantic woodland scenes such as those in Dante's *Inferno* and Spenser's *Faerie Queen* make it challenging for critics to interpret the pastoral woods without the spiritual and allegorical contexts that, Theis posits, often suppress a more direct ecocritical read of these pastoral scenes. Theis refashions the forest as creative space, a space that is both allegorical (as tradition may have it) and literal (as the botanical space it represents). While historically most scholars have focused on these allegorical representations of the woods, Theis develops a critical approach to the botanical perspective. Thus, Theis liberates the sylvan pastoral from its restricting association with Ben Johnson and his followers to a more dynamic literary technique that occurs more broadly throughout Early Modern writing.

Theis's examples throughout part one include a diverse range of contemporary nature handbooks popular in Early Modern England to well-known works from authors such as Shakespeare and Marvell. Together, these sources help broaden and contextual the Early Modern Forest. As the various handbooks and creative works establish various images of the pastoral wood, Theis persuasively argues that "English forests constantly shape and are shaped by culture" (93). Theis explicates several pastoral scenes and provides an ecocritical approach to the often tangled topography of the forest.

Part two, then, takes a more historical approach to the sylvan pastoral forest. Theis places the refashioned and broadened genre established in part one back into the social and political milieu leading up to the Civil War. Theis asserts that "the forest and pastoral tropes appear in an ideologically diverse range of texts," appearing throughout the works of "the radical agrarian communist Gerrard Winstanley," the "moderate, royalist" James Howell, and the "strong royalist" John Evelyn, among others (159). Each of these individuals, Theis argues, presents the sylvan pastoral forest differently, in line with their various ideologies. In doing so, Theis highlights the connections between representations of the forest and the civil war, as authors strove to "link their agendas to nature" (240). Theis then addresses spiritual ideologies and their association with the sylvan pastoral through the works of John Milton, whose "pastoral conjoins inseparably the material and the spiritual" (244).

As much of the content in part two requires the definition and restructuring of the sylvan pastoral from part one, Theis is able to present a radically new approach to the Early Modern forest. Particularly in regards to Milton, Theis argues that Early Modern pastoral authors are actively engaging the genre itself in order to establish an interdependency between representations of nature and intellectual

imperatives (247). Theis reveals that while many scholars continue to abstract Milton's landscapes into spiritual allegories, it is equally beneficial to explore the rooted and literal landscapes presented in the text and declares that "it is time to see the forest for the trees" (263).

Theis's approach to the sylvan pastoral, while radical in comparison to centuries of Milton studies, remains comfortably within the evolving field of ecocriticism. Such an emphasis on the literal, arboreal landscapes is being applied to both contemporary and historical texts in order to establish a better understanding of society's awareness of ecological issues. *Writing the Forest* concludes with an impressive bibliography listing around three-hundred titles ranging from genre studies to civil war documents to ecopolitics and the history of English forestry. Such a diverse range of sources allows readers the convenient opportunity for further reading on any of Theis's various topics of consideration.

The prose and the progression of Theis's argument throughout *Writing the Forest* establish a clear and engaging tone. Part one, particularly, lends itself to new or perhaps peripheral ecocriticism students, as the section systematically builds the definition of the sylvan pastoral from the ground up. Part two, however, assumes a higher level of expertise regarding the historical landscape of Early Modern England, specifically regarding the civil war and Interregnum. Ecocritics concerned with periods other than Early Modern may still find Theis's restructuring of the sylvan pastoral and the ideological implications of forest descriptions quite useful.

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