

THE MUDDY SHAKESPEAREAN GREEN: THEORISING SHAKESPEAREAN  
ECOCRITICISM<sup>1</sup>

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Is it (Shakespearean) ecocriticism if it is not presentist, politically engaged  
in and with the world we inhabit now?

(Sharon O'Dair, "The State of the Green" 478)

**Prologue**

Though ecocriticism is relatively new to Shakespeare, the question of activism is not so new to ecocriticism. It has been with ecocriticism from the start, and theorists have alternately dodged, acknowledged, ignored, refuted, and even sought to theorise it, all without producing much result — at least in terms of activism. Ironically, though, despite this lack of result, over-production seems to have become a characteristic of ecocriticism. Shakespearean ecocriticism seems to be following the pattern.

There has been such a proliferation of ecocritical volleys into Shakespeare recently that it has seemed to some that there is simply too much of it (and not of sufficient quality), that there is a need to slow down (and do it better), and that there is, perhaps, little justification for ecocritical readings of Shakespeare, that there is at best a dubious relationship between these ecocritical readings and the health of the environment. Greg Garrard (2005) has even suggested that "most of [Shakespeare's] plays do not deal with the natural world or animals in any significant way, and [that] the historical context in which he wrote was neither afflicted by major environmental problems, nor plagued by doubts about the role of humanity on Earth". This is contrary to what we know about the period. There were substantial environmental crises at the time Shakespeare wrote, but whether or not the early moderns perceived the crises as environmental is another question entirely. There was the Little Ice Age. There were food supply issues, in part the result of the Little Ice Age. There was extensive pollution, especially in the cities. There was deforestation. There were also substantial changes in humanity's relationship with the natural world, to a certain extent as a result of a more easily accessible and commoditised natural world, produced by the felt need of European nations to expand, to colonise, to control, possess, and exploit more. There were broad social changes on the trajectory away from feudalism. There was, that's to

say, a lot happening, certainly enough to justify the many ecocritical Shakespeares that have begun to appear.

It seems obvious and barely worth arguing at this stage that there is a fundamental difference between ecocritical readings of Shakespeare, on the one hand, and, on the other, the volumes of very useful scholarly work that have been produced over the centuries about representations of nature in Shakespeare, a difference that Sharon O'Dair has characterised as “old school ‘nature studies’ and new school ‘ecocriticism’” (476). It seems equally obvious that this difference ultimately rests on the position that ecocriticism is fundamentally activist in intent, whereas thematic criticism is not. At conferences in the past, I have always assumed that we all agree that ecocriticism is first and foremost activist in intent and have been shocked to find that we are not all in agreement on this matter. Not only that, but there are some real issues about what activism actually means: the perimeters and parameters of that “activism” remain vague and fuzzy. There are, then, three questions that need to be resolved now if we want to continue doing what we are calling “ecocritical Shakespeares”: 1] how can we make the perimeters and parameters of “activism” less fuzzy? 2] is an activist Shakespearean ecocriticism possible, and, if so, how? and 3] are Shakespeareans producing too much chaff and not enough grain?

## Act One

In the first annotated bibliographic collection of ecocritical materials dealing with Renaissance literature, Karen Raber explains that one of her criteria for inclusion of given materials was “the author’s attention to the *physical* natural world or its conceptual influence on literature and culture . . . [as] a significant component of the argument” (*emphasis in original* 151). Such a delimitation is useful because it forces what has become a defining focus of ecocriticism—an emphasis on the real, the material world we daily breathe and smell and feel when we walk outside, the world that rains on us, starves or feeds us, drowns or burns us, the world we reconstruct through discourse, a world that nevertheless exists prior to our discursive constructions of it, and will no doubt exist in some form or another long after we are gone (and it is just a matter of time before we *are* gone).

This emphasis on the world outside of the text is a good start and, of course, there is far more that is necessary, both for ecocriticism generally and for green Shakespeares specifically. O'Dair writes that by “the end of the first decade of this new millennium, the state of the Shakespearean green is muddy” (475) and for her there are two main issues underfoot in this muddiness: one has to do with overproduction from critics; the other—and it is related to the first—has to do with “definitional laxity” (475). At the heart of this definitional laxity, I think, is a discomfort about defining activism. To cite once again from Raber, “Works by Robert N. Watson, Simon C. Estok, and Gabriel Egan suggests that a positive synergy can emerge from encounters between the historical past and current theory, in which each productively interrogates the

other” (168); however, each of these authors (and I am one of them) fails to offer an adequate definition of the core concept that for them defines ecocriticism itself — namely, academic activism. If we assume (as I do) that the epigraph which begins this article is rhetorical in its original articulation and should remain so wherever cited, then what does activism mean?

Robert Watson has facetiously asked:

Is ecocriticism — like New Historicism, some might argue — mostly an effort of liberal academics to assuage their student-day consciences (and their current radical students) about their retreat into aesthetics and detached professionalism, by forcing literary criticism into a sterile hybrid with social activism? ... is ecocriticism the latest resort of identity politics in the academy, a way for those excluded by the usual categories to claim victim status, either by identifying with an oppressed biosphere ... or else by imagining their suffering and extinction in an anticipated ecological catastrophe? (4)

While this is nicely-written there seems to be a basic misunderstanding about what ecocriticism is that seems to grow from Watson’s belief that environmentalist movements might represent a “search for a politically safe and aesthetically attractive version of late 1960s radicalism” (5). It is not this. Ecocriticism does seek change. It is the activist intentions, that have generated the discourses of immediacy and the aesthetics of contact, that have come to characterise ecocriticism. It is the activist impulse that has given urgency to our words and flavor to our meetings. It is the activist ambitions that have differentiated us and what we seek to do from the legions of staid thematicists who muse uselessly as the world smolders to an end.

Yet, Watson’s cynicism is understandable. Like so many other “political” theories before it, ecocriticism was, by virtue of its uniqueness and belief in the changes it might bring about, radical at birth but has grown into a complacent teenager. I often wonder, for instance, how it is possible that ecocritics don’t see, don’t think of, and don’t want to think of what Marti Kheel has called “compulsory meat eating,” that people don’t see and don’t want to see that meat is bad, that people want to remain oblivious to how environmentally unsound meat production really is. Meat eating seems to me, then, the epitome of ecocritical complacency and of its subsequent lack of an ability to connect issues.<sup>2</sup>

We can also acknowledge, without question, that ecocriticism suffers from anxieties about not being able to and not wanting to give a fully articulated, fully developed theory, a totalising sweep of arrogance and authority. Provisionality marks ecocriticism, as it marks other activist theories, theories that are activist, at least in part, because they resist orthodoxy and assimilation, resist being pinned down, confined, and blunted. Indeed, we might say in this context that both the single-authored books broadly on the topic of Shakespeare and ecocriticism – Gabriel Egan’s *Green Shakespeare* and Robert Watson’s *Back to Nature: the Green and the Real in the*

*Late Renaissance* – have neither adequately diagnosed nor dealt with the problems facing ecocritical Shakespeares, have not engaged with ecocriticism as a new critical or theoretical approach, and have each, in their different ways, sought to assimilate ecocriticism, blunt its edge of peculiarity, normalise it, and make it safe for the Shakespearean canon. The result is more to flee from than to face ecocriticism.

Radical for what it does articulate, ecocriticism is increasingly indolent in what it doesn't. Supposedly articulating an activist vision, ecocriticism nevertheless fails to define that activism, relying more as a rule than an exception on the "trickle down" theory of activism — we teach our students, and one day a seed that we plant in one of those young minds might grow. This seems to me a bit of a cop-out. Of course, part of the activism of ecocriticism is in saying things that need to be said (for example, about the relationship between ecocriticism and meat), and the attempt "to help make amends for past deficiencies among literary scholars" (Malamud 7) is itself a radical and progressive gesture, but we need to be careful about remembering the provisionality of these gestures. There was a time, for instance, when the mere fact of something being published with the word "ecocriticism" in its title was radical, a subversive act, an indication of progressive changes in the field. The mere fact of the session I proposed, chaired, and participated in entitled "Ecocriticism and the World of Shakespeare" being given a stage at the Eighth World Shakespeare Congress, held in 2006 in Brisbane, seemed, at the time, a powerful activist gesture. Things change, however, and there has got to be more to it than that now.

Activism has got to involve, as I have said elsewhere,<sup>3</sup> several things at this point in the game. These core features, the "must haves," of this activism include the following: 1] ecocriticism will need to lead to heightened awareness, and this will be a direct result of inviting and accepting new terminologies as they develop, rather than spurning them as jargon, as mystifications, as obscurantism;<sup>4</sup> 2] ecocriticism will need to do what feminist criticism does, as Toril Moi so aptly expresses this: "it seeks to expose, not to perpetuate" (xiv). This ultimately means either an implicit or explicit call for broad changes in behavior; 3] it will need, as David Orton has argued, "to have some direct relevancy for environmental and green activists who embrace changing industrial capitalist society;"<sup>5</sup> and 4] it will need practice from its preachers i.e. it will need to look seriously at anthropocentrism and speciesism and how these inform the daily choices we make, from the food we eat to the clothes we wear. Just as it is difficult to take seriously big oil companies that spend millions advertising their commitment to the environment, so too the ecocritic who theorises brilliantly on a stomach full of roast beef on rye, oblivious to the incommensurability of meat production and environmentalism.

## Act Two

What, then, are the possibilities for an activist Shakespearean ecocriticism?<sup>6</sup> At the end of *Green Shakespeare*, Gabriel Egan urges (passively) that "it is hoped that the

readings [he offers] . . . show the potential for a new kind of criticism that uses as a cultural lens the most pressing concerns of our time” (175). With no insult intended we can see that this is an empty statement, offered as part of a conclusion to the book’s promised but un-provided activism. If ecocriticism is, as Egan says, “a new kind of criticism,” then what makes it so? Is the attention to relationships between art and nature (broadly speaking) or the contextualising of environmentalist thinking or the attention to representations (witting or unwitting) of environmentalist ethics enough? Is the goal of activist engagement with the present enough? In many ways, ecocriticism, as many have now noted, mirrors feminist criticism (see Glotfelty: xviii; Kerridge: 16) both pursuing similar sets of goals, feminist criticism looking at representations of women with an eye to changing conditions for women in the present, to being more than thematicist, to doing more than simply writing or re-writing histories, to being activist. What makes ecocriticism “a new kind of criticism,” in part, is the topic: environment. Ecocriticism doesn’t offer a new methodology—not yet; but having the natural environment (in literary studies, at least) as the object of activist discussion, as the thing for which changes in society need to be made—this is very new. It is also difficult to conceptualise.

The bottom line with activist criticism of any type is that it has got to cause changes not only in how we think but also in how we interact with the material world. This means that doing ecocriticism (seen as implicitly activist) by looking at Shakespeare will invariably mean recognising the importance of discursive pasts for material presents. It will mean recognising the importance of how present concerns shape our inquiries into the past, a key concept (and a seemingly obvious one at that) of what has come to be known as presentism. Hugh Grady has argued that “presentism” is “work based on the understanding that all our knowledge of the past, including that of Shakespeare’s historical context, is shaped by the ideologies and discourses of our cultural present” (<http://www.shaksper.net/archives/2007/0065.html>). There are dangers, however, in this approach even if it seems impossible to approach the past through any concerns *but* those of the present. One of the most obvious of these is in assuming that there is a direct correspondence between discursive representations of issues in the past and the ethical issues of the present that direct us to them.

Discussing *As You Like It*, Joan Fitzpatrick admirably asks “would being vegetarian give Jacques the moral high-ground from an Elizabethan point of view?” (58). Fitzpatrick argues extensively and persuasively that it wouldn’t, that the dietaries and “early modern physicians considered the avoidance of meat as positively unhealthy,” that vegetarianism might even be considered “heretical” in the period (7), and that “the standard Elizabeth [sic] view appears to have been that eating meat was divinely ordained and more healthy than a vegetarian diet although there were voices of dissent which considered meat eating a barbaric and indulgent practice” (61).<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, the moral debates about meat before, during, and after the time of Shakespeare mean that it is necessary to see where Shakespeare actually fits in. This means looking at Shakespeare’s articulation of issues important to our environmental ethics in a linear

sense of a progression of past to present. But not that alone. For it also means doing more than simply contextualising environmental ethics within history; it means looking at dialogue between past and present, at how the past can cause us to rethink our material relations with the present.

Fitzpatrick is correct to caution us that depicting vegetarianism might not strike the same chords of political virtue in the early modern period as they do today (if they do today); still, this is not to say that the ethics Shakespeare articulates is beyond critique here. To exempt Shakespeare from such critique because Elizabethans liked their meat would be like exempting Elizabethan Londoners from critique of bear-baiting because of their fondness for it. We see it as wrong today, even though the Elizabethans viewed it otherwise (and how their views developed into ours, though I don't pursue it here, is obviously important), and it is our present take on the matter that determines the kind of analyses we do and the purposes for which we do them. Erica Fudge, for instance, has analysed how the early modern fondness for bear-baiting functions and how it fails to do what it seeks to do: "Baiting is the most spectacular representation of human dominion in early modern England, but it is also the most spectacular representation of humanity's failure to establish its human-ness" (170). Fudge works on the assumption that bear-baiting in Elizabethan London has relevance for how we organise our worlds today, that the past is at the core of motivations for the ethical arrangements we produce and follow in the present, and that the conceptual separation of human and nonhuman animals doesn't work, either in the early modern period or today.

The "animal question" is not one which is going to go away, and ecocritics ignore it at their peril (hence this will be the theme for *Green Letters* 12). Traditionally, ecocritics have scarcely looked at animals. The phrase "can't see the forest for the trees" springs to mind: a healthy forest has animals, lots of animals. A healthy ecocriticism needs to see those animals. If a Thoreauvian ecocriticism needs to connect with contemporary issues, no less does a Shakespearean ecocriticism—both need to see the forest, as it were, and there is a lesson in the blurring of the conceptual boundaries between human and nonhuman in Shakespeare. The pasties in *Titus* (made with the ground remains of Chiron and Demetrius and fed to their mother Tamora) are one very obvious example, though there are other less culinary examples, of which Caliban is one. We do well to take that lesson, and by so doing, perhaps using nonhuman animals less for clothing, entertainment and, especially, food. This would be activism — one version, at least.

### Act Three

In a discussion concerning the ecological unsoundness of academic business, O'Dair argues that the "pressure to publish quickly and copiously", about which John Guillory has written (Guillory "Evaluating" 25–26, as cited by O'Dair "Slow Shakespeare" 19), has resulted in a

frenzy of publication [that] only makes more difficult our attempts to discern what may be valuable in our research on the early modern period and its literary works, or, in the case of early modern ecostudy, what may be valuable for the health of the planet. This overproduction appears to be self-perpetuating, if overdetermined, and in turn makes even more difficult our attempts to separate intellectual wheat from chaff. Both effects are detrimental to intellectual and professional life, as well as, of course, from an ecological or ecocritical perspective, the health of the planet. (19)

Probably everyone would agree with this, in principle; however, in practice, there is so much work being produced which is simply taking us away from where we should be going that I am compelled to argue for *more* work but less chaff, and certainly more that is committed to showing a clearly activist potential.<sup>8</sup>

One of the key differences between studying new literature and old literature is in the amount of work that the scholar needs to be familiar with. This is not a slight on, for example, a writer such as Ruth Ozeki (whose work I admire as much as I admire Shakespeare's) or on Ozeki scholars (I myself have presented papers on her work), but there is obviously more that has been written about *Titus Andronicus* than has been written about, for instance, *My Year of Meats*. The more we move away, then, from the origins of ecocriticism (as spatially specific and temporally local) the more complicated and rigorous the scholarship will necessarily become. A phrase like "the study of the relationship between literature and the environment" does not wash with Shakespeareans because, in various ways, that kind of work has been done. What a Shakespearean wants to know is what ecocriticism can offer to her field that thematic critiques of environment and nature haven't already provided. What makes ecocriticism different? This is a key challenge that comes up at every ecocriticism meeting I've attended since 1999. It is the question that defines ecocriticism—its scope and hope and vision and limits, in short, what ecocriticism *is*. With regard to a 'Green Shakespeare' this may very well mean slowing down and doing better work, but it will not mean doing less.

## Epilogue

There is no doubt that our good words and intentions are failing to make a meaningful difference. We are not connecting well enough. We are losing because our values do not sell and because we are averse not only to marketing our values but to the very marketing processes themselves. We have had books that take us very far afield, deep into policy-maker country (Slovic and Satterfield's *What's Nature Worth?—Narrative Expressions of Environmental Values* comes to mind), but these have largely been directed at the converted—intellectually, these books cross over, but in practical terms, they sell to intellectuals, not policy-makers. We have yet to cross the Great Divide between intellectuals and the world. But how?

Nature writer David Quammen wrote an email to Scott Slovic in 1998, a part of which read as follows:

. . . a writer who wants to influence how humans interact with landscape and nature should strive to reach as large an audience as possible and NOT preach to the converted. That means, for me, flavoring my work with entertainment-value, wrapping my convictions subversively within packages that might amuse and engage a large unconverted audience, and placing my work whenever possible in publications that reach the great unwashed. (Quammen qtd in Slovic "Foreword" viii)

Gregory McNamee seems to agree and argues in an interview in *What's Nature Worth?* that "if you mean to engage the public in a discussion of values of land, literature is not the vehicle to do it. Journalism may be" (89). Journalism, of course, *does* succeed much better at reaching the great unwashed, but this does not mean that literature has not or cannot. Shakespeare, more than any other author, *has* touched the popular imagination at many times in many places, and he continues to do so. McNamee's professional bigotry against literature is just that: professional bigotry. Yet there is no question that ecocritics have to address the issue of values in ways that connect meaningfully with the non-academic world. If it means through journalism, fine. If it means through narrative, fine. If it means through *50 Things You Can Do to Save the Earth*, fine. But there are certainly worse vehicles than Shakespeare through which to theorise and popularise ecocriticism, and if this means taking Shakespeare and using him for our own political purposes, so what? If we seek to ground ecocriticism in a thoughtful reflection on the relationship between our activist requirements and an engagement with the literature and culture of previous, salient historical periods (as Shakespearean ecocriticism does) this is not the same as saying that our work will be any less rigorous.

Good work has put ecocriticism on the map. With the institutionalization that has occurred in some parts of the world (if not, one might argue, in the UK) predictable dangers have, of course, arisen. The nonchalance that comes with no longer having to fight tooth and nail for a readership, an audience, legitimacy, and so on is one of these, and we need to stay on our toes and to look constantly at how we *think* our comments about Shakespeare are helping to change things and at what changes our readings might inspire in our own lives and in the lives of other people. And the other serious issue associated with institutionalization, as O'Dair has noted, is that a lot of junk is being shoveled in: if ecocriticism is to retain legitimacy in a tightly competitive academic world, then we need to start sorting through that work and evaluating it. Only good work is going to keep us on the map. We've all weathered the first dismal decade of the new millenium, and perhaps there will be real changes now, changes of which our voices can be part.

We seem to be entering an age of considerable hope, a hope that is surprisingly



resilient after eight years of an illiterate and unintelligible American president corroding the world. From the very start, the hopefulness of ecocriticism has been that it can effect some change. This effort to effect change has been and should continue to be the focus of our ecocritical work, work that increasingly and excitingly includes Shakespeare. While it has had problems theorizing itself with contemporary literature, ecocriticism faces new opportunities (and challenges) with Shakespeare. The fact that many twentieth- and twenty-first century “nature writers” are often explicitly political and direct in their comments about nature is perhaps what has led ecocriticism away from self-theorizing (which has not been needed), away from articulating any kind of uniquely ecocritical methodology (which has also not been needed); Shakespeareans, however, want to know what is *eco*- and what is *critical* about ecocriticism. Should ecocriticism theorise itself through and articulate a methodology out of the belly of the Bard, it won't be the first to do so.

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#### NOTES

1. This paper was supported by the Seok Chun Research Fund, Sungkyunkwan University (Seoul) in 2008.
2. I fear that in saying this kind of thing, I am garnering a host of enemies; nevertheless, these words need to be said. Consciousness-raising amongst ourselves seems the first order of business, if we have any pretensions to being activist. Stopping eating meat is a very basic and immediate activist move and there is no justification for not doing so.
3. Much of this paragraph appears in a slightly different form in “Theorizing in a space of ambivalent openness: ecocriticism and ecophobia,” forthcoming in *ISLE* (May 2009).
4. Many ecocritical scholars have been clear about their disdain for theory, their desire to “get on with it,” scholars who see “making contact” (current titles—for instance, Ingram (et al) *Coming into Contact: Explorations in Ecocritical Theory and Practice*—reflect this desire for contact) as vital, who see an urgency of the here and now (The Fifth Biennial Conference of ASLE—the 2003 conference entitled “the solid earth! the actual world!”—springs to mind) and a “resurgence of the real” (the phrase coming from the title of Charlene Spretnak's 1999 book) scholars who wish to avoid “wrangling over what it means” (Buell *The Future* 3) to do ecocriticism, who fantasise about “escaping from the esoteric abstractness that afflicts current theorizing about literature” (Kroeber 1), and who want to remain free from the “post-structuralist nihilism” (236) Glen Love fears. John Tallmadge and the late Henry Harrington very succinctly warn about theory that goes “spinning off into obscurantism or idiosyncrasy” (xv), while Lawrence Buell worries about what he terms “mesmerization by literary theory” (*The Environmental Imagination* 111).
5. See <http://home.ca.inter.net/~greenweb/Disconnect.html>.
6. Though I use the word “activist” in relation to ecocriticism, I would rather that we remove the word altogether and assume that it is already implied in ecocriticism.
7. No less today does the US Food and Drug Administration (spurred by the immensely powerful meat-industry lobbyists) mistakenly promote meat as the crucial source of protein (and, indeed, health), notwithstanding the 1977 release of “Dietary Goals for the United States” by the Senate

Nutrition Committee (whose chairman is George S. McGovern), which recommended radical reductions of meat in people's diet. Michael Pollan speaks to these issues in considerable detail (see Pollan 2006 and 2008).

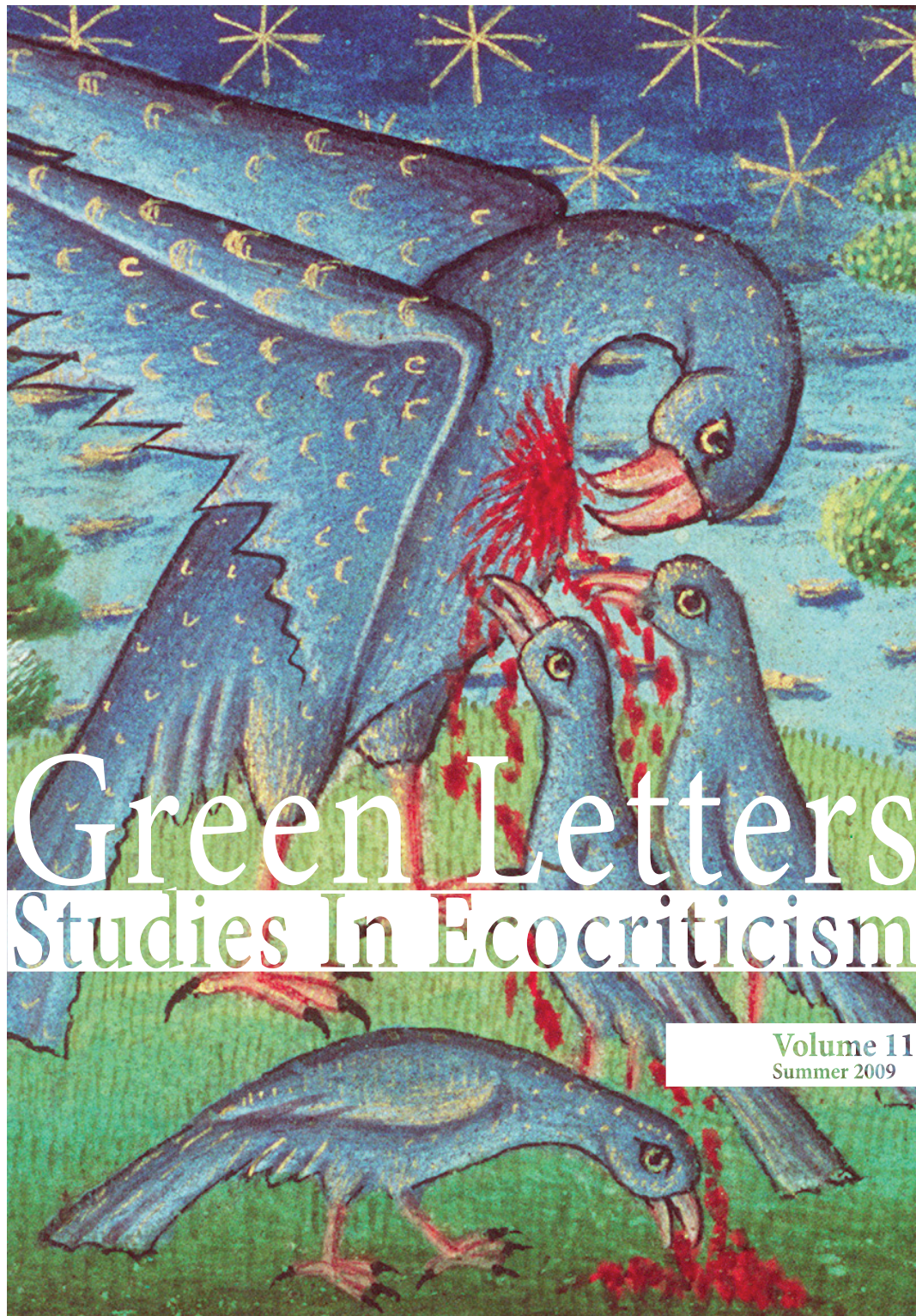
8. Sharon O'Dair and I disagree on this issue. Our disagreement on this matter dates back to 2005, though it is a friendly enough disagreement that Prof O'Dair has accepted my proposal entitled "Contra O'Dair, More Please: Shakespeare and Ecocriticism" for a panel she will chair at the ASLE 2009 in Victoria.

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