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Adam J. Goldwyn, *Byzantine Ecocriticism. Women, Nature, and Power in the Medieval Greek Romance*, The New Middle Ages. Cham: Palgrave-MacMillan, 2018, 240 pp., ISBN 978-3-319-69203-6.

Ecocriticism is a theoretical school current among scholars of literature since the 1990s. Studying ideas about the environment as conveyed by literary texts, it privileges questions of ecology and ecological implications in literature. How do landscapes of wilderness feature in a story? How do humans imagine their own place in the natural world? The field of *Byzantine Studies*, on the other hand, focuses on the historical world of the Byzantines. Yet these two separate fields, argues Adam Goldwyn in his recent book, may have much to learn from each other. *Byzantine Ecocriticism. Women, Nature, and Power in the Medieval Greek Romance* is, as far as I can tell, the first monograph dedicated entirely to precisely this, Byzantine ecocriticism (which means, of course, ecocritical readings of Byzantine texts rather than the Byzantines' ecocritical readings). In fact, the book reads partly as a manifesto that heralds the emergence of this new discipline. It asserts that we can no longer read historical texts as innocent of ecological consequences; we cannot be uncritical of their environmental ideologies – “reading in the Anthropocene requires a fundamental revision of literary criticism” (p. 7).

Goldwyn points out that “much yet remains unknown about the environmental attitudes of a multifaceted culture that lasted a thousand years and covered large and ecologically diverse swathes of three continents and the seas and waterways that linked them” (p. 20). Since he attempts to open up this new field, he spends the introductory chapter, “Byzantine Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis,” explaining what ecocriticism is and making a case for why it is important. The chapter comprises an instructive review of scholarship and trends in environmental humanities and discusses to what degree ecocriticism is or should be political, a kind of academic activism.

In addition to – or rather as a part of – the ecocritical perspective, the author introduces intersectional perspectives, engaging not least *ecofeminism* and *queer ecocriticism*. The patriarchal system and its hegemony

attempts to control women like it wants to control the natural environment; women, children, slaves, animals, and plants are all subject to male power. This adds a distinctly social aspect to his investigation.

Goldwyn's source material consists of Middle and Late Byzantine romances and novels. After the first introductory chapter follows a reading of metaphors in *Digenis Akritis*. The author pays attention to the way romantic love is imagined in terms of gardens/cultivation and animals/hunting, of male control of plants, animals, and women. He continues by reading three Komnenian novels, focusing on the violence of such control and the silencing of women's or animals' or plants' experiences. Male control, then, is ultimately carried out in the narration itself, which eclipses the pain of the prey and the wounds of the raped.

Yet there is also something transformative going on, he contends, when plants are described as humans and humans are described as plants; perhaps the clear distinctions are less clear than we would at first imagine? Chapter 4 engages Palaiologan stories – and various European translations and translation strategies – to explore cultural ideas about witchcraft, magic, and female control over nature. The final chapter ventures into the complicated terrain of posthumanism and the sort of hybridization where clear borders between human and non-human, organic and inorganic, animate and inanimate are being renegotiated. Goldwyn argues that if we start exploring such aspects of the romances we may be able to re-evaluate our own condition through the readings of Byzantine texts. In *Digenis*, for instance, we may discover “a model for a Byzantine posthumanism, for the line between monstrosity and heroism is as blurry as any other” (p. 200). It is in such instances, when Goldwyn is able to turn things around and let the reader be surprised by the upending of categories, by the intimacy between ivy and oak, that he is at his very best.

“It is past time for Byzantinists to demonstrate [concerns for eco-ethics ...]. The future of the world – and thus of Byzantine Studies – depends on it.” (p. 231). Thus concludes this groundbreaking volume. It is driven by a strong ethical impulse and a sense of urgency: We cannot retreat to our private rooms and read old tales while the world outside is in crisis. Goldwyn is a highly competent reader of literary texts, but

what distinguishes this book is its ability to put Byzantine stories into conversation with a number of critical perspectives, other literary texts (ancient and modern), and contemporary political concerns.

The disadvantage of Goldwyn's (eco)feminist approach is, perhaps, that the study ends up as slightly more conventional than it might otherwise have been. Studies of gender in the Byzantine world have been around for quite some time already, and, after all, criticizing older texts for their misogyny is pretty much duck soup to a modern feminist (cf. e.g. Ursula Le Guin's critique of male narrativity cited on pp. 191ff). Goldwyn's attention to the ecocritical is more pioneering, and it also brings out the most interesting nuances of the book, the ambiguous places where plant life and human life intersect. On the other hand, the author demonstrates exceptionally well how issues of gender and nature are interwoven in the romances.

In any case, this is a book that any Byzantinist should read, be provoked by, and be inspired by. From now on there exists such a thing as Byzantine ecocriticism.

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