

Review: Colin Carman, *The Radical Ecology of the Shelleys: Eros and the Environment* (New York: Routledge, 2018) 204pp. ISBN 978-036-703-0230, £120.00.

KATHERINE WARBY

UNTIL COLIN CARMAN'S *The Radical Ecology of the Shelleys* (2018), there was little scholarly recognition of the Shelleys' queering of nature. George Haggerty's *Queer Gothic* (2006) investigated how, beginning in the eighteenth century, writers 'gave sexuality a history in the first place', with a particular discussion of how gothic works were 'primarily concerned with male relations', such as in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818).¹ In more recent years, Eric Robertson's article 'Volcanoes, guts and cosmic collisions: the queer sublime in *Frankenstein* and *Melancholia*' (2013), questioned how 'the nonprocreative body addresses the complex mythic relationship humans have towards the ecological realities of death, debasement and decay'.² However, as the first book-length study of its kind, Carman aims to demonstrate the Shelleys' belief that nature and queerness are interconnected as they 'pervert dominant notions of the "natural" in [the] English Romantic age'.³

Carman uses queer ecology—an interdisciplinary mode of ecology—to demonstrate how the Shelleys queered nature in their Romantic works. As defined by Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson in their text, *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire* (2010) a queer ecology 'probe[s] the intersections of sex and nature' to understand 'the ways in which sexual relations organize and influence both the material world of nature and our perceptions, experiences, and constitutions of the world'.⁴ Using this lens, Carman's study

¹ George Haggerty, *Queer Gothic* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2006) p.5; *Ibid.*, p.4.

² Eric Robertson, 'Volcanoes, Guts and Cosmic Collisions: The Queer Sublime in *Frankenstein* and *Melancholia*', *Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism*, 18.1 (2014) pp.63-77 (p.64)
<<https://www.tandfonline.com>> [Accessed 03/06/2020].

³ Colin Carman, *The Radical Ecology of the Shelleys: Eros and the Environment* (New York: Routledge, 2018) p.21.

⁴ Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson, *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010) p.5.

enables a new interpretation of the Shelleys' writings, as he demonstrates that their texts reveal their views on sex, sexuality, and the queering of nature. Carman's study entreats us to broaden our critical approaches to Romantic nature writing, 'challeng[ing] us to adopt a different understanding of the human species and its deeply intimate, even erotic, interrelatedness with its environs'⁵ as he demonstrates that the lines between ecocriticism, feminist studies, climate studies, and natural sciences meet in the Shelleys' works.

Throughout his book, Carman explores the works of Percy Shelley including his apocryphal *Discourse on the Manners of the Ancient Greeks Relative to the Subject of Love* (1818), and his poems "The Sensitive Plant" (1820), and "The Witch of Atlas" (1824). Carman also explores the novels of Mary Shelley including *Valperga* (1823), *The Last Man* (1826), *Lodore* (1835), and *Maurice* (1998). His analysis provides fresh insight into the couple's different ecological approaches to their work. For Carman, Percy Shelley attempts to deconstruct the norms of nature, sex, and sexuality in the environment, whereas Mary Shelley works on the ecology of the domestic, same sex-family structures, and the community.

Chapter one 'Queer Ecology and its Romantic Roots' lays out the theoretical foundations for Carman's discussion by following the origins of queer ecology back to Timothy Morton, who, in 2010, defined this ecology and challenged the heterosexist notions of nature.⁶ For Morton, queer ecology reimagines nature and sexuality through a multidisciplinary attitude to biodiversity, gender and sexuality, and the denaturalization of heteronormativity. Here, Carman identifies that the word 'sexuality' arose in the late 1790s, in the context of a suppression of liberal freedoms which he links to the French Revolution. However, this did not stop the Shelleys from exploring their 'intense curiosity about nature and the natural in relation to sexual pleasure'.⁷

The second chapter focuses on Percy Shelley's belief that 'nature and culture are not opposites but deeply interfused'.⁸ Carman reads Shelley's *Discourse* and argues that, while Shelley seeks to naturalise sex and sexuality, he

⁵ Carman, p.1.

⁶ Timothy Morton, 'Guest Column: Queer Ecology', *PLMA*, 125.2 (2010) pp.273-282 (p.274).

⁷ Carman, p.22.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.38.

was writing during a time that actively punished men who had sexual relationships with other men. Therefore, Carman shows that Shelley took precautions against this, including expressing his 'dismissiveness and disgust [as a part] of the necessary precautions a writer had to take if he even dared to take on the nature of queer *Eros*'.⁹ Carman not only points out Shelley's use of gender-neutral pronouns such as 'the person' or 'a person', but highlights that (despite the essay remaining unpublished until 1840) Shelley gently attempted to seek the 'natural[isation] [of] same-sex *Eros*' in a sexually repressive Britain through addressing same-sex relationships.¹⁰

In chapter three, 'Percy Shelley's Hermaphroditus', Carman explores the queering of botanical nature through the hermaphroditism in "The Sensitive Plant" and "The Witch of Atlas", asserting that: '[t]he Sensitive-Plant and The Witch are also ecologically minding inasmuch as they adumbrate habitats wherein queer bodies and desire flourish free of social prejudice'.¹¹ For Carman, the sensitive-plant and the Witch each represent the queering of nature, gender, and sexuality. Carman also tracks the influences of the works of Erasmus Darwin, Carl Linnaeus, and Edmund Burke on Percy Shelley's poems. He argues that, when the sensitive-plant latterly becomes infected, it is because of 'the lack of sexual variety'¹² the plant is receiving. Carman recognizes Shelley's queering of nature in the diverse sexual life that the plant requires.

Chapters four and five move on to Mary Shelley, where Carman addresses the queer domestic within Shelley's novels *Maurice* and *Valperga*. In chapter four, Carman reinforces that the blended family unit of Mary Shelley's youth influenced the presence of the untraditional family structures within in her texts. Carman highlights Mary Shelley's interweaving of the domestic with the natural, with particular attention to dwelling spaces and natural spaces (such as the forest) that frequently converge in her works. For Carman, Shelley housing her characters in 'the cottage' often blurs the lines between indoors and outdoors. As Carman recognises, this liminal space seeks to influence others to improve the community

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.46.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.38.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.78.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.94.

as a whole, otherwise known as 'communal ecology'. Carman further notes that in disrupting the privileged convention of the 'cottage' as a form of escape from patriarchal industrialisation, and further separating the 'cottage and its enmeshment in the English landscape', Shelley chooses instead to focus on the families who thrive within them.¹³

In Chapter five, Carman discusses how Mary Shelley explores desire and same-sex relationships through nature in her novels *The Last Man*, and *Lodore*. Carman focuses on the acts of 'earth kissing' and 'tree kissing' through a romantic relationship between *The Last Man's* protagonist, Lionel Verney, and Adrian (often read biographically as Mary and Percy Shelley respectively). Carman notes that the unusually warm climate in *The Last Man* induces femininity within Lionel, as when he sees Adrian after a time spent apart, Lionel loses control over his feelings towards Adrian in 'girlish ecstasies'.¹⁴ However, Lionel 'transfers his frustrated desire from the erotic aim he dare not embrace openly onto the earth'.¹⁵ This, as Carman notes, enables the characters to make sense of their environmental belonging as they attempt to 'make erotic contact with the natural world and channel the untamed wildness they feel in their surroundings'.¹⁶ Lastly, Carman posits that the male friendships in *The Last Man* are portrayed in a similar way to the female relationships in *Lodore*, with its heroine Ethel who is immensely sensitive towards the atmosphere.

Carman's conclusion, 'Tangled, or the Shelleyan Network', returns the work to a theory-based approach to explore commonly used words in the Shelleys' writings. Recurring words such as 'tangled', establish, as Carman reinforces, that the Shelleys 'wanted their readers to think about the way they are networked and intertwined with all living creatures'.¹⁷ Carman notes that this way of thinking is now what is defined by Morton as 'the mesh', the interconnectedness of all living things.¹⁸

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.125.

¹⁴ Mary Shelley, *The Last Man* (New York: Open Road Media, 2015) p.620.

¹⁵ Carman, p.154.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.155.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.192.

¹⁸ Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2010) p.94.

This book will be invaluable to any scholar with an interest in the Shelleys and Romantic ecocriticism. As Carman demonstrates, ecology is already queer and erotic, but due to nature's association with the heteronormative and masculine, it has been overlooked in previous Shelley scholarship. Carman best demonstrates this in his fourth and fifth chapters through his analysis of the connections between same-sex relationships and the wider community, 'where the straightjacket of heterosexual matrimony is concerned'.¹⁹ Carman's text would benefit from more interaction with the Shelleys' journals, diaries, and letters. Such interaction would help to suggest how the Shelleys may have been inspired by their environments and would prove useful in understanding the genesis of their queer writings. Though some of these sources are included, some further engagement would add to the already rich knowledge of queer ecology and the Shelleys that Carman possesses. Nonetheless, Carman pinpoints hitherto neglected queer elements within the Shelleys' works and therefore presents a broader understanding of the fundamentality of queer ecology to Romantic writing.



BIOGRAPHY: Katherine Warby is a PhD student at The University of Huddersfield. Her research focuses on cold and hostile weather in Romantic writing. Katherine received funding for her PhD in 2019 placing her on a 'Fast track' PhD, converting her MA studies into a full research degree. Since this, she has been working on several chapters of her dissertation including a chapter on Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826). As well as exploring the impact the cold had on Wordsworth when in Goslar, the cold and icy setting in Coleridge's 'Rime of the Ancyent Marinere' (1798), and William Cowper's frightful weather in 'The Task' (1785).

CONTACT: Katherine.Warby@hud.ac.uk

¹⁹ Carman, p.11.