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The Stag Head Spoke by Erina Harris

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Unbalanced Books

The Stag Head Spoke by ERINA HARRIS

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Reviewed by JOEL DESHAYE

Among the many plants in my apartment is a staghorn fern that drew me to Erina Harris's first book, *The Stag Head Spoke*. The stag head is a central image of the first part of this two-part book. More to my liking than the second part, the "Bestiary" has wonderful moments when the stag head does speak, inviting into a house some children who ride "house-mares bridled" (21), toy horses that have an imagined life like that of the stag head. Harris's imagination in Book One is compelling, partly because her language so artfully dramatizes the interplay of animals, including humans. In "Rocking-Man," the shadow of a toy unicorn ridden by the children's drunken father blurs the human-equine boundary. The personification of dusk by minimalistic characters in Book Two, a free-verse play entitled "For the Suicide of Vespertine" that has surprisingly little drama compared to the "Bestiary," further raises the posthumanistic question of how special people really are.

Harris moves this equally ecocritical question from the usual wilderness to domestic spaces through the etymology of *ecology*, which comes from the Greek *oikos*, meaning house or dwelling. In *The Stag Head Spoke*, the stag head is the mouthpiece of a house that has the uncanniness not only of toys but also of ghosts. "Cryptozoology: Show and Tell Sonnet" creates images of death—a dead fetus, a widow, an "ashen shade" (8), a crow—to dramatize a relationship between brother and sister (and estranged father)

that provides the Bestiary's through-line. The brother's concern with "trying so hard to speak" (8) coming soon after a pair of poems called "Mimesis: The Dunce and the Shadow" recalls William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* and the dunce-like "idiot" Benjy, who obsesses about his sister and whose brother is obsessed with the shadow as a symbol of time. Faulkner's Gothic sensibilities haunt *The Stag Head Spoke*, contributing an engaging creepiness to mouthfuls of great rhyming lines: "The town widow walking dusk with the strange girl kept, in red dress, to us, / And the drunkard, flushed, curled in ashen shade by a shrub" (8); "He is parted from his sound. It enters sky which carries it / further and someplace lays it down" (9).

Detracting from the aural pleasure of the rhymes is the frustration of postmodern syntax. From "Cryptozoology," one of the poems already quoted, comes an example: "As he turns, it tips he sees / Through the glass that engorged, softening face bows so slowly toward his shoulder" (8). In an essay, these lines would be called a mixed construction. The difficulty increases later. In Book Two, I am deterred by the parataxis and lack of clarifying punctuation in successive stanzas (e.g., in the "Mourner I" poems). Because some poems in the book do have such punctuation, elsewhere I sense its absence. The lack is similar to Charles Baudelaire's absent rhymes (brought to my attention by Olivier Gallet). A longing for something absent can teach a tolerance of disappointment or reach toward unutterable feeling. Nevertheless, I want to find what is missing *in* the text—its internal logic. The poem entitled "Bestiary" has it when the stag head and house both speak:

Said the wooden house
From the head in the wall, in

worn corridor

Winding its mind to there a
door: is born with the children,
“Come,” (21)

A pedant could rearrange the stanza to read that “[t]he wooden house said” such and such in a “worn corridor / Winding its mind to a door there.” The straightened-out syntax, however, no longer complements the “winding” of the corridor or of the “mind” that follows the syntax without trying to unwind it. It has reason and works as is. I wish that more of the poems shared the stag head’s view:

..... it is
Not disagreeable to bear

My self toward order, not
A lesser thing is ordering: a giving. . . .
(24)

In Book Two, overly long Steinian passages of discontinuous fragments might try a reader’s patience. Because I have no expertise in the modern free-verse play, I wondered about a reader-response method and who the ideal or implied readers would be. Although the play is Beckettian in its abstract trio of characters, it has little apparent conflict, even with the suicide theme and the classic five-act structure that otherwise suits the dramatic triangle of conflict, climax, and resolution so well. Without as much for me to enjoy as Book One, the play becomes an object to be

studied or a study itself. As an academic, I know how specialization narrows a field, and Harris (a doctoral student in poetics) seems to be writing primarily here for other specialists in experimental poetry, many of whom are named in the lengthy acknowledgments.

While the play might be mainly for them, I do usually enjoy texts that ask the reader to “unknot a riddle” (87), as one of the characters attempts in Act Five. Weirdly applicable in Harris’s posthumanist context is Daniel Tiffany’s statement pertaining to some of the earliest English riddles: “[t]he riddle produces a complex object—a ‘riddle-creature’—that, by speaking, sheds its human qualities yet goes on speaking” (41-42). The stag head is such a creature and, for me, is much more curious than the three figures that speak in its stead in the play.

Works Cited

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