How did authors such as Jonson, Spenser, Donne and Milton think about the past lives of the words they used? Hannah Crawforth shows how early modern writers were acutely attuned to the religious and political implications of the etymology of English words. She argues that these lexically astute writers actively engaged with the lexicographers, Anglo-Saxonists and etymologists who were carrying out a national project to recover, or invent, the origins of English, at a time when the question of a national vernacular was inseparable from that of national identity. English words are deployed to particular effect – as a polemical weapon, allegorical device, coded form of communication, type of historical allusion or political tool. Drawing together Early Modern literature and linguistics, Crawforth argues that the history of English as it was studied in the period radically underpins the writing of its greatest poets.

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ETYMOLOGY AND THE INVENTION OF ENGLISH IN EARLY MODERN LITERATURE

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## Contents

**Preface**  
**Acknowledgements**  
**Note on the text**  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction: Etymology in Early Modern literature</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Etymology and estrangement in the poems of Edmund Spenser</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Etymology and textual time in the masques of Ben Jonson</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Etymology and place in Donne’s sermons</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Etymology and the ends of idealism in Milton’s prose</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion: A world in a word</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index</td>
<td>211</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
… as if thought plunged into a sea of words and came up dripping.
Virginia Woolf on the ‘word-coinig genius’ of the Elizabethans

Etymology looks to the past to shape the future, deriving new insight about the meaning and usage of words from a detailed examination of their origins. In this Janus-faced aspect it fundamentally resembles the structure of the Renaissance itself, which draws life from the reanimation of its own past. In what follows I will suggest that the excavation of etymologies is one of the most important activities carried out by – and devices available to – Early Modern writers. But it is first necessary to say a few words about why one would write, or read, a book about etymology at all. For as a critical discipline etymology surely belongs to an era long since past, beloved of the Germanic philologists who dominated the nineteenth century, and put to rest by Saussure and his followers, who posited a more sophisticated model of language that values not just the diachronic but also the synchronic. And yet etymology will not go away. From the New Critical emphasis on paying minute attention to the words on the page, which in excluding all knowledge extraneous to the text itself sought to give new weight to the question of precisely what that text means, to the linguistic pyrotechnics of deconstruction, which performs intricate pirouettes around the meaning of a central term, etymology has persisted throughout the history of English literary studies. It is no exaggeration to say that we might conceive of our own scholarly discipline as one that is both born out of and underpinned by etymology. For, at root, etymology is concerned with the one single question that preoccupies literary critics more than any other: what, and how, do words mean?

Medieval studies, with its textual emphasis and particular interest in the practices of editing, has addressed the place of etymology in its own discipline more openly than most literary-critical fields, and the debate around the New Philology that has been so important to the recent flourishing of theoretically astute scholarship on Old and Middle English texts
Preface

has explicitly considered the place of word histories in its own practice. But Renaissance studies has not yet applied the most important insight offered by the New Historicism who have so influenced the field over the past thirty years (and who have been so often criticized for their lack of nuanced attention to the words on the page) to the most fundamental aspect of Early Modern texts: their language. This present study seeks to historicize our approach to the language of Renaissance literature by addressing how Early Modern writers themselves conceived of the past lives of their words. It is one of the most remarked-upon features of the literature of the English Renaissance that its language displays an unusual playfulness, exuberance or even perversity. My epigram, taken from Virginia Woolf’s ‘Notes on an Elizabethan Play’, captures precisely the kind of virtuosity that readers associate with the writing of the Tudor–Stuart years, the particular linguistic brilliance that typifies the literature of the period – its elaborate puns and metaphors, crystalline images, striking diction, formal inventiveness and hidden layers of meaning. My contention in this book is that the ‘word-coining genius’ central to the texts of Early Modern writers is possible because they work at a moment in which the history of their language is first beginning to be documented. Woolf’s description also evokes the contradictory nature of this endeavour: they are creating something out of what is already there; the sea their thought ‘plunged into’ is no new invention and yet it washes over them, creating their language afresh, drenching each idea in the dewiness of novelty and the saltiness of the past.

This book began life as a PhD dissertation under the care of Jeff Dolven and Nigel Smith, the most generous advisors imaginable, and with whom I am lucky to enjoy ongoing conversations that have continued to shape my thinking, writing and teaching. Their questions have always been provocative, their insights unfailingly acute, and their advice ever honest and kind. I have appreciated the long leash they have afforded me and this project, as we roamed together widely, and the time and attention they have unhesitatingly given at exactly the right moments. To Leonard Barkan I owe thanks for the fact I came to study Early Modern Literature at all. Lisa Jardine provided me with an academic home when far from Princeton, and continues to be an extraordinary mentor. Richard and Marie Axton have given me far more than I can ever repay, including a library to inspire envy.

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Note on the text

Owing to this book's interest in the origins and developments of language I have here preserved original spellings when quoting from early printed texts and manuscripts.