

Introduction

Broken knowledge

The natural world in Shakespeare's time was conceived as a complex and tangled system of sympathies and antipathies, and man's place in it was highly questionable; everything in life was seen as connected, but this was the source of worry and wonder rather than of complacency.¹ New religious, philosophical and scientific ideas created uncertainty about how the natural world worked, and about its relationship to the divine. Those ideas created anxiety: as we'll see, there was even a worry that how people thought about nature might have an effect on how the world really worked. The sense of order in the natural world was becoming increasingly provisional, slippery and complex, having to accommodate more and more strange phenomena, which challenged the belief in man's centrality and his ability to comprehend and master the world. In Shakespeare's plays, those people who try to master nature in an individualistic way tend to be doomed, but that those who adopt a give-and-take attitude to the relationship between people and nature may find some chance of moving towards some kind of salvation, finding a form of grace. Recognizing the compromised and compromising quality of the natural world enables Shakespeare's characters to be happy in this world, and possibly points towards the more permanent happiness of the afterlife.

Hamlet famously tells Horatio that there are 'more things in heaven and earth . . . Than are dreamt of in your philosophy' (I. v. 166–7).² He believes that the common natural philosophy of his time is an inadequate dream, and expresses a certain taunting delight at his friend's discomfiture. He

¹ I use the phrase 'Shakespeare's time' (or some variation thereof), rather than 'Renaissance', 'Early Modern' or 'Reformation', as the phrase is more neutral: I simply want to focus on the intellectual atmosphere of Shakespeare's working life (from the late 1580s to around 1613), without pressing on any of the ideological triggers that the other terms involve.

² All references to Shakespeare's works are to *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), though I have frequently consulted the most recent Arden, Oxford and Cambridge editions, and have adopted some of their readings, as well as making minor orthographical changes of my own.

welcomes the ghost on account of it being ‘a stranger’ (line 165), something that doesn’t fit into the commonplace order of things. Yet its strangeness is paradoxical: it is at least the likeness of his own father, the former king of this country, not an intruder. Its presence makes Hamlet inclined to become ‘strange or odd’ (line 170) in his antic disposition, and makes ‘time . . . out of joint’ (line 188). The order of things is subverted, but precisely by a representative of an old order. In the face of such a strange phenomenon, Hamlet and his companions are struck with wonder as their system of knowledge is broken, and they are revealed as being ‘fools of nature’ (I. iv. 54). That phrase is complex: the main sense is that they are fools because they only believe in natural phenomena when there are supernatural things too; yet they are also like ‘natural’ fools in being born stupid, and such fools were often considered strangely wise; finally, they are fooled *by* Nature, who has tricked them into believing that the natural world is limited and comprehensible.

Nature, for Shakespeare, always has tricks up its sleeve; there is always something more. King Lear declares that if we ‘Allow not nature more than nature needs, / Man’s life is cheap as beast’s’ (II. iv. 266–7). Nature is excessive, particularly in the way it links person to person, often grotesquely: Lear has just called Goneril ‘a bile, / A plague-sore, or embossed carbuncle, / In my corrupted blood’, but this is not a radical repudiation of her – indeed, it is rather an inverted recognition of their ineradicable connection, for he ‘must needs call [her] mine’ (lines 223–5). Organic connectedness is all, and the sense of connection involved is always related to and mediated through something excessive and supplementary, like a boil or Hamlet’s ‘vicious mole of nature’ (I. iv. 24), a mark of inborn sin, which is both part of natural wholeness and a subterranean supplement which disfigures even as it gives character.³

That sense of excess, of the irreducible untidiness and slipperiness of the natural world, is a central subject of this book. While some of Shakespeare’s contemporaries – and some of his characters – believed that man could stand in a special place outside nature and could therefore master it (as Archimedes had famously imagined),⁴ Shakespeare repeatedly shows the dangerous folly of that presumption. The natural world, in all its complexity, is used to channel and compromise human motives, challenging the

³ As the Ghost soon manifests itself under the stage, it becomes punningly connected to this mole (I. v. 170). On Shakespeare’s sense of beauty being characterized by such flaws, see Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespeare’s Freedom* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), chapter 2.

⁴ He claimed, according to Pappus of Alexandria, that if he had a big enough lever, and a place to stand, he could move the whole world.

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vain notion of what Macbeth calls the ‘single state of man’ (I. iii. 140) – whether that notion is driven by ideas of religious transcendence, political power, or scientific knowledge. Those who accept the limitation of human wisdom, however, may have more hope, and may even find a strange kind of grace in doing so.

A central argument of this book is that Shakespeare anticipates the Romantics in finding hints of something unfallen, and even potentially redemptive, in the natural world. Raymond Williams sees a decisive shift in attitudes towards nature during the eighteenth century, between Addison and Wordsworth:

Two principles of Nature can . . . be seen simultaneously. There is nature as a principle of order, of which the ordering mind is part, and which human activity, by regulating principles, may then rearrange and control. But there is also nature as a principle of creation, of which the creative mind is part, and from which we may learn the truths of our own sympathetic nature.⁵

I want to argue that these principles can be found, at least in embryo, in the works of Shakespeare and some of his contemporaries, and that they are even more significantly and productively entangled there. Whereas the Romantics have to make a leap of faith in order to appropriate nature’s validation of human creativity, for Shakespeare nature is a creative principle both within and outside man, one which he must acknowledge he can never master. While many of his contemporaries were increasingly insisting on man’s capacity to master nature, Shakespeare sees a certain wise passivity as the prerequisite for accessing grace through nature. It is important, though, to recognize that Shakespeare’s natural world was not the same thing as Wordsworth’s: the orthodox religious thinking of his time made it clear that nature was fallen, ‘cursed in the curse of man’, as John Donne puts it.⁶ Yet intimations of redemption could be found in other forms of thinking that cut across and complicated religious orthodoxy.

The orderly medieval worldview, in which nature was organized on the basis of a clear, hierarchical set of connections between orders of being, was on the brink of abandonment, and would be decisively relinquished as a result of Descartes’ and Newton’s mechanistic ideas; yet, even while the older view of nature was becoming obsolete, some tried to rescue it by conceiving of it as even more organically and mysteriously interconnected

⁵ Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1973), p. 127.

⁶ ‘The First Anniversary: An Anatomy of the World’ (1611), line 200. References to *The Poems of John Donne*, ed. Robin Robbins, 2 vols. (Harlow: Longman, 2008).

than earlier ages had argued. Such thinkers, whether influenced by Stoicism, Epicureanism, or Neoplatonism, or by an eclectic mix of those lines of ancient thought, often believed that the natural world was self-sufficient, unfallen, or even itself divine.

Another key aspect of the times' intellectual ferment emerged as a consequence of such controversies about the operation of the natural world: an increasing sense that one's beliefs or opinions about how the world worked might actually change the nature of the phenomena; as Hamlet puts it, 'there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so' (II. ii. 249–50). This had an effect on both natural and religious thinking, for the Reformation had already shown people the relativism and provisionality of the most important aspects of belief. Whereas political authority was marshalled to ensure at least outward conformity on matters of religious belief, a great deal more freedom was allowed in people's thinking about the natural world, and that freedom of thought could in turn affect people's understanding of religious questions, most notably the relations of humans to grace.

The primary purpose of grace is, of course, to bring about salvation. Yet it is also clear that the language of grace is frequently used to refer to more mundane forms of redemption: the reconciliation of lovers and family members, the resolution of political conflict, and, more generally, the finding of earthly happiness. When the language of grace and redemption is used in such contexts, it is at one level a figure of speech, but it may also be a prefiguration. Earthly happiness may be an outward and visible sign of inward and spiritual redemption. Correspondingly, the Book of Nature, if read aright, may give signs of divine approval. In addition, the Reformation's detachment of good works from grace, though downgrading the value of good works and earthly happiness, may have enabled the natural world to stand as a relatively autonomous sphere of satisfaction for human beings who can't do anything about their ultimate fate. Happiness on earth may not necessarily prefigure salvation, but it is still happiness, and it is something we can work to achieve. It may at least set one on the road to grace, or prepare one for it.

How far one could actively prepare oneself for grace was a highly controversial matter. The Reformation was particularly keen to convict the Roman Catholic Church of the Pelagian heresy – the idea that humans could bring about their own salvation by good deeds – but Pelagianism has a tendency to creep in by the back door, even when the orthodox are on the lookout for it.⁷ Many orthodox Protestants, while insisting that faith is

⁷ See Alison Shell, *Shakespeare and Religion* (London: Methuen, 2010), p. 166.

the only route to salvation, allow that the human will at least participates in the process of arriving at faith – voluntarism.⁸ The orthodox may also insist that good works are not necessary to salvation, but they are an *appropriate* response to an inward conviction of divine favour, and evidence of sanctification.⁹ This idea almost aestheticizes morality, making it something pleasing to God but ultimately inconsequential for one's salvation.¹⁰ Good works become a separate sphere of meaning in this world, even if they don't affect the next one.

The tendency to separate spheres of meaning chimes with new approaches to studying nature. Those who focus on a study of the natural world (e.g., Francis Bacon) often bracket off matters of salvation as being already settled by an inscrutable divine providence. In doing so, however, they often import categories of good and bad from religious thinking, with the result that a natural world studied on its own terms starts to have its own apparent capacity to validate human action. This approach, along with the separation of good works from salvation, together helps motivate human responses to the natural world which are unanchored to theology even as they are structured by habits of religious responsiveness. These attitudes allow for the validation – up to a point – of human art, while requiring that art to be rooted in the natural world. Both may derive some of their force from Stoicism.

Stoics argue that humans must make their will conform with nature, and that the virtue that arises from such conformity is its own reward. *Arete* (virtue/excellence) leads to *eudaimonia* (happiness/flourishing). This view is in itself compatible with Calvinism (indeed Calvin himself was much influenced by Stoicism), in that it provides a basis for morality while leaving salvation out of the issue.¹¹ Renaissance Stoics – most notably Lipsius –

⁸ See R. T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 33–4, 59–61.

⁹ See William J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth-Century Portrait* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 88, 180–1, 199. See also Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism*, pp. 25, 75, 87, 91.

¹⁰ The preacher narrator of Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* (London: Virago, 2005), pp. 141–2 comments: 'Calvin says somewhere that each of us is an actor on a stage and God is the audience. That metaphor has always interested me, because it makes us artists of our own behaviour, and the reaction of God to us might be thought of as aesthetic rather than morally judgmental in the ordinary sense'. For Calvin's use of theatrical metaphors, and the idea of the natural world as a participative theatre of God's glory, see Belden C. Lane, 'Spirituality as the Performance of Desire: Calvin on the World as the Theatre of God's Glory', *Spiritus* 1 (2001): 1–30.

¹¹ On Calvin and Stoicism, see John Sellars, *Stoicism* (Durham: Acumen, 2006), p. 142, and Bouwsma, *John Calvin*, for a fuller account of Calvin's own struggles with Stoicism. Reid Barbour, in *English Stoics and Epicureans: Ancient Legacies in Early Stuart Culture* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), pp. 94–105, sees an alliance between Stoicism and Calvinism that answered a corresponding alliance between Epicureanism and Arminianism, even though Calvinists tried to deny this (pp. 204–8).

attempted to accommodate Christianity with their philosophy, and though Stoicism is not on its own terms genuinely compatible with Christianity, as it is a wholly materialist (or pantheist) philosophy, its very incompatibility enables its understanding of the natural world to operate in parallel with Christian thinking, separating the orders of nature and grace.¹² English Stoicism attempts a balance between ‘free will and submissive holism’ that resonates in Shakespeare.¹³ Renaissance Neostoicism offers a grounding for the idea of natural virtue, then, one which chimes with the Protestant anxiety about preparation for grace. For Stoics, if one cannot become the ideally constant Sage, one can at least *prepare* oneself in the direction of the ideal: the process is as valuable as the end product.¹⁴ The analogies with Protestant thinking are clear (one can’t earn grace, but one can be ready for it).¹⁵ If humans are to fit their will to that of nature, they need to recognize the limitations of their own capacities – and this, I think, is the central way in which Shakespeare presents the natural world: as a means of mediating our relation to others, as a source of happiness, as a way of limiting the exercise of our will, and – at least potentially – as a means of salvation.

I do not, it must be stressed, mean to argue that Shakespeare *is* a Stoic, any more than he is a Calvinist, a Catholic or a Platonist.¹⁶ What I mean to show is that there was an extraordinary range of thinkable ideas about nature in his time, and that he was able, with the unique eclecticism of the dramatist, to make suggestive imaginative patterns out of mixtures of those ideas, however heterodox, such mixing might be considered. ‘Thought is free,’ sings Stephano in *The Tempest*, but he’s soon frightened out of that liberal view by the invisible Ariel’s music, and prays for ‘Mercy’ (III. ii. 123, 131) before being consoled by Caliban. This is a highly characteristic movement: an expansion of thought is reined in by recalcitrant reality, but the free play of beliefs and opinions is not wholly or finally stifled.

¹² Stoicism’s sense of the cosmos as a living being, organically interconnected in all sorts of ways, is in turn compatible with much modern thinking about nature, such as James Lovelock’s Gaia hypothesis; see Sellars, *Stoicism*, pp. 93, 103, 95.

¹³ Barbour, *English Stoics*, p. 214. ¹⁴ See Barbour, *English Stoics*, pp. 116–7.

¹⁵ See Bouwsma, *John Calvin*, p. 187. The question of preparation for faith is controversial: according to Calvin, there is no such thing, but there is rather preparation *of* faith, which is God’s business rather than man’s. However, Calvin’s followers tended to slip into more voluntaristic positions. See Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism*, pp. 19–20, 64.

¹⁶ See T. S. Eliot, ‘Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca’, in *Selected Essays*, 3rd ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), pp. 126–40. Eliot’s point that Shakespeare ‘needed less contact’ with an idea ‘in order to absorb all that he required’ is a crucial one for my argument: the availability of an idea in his time is enough for us to be reasonably confident that he could make imaginative use of it.

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Thinking has an active, imaginatively transitive power in Shakespeare's plays, transforming the world, even if only for a moment.¹⁷

Opinion, belief and point of view therefore have considerable traction. Leonard Barkan points out that in Nicholas of Cusa's account the scholastic model of proportional relationships breaks down 'because everything within the creation depends upon point of view, i.e. these familiar proportions represent only our limited point of view'.¹⁸ Whether our limited point of view is responsible or whether, as in later thinkers, the sense of harmony in nature is fractured by human interference, there is no stability. Opinion has power. Sixteenth-century English people had grown used to sudden changes of religious position, and anticipated the possibility of more changes, with the result that their deepest religious beliefs had become privatized, provisional, equivocal.¹⁹ Though questions of natural philosophy were not so subject to official changes of belief system, an open-minded, ironically distanced attitude to religion could easily spill over into other spheres of belief, particularly when they were not crisply distinguished from each other. Alison Shell shows that while Shakespeare's work is 'saturated in religious discourse', 'the Judaeo-Christian story is something less than a master narrative' for Shakespeare (unlike most of his contemporaries).²⁰ Likewise, Shakespeare is uniquely capable of saturating his works with doctrines of the natural world, without getting tied down by any one master narrative. Shell further argues that many of Shakespeare's plays exist in a *gentile* world, that is, a world in which the grand narratives of the Judaeo-Christian tradition don't quite apply; yet she is clear that such a fictional world was an uneasy one for Shakespeare's audience.²¹ These gentile worlds open space for experiment: Sarah Beckwith has suggested that Reformed belief opened the door for a certain bewildering sense that subjective attitudes could transform the objective reality of the world; as she puts it,

Reformed sacramental theology . . . situates the efficacy of the sacrament in the transformation of the one receiving communion, in the subjective faith – and knowledge – of the worshipper rather than the objective

¹⁷ E.g. in *Henry V*, where we are invited to 'Think, when we talk of horses, that you see them / Printing their proud hooves i' th' receiving earth' (Prologue 26–7), and Troilus's insistence that he will 'Think' Diomedes' hand an altar of sacrifice for Cressida (*Troilus and Cressida*, IV. iii. 8).

¹⁸ Leonard Barkan, *Nature's Work of Art: The Human Body as Image of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), p. 9.

¹⁹ For a good discussion of this topic, see Lena Cowen Orlin, *Locating Privacy in Tudor London* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 10.

²⁰ *Shakespeare and Religion*, p. 3. ²¹ *Shakespeare and Religion*, pp. 205, 216.

(*ex opere operato*) work of the priest. ‘You will receive so much as you believe you receive,’ proclaims Luther.²²

Queen Elizabeth seems to have believed in an opposite but correlated position, writing of the Eucharist,

’Twas Christ the Word that spake it.
 The same took bread and brake it,
 And as the Word did make it,
 So I believe and take it.²³

A variant version makes the point of the last two lines even clearer: ‘And what the Lord did make it, / That I believe and take it’. For Luther, whatever one believes can perhaps alter the nature of reality; but Elizabeth suggests that the objective nature of the world as made by God can affect one’s belief – one therefore has to accept a rather peculiar position, believing in something without knowing what it is. There is considerable give and take between mind and world, which are in a mutually dynamic relation. If human opinion could change the nature of such pivotal phenomena as the Eucharist, surely it had an analogous power to change more trivial, secondary aspects of the natural world.

Before we look further at the ideas available, though, it is important to set out the problems in writing about such a complex concept as ‘nature’. What we mean by nature has been a key issue in recent ecocriticism. Timothy Morton warns us that the very idea of ‘Nature’ tends to take us too far into the realm of metaphysics,²⁴ but if we are alert to the concept’s slipperiness, it can remain helpful; as Mary Midgley has pointed out, ‘if you try to sling Nature – or indeed the whole idea of Nature – out through the door, she always comes quietly back down the chimney’.²⁵

C. S. Lewis’s careful study of the word’s implications is a valuable starting-point: he shows that ‘nature’ first means the characteristic properties of any given thing, then comes to mean the characteristic properties of everything, then everything (what Lewis calls the ‘dangerous sense’); the crucial turn comes when what Lewis calls the ‘demoted sense’ of the word emerges, meaning everything but the God who created it. But nature can then be demoted – or promoted – in opposition to man’s activity: when

²² Sarah Beckwith, *Shakespeare and the Grammar of Forgiveness* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), p. 27.

²³ Elizabeth I, *Collected Works*, ed. Leah S. Marcus, Janel Mueller and Mary Beth Rose (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 47.

²⁴ Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

²⁵ Mary Midgley, *Are You an Illusion?* (Durham: Acumen, 2014), p. 83.

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we want to praise man's creativity or rationality, nature is something to rise above, but when we want to condemn man's interference, that interference is called 'unnatural'.²⁶ Though his whole reading of the term's development is a salutary corrective against Romantic conceptions of nature, Lewis also acknowledges that our sense of relief at our escape from obviously man-made worlds has some claim to be called *natural*: when natural forces are more visible and human activity less salient, we instinctively feel ourselves to be entering the natural world; however, much that world may in fact be altered by human action.²⁷

This idea has been developed by Kate Soper: admitting like Lewis that our commonplace talk about nature is loose, she insists (following Wittgenstein) that the ordinary (what she calls the 'lay') meanings of the term make desirable discriminations about our uses of the world.²⁸ Less philological and historical than Lewis, and inflected by more recent modes of thinking, Soper has updated his warnings about the potential confusions in the idea of nature. She shows that ecopolitical appeals to nature are in tension with a postmodern identity politics which rejects any appeal to the natural. Soper deftly finds a middle ground, acknowledging the discursive dangers of lazy appeals to nature's authority, while recognizing that a realist approach to the natural is needed to set the basis for any legitimate activist thinking, or indeed any kind of 'explanatory and prescriptive force' for one's arguments.²⁹

Between Lewis and Soper, Raymond Williams famously warned that nature is 'perhaps the most complex word in the language', but he also provides a clear potted history of that complexity, with more political implications than are present in Lewis. Williams shows that the dominant medieval–Renaissance concept was the idea of Nature as a deity, subordinate only to the Christian God, and sometimes His competitor as an 'absolute monarch', replaced in the seventeenth century by the more comprehensible, negotiable sense of Nature as a 'constitutional monarch, with a new emphasis on natural laws', into which men could (and indeed should) enquire.³⁰ Shakespeare's age, one might say, was trying to preserve a mixed constitution, rather like Queen Elizabeth's famous 'monarchical

²⁶ C. S. Lewis, *Studies in Words*, 2nd edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), pp. 24–64.

²⁷ *Studies in Words*, p. 74.

²⁸ Kate Soper, *What Is Nature? Culture, Politics and the Non-Human* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), pp. 20, 182–4.

²⁹ *What Is Nature?*, p. 133.

³⁰ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, revised ed. (London: Flamingo, 1983), pp. 219–24.

republic’;³¹ the paradoxes involved had deep political, scientific and imaginative implications which will be central to this book.

Recent ecocriticism of Renaissance literature has admirably developed from the conceptual groundwork we find in Lewis, Soper and Williams. Gabriel Egan has convincingly argued that the organic and often holistic thinking which permeates Shakespeare’s plays need not be seen as politically conservative, but in fact frequently provides opportunities for real competition over political matters.³² We do not need to return to the outdated – though sometimes unfairly maligned – concept of the Great Chain of Being, which Tillyard saw as central to Elizabethan and Jacobean culture;³³ rather, we might see a system of order that is much more complex and tangled, and which enabled (though also continually put in question) relations between humans and their environment. Todd Borlik, developing from Egan, has shown that an alert reading of the meanings of nature in the period can help us recognize the limitations of human political power, and emphasizes how a ‘green’ version of the Great Chain roots human subjectivity in non-human nature.³⁴

Others have taken more pessimistic views: Bruce Boehrer shows how the drama of Shakespeare’s times responded to ecological challenges, and to fears about the changing natural environment;³⁵ Charlotte Scott has argued that Shakespeare’s plays are informed by early modern discourses of husbandry, and that those discourses, like the plays (and the Sonnets), emphasize an ongoing transition to human mastery of the natural environment.³⁶ The present book takes rather a different line: while Boehrer argues that Shakespeare becomes more pessimistic about the natural world as his work develops, I argue that he shows a continuing – if increasingly

³¹ See Patrick Collinson, ‘The Monarchical Republic of Queen Elizabeth I’, in *Elizabethan Essays* (London: Hambledon Press, 1994), pp. 31–57.

³² Gabriel Egan, *Green Shakespeare: From Ecopolitics to Ecocriticism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), p. 4 and *passim*. Human activity since the Industrial Revolution has undoubtedly changed our planet’s ecosystems so radically that catastrophe is probably imminent, and perhaps unavoidable. Enlightenment universalism was right insofar as it’s true that fossil fuels burned in Accrington affect the climate of the Antarctic, which in turn makes seas rise in Sri Lanka. As Timothy Morton points out, ‘everything is connected. And it sucks’. – Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 33.

³³ E. M. W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1943), A.O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964).

³⁴ Todd A. Borlik, *Ecocriticism and Early Modern English Literature: Green Pastures* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

³⁵ Bruce Boehrer, *Environmental Degradation in Jacobean Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

³⁶ Charlotte Scott, *Shakespeare’s Nature: From Cultivation to Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).