

THE CONCEPT OF NATURE IN EARLY MODERN ENGLISH LITERATURE

The Concept of Nature in Early Modern English Literature traces a genealogy of ecology in seventeenth-century literature and natural philosophy through the development of the protoecological concept of “the oeconomy of nature.” Founded in 1644 by Kenelm Digby, this concept was subsequently employed by a number of theologians, physicians, and natural philosophers to conceptualize nature as an interdependent system. Focusing on the middle decades of the seventeenth century, Peter Remien examines how Samuel Gott, Walter Charleton, Robert Boyle, Samuel Collins, and Thomas Burnet formed the oeconomy of nature. Remien also shows how literary authors Ben Jonson, George Herbert, Andrew Marvell, Margaret Cavendish, and John Milton use the discourse of oeconomy to explore the contours of humankind’s relationship with the natural world. This book participates in an intellectual history of the science of ecology while prompting a reevaluation of how we understand the relationship between literature and ecology in the early modern period.

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Peter Remien

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Preface

Writing about nature can be a perilous endeavor. Protean and layered, the concept resists easy definition. Nature can mean essence, the principle of motion, birth, nonhumanness, pristineness, or the aggregate of material things including or excluding humanity. The Oxford English Dictionary currently includes thirty-four distinct definitions of the noun “nature.”¹ It is no wonder that Raymond Williams refers to “nature” as “perhaps the most complex word in the [English] language.”² For the environmental historian William Cronon ideas of pristine nature and wilderness distort humankind’s relationship with the nonhuman world, and for Timothy Morton the idea of nature must be dispensed of entirely to arrive at an ecological understanding of the world.³ Centuries earlier, Robert Boyle argued that scholars must reject “Vulgar” notions of nature in order to make room for proper experimental philosophy.⁴ And yet doing away with such a dynamic and essential concept – central to the development of so many important institutions, disciplines, and ideas – impoverishes both intellectual and literary history.

The Concept of Nature in Early Modern English Literature is not a comprehensive study of nature in early modern English literature. A project of that scope would fill volumes. I do not, for example, examine nature in many important works like Spenser’s *Two Cantos of Mutability* or Shakespeare’s sonnets. Rather, the book explores the emergence of the natural-philosophical concept of “the oeconomy of nature” in the middle decades of the seventeenth century in the works of Kenelm Digby and other natural philosophers, as well as the practical agrarian concept of “natural oeconomy” – simply referred to as “oeconomy” (household management) by early modern writers – in the literature of Jonson, Marvell, Herbert, Cavendish, and Milton. Oeconomy is foundational to ecology because it supplies an early model for thinking about nature as a system based on efficiency and proper dispensation. Indeed, as I illustrate in the Epilogue, both Linnaeus and Charles Darwin use the oeconomy of

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nature to conceptualize nature's collective processes. While this book centers on the middle decades of the seventeenth century, its broader historical trajectory reaches from Aristotle to Charles Darwin. It is by no means a complete history of ecology, but it supplements existing scholarship by focusing on the emergence of an important protoecological concept. This book extends the intellectual history of ecology into the seventeenth century while prompting a reevaluation of the relationship between literature, nature, and ecology in seventeenth-century England and beyond.

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