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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THE CONCEPT OF NATURE
IN EARLY MODERN ENGLISH LITERATURE

PETER REMIEN

Lewis-Clark State College
For my family
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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.” It is no wonder that Raymond Williams refers to “nature” as “perhaps the most complex word in the [English] language.” 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. Centuries earlier, Robert Boyle argued that scholars must reject “Vulgar” notions of nature in order to make room for proper experimental philosophy. 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
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.
Acknowledgments

I owe a great debt of gratitude to the many people who helped bring this book to fruition. First of all, I would like to thank David Glimp and Katherine Eggert for guiding this project from the early stages of its development. I couldn’t have asked for better teachers and mentors. I would also like to thank my dissertation committee (Valerie Forman, Richelle Munkhoff, and Paul Hammer), as well as Harry Berger, Jr., for advice, inspiration, and sage commentary. My research was generously supported by the English Department, Graduate School, and Center for British and Irish Studies at the University of Colorado at Boulder; as well as by the English Department at the University of Wyoming; the Huntington Library; the RMMLA; the British Library; Smith College Library’s Special Collections; and the Humanities Division, Provost, and Faculty Affairs Committee at Lewis-Clark State College.

I am grateful for my brilliant and supportive colleagues at Lewis-Clark State College. I would like to thank all of my colleagues in the Humanities Division for making the college a great place to work. My associates in literature – Okey Goode, Chris Norden, and Marlowe Daly-Galeano – have been particularly influential in helping me to refine my ideas and to grow as a teacher and scholar. The Ecocriticism Reading Group in Moscow, Idaho, has also helped to shape this book. I would particularly like to thank Erin James, Scott Slovic, Anna Banks, Jenn Ladino, Debbie Lee, Donna Potts, Xinmin Liu, and Kota Inoue. I am inspired by the diverse intellectual communities brought together by the study of literature and the environment.

I am grateful to the many others who have been generous with their knowledge, encouragement, and feedback: Rebecca Totaro, Jeffrey Theis, Todd Borlik, Vin Nardizzi, Karen Raber, Joanna Picciotto, Reid Barbour, Richard Strier, Rebecca Laroche, Jennifer Munroe, Todd Butler, Will Hamlin, Simon Gikandi, Barney Latimer, Lara Dodds, Henry Turner, Beth Pittenger, James Fitzmaurice, Robert Watson, Nan Goodman,
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Acknowledgments

Michael Zimmerman, Teresa Toulouse, Julian Yates, Barbara Blumenthal, Bill Oram, Jonathan Goldberg, and Timothy Sweet. Thanks also to my wonderful students at the University of Colorado at Boulder, the University of Wyoming, and Lewis-Clark State College.

It is an unfortunate by-product of the blind peer-review process that many people most deserving of thanks remain anonymous. I am extremely grateful for my readers at *PMLA*, *Studies in Philology*, and Cambridge University Press for their brilliant suggestions, comments, and critique. This book is much stronger because of them. Thank you also to Ray Ryan and the editorial staff at Cambridge University Press for assuming stewardship of my book.

Finally, I would like to thank my family for their unconditional love and support: my parents, Helen and Cam, for nurturing my creativity and intellectual curiosity; Chris and Diana for their scientific expertise; my children, Viren and Aila, for filling my life with joy; and my wife, Shelly, for her love, intelligence, sense of humor, and technical expertise in writing and editing.

An article version of Chapter 2 has been previously published in *Studies in Philology* 111, no. 2 (2014): 255–81 under the title “Jonson’s Universal Parasite: Patronage and Embodied Critique in ‘To Penshurst,’” and material from the Introduction has been previously published as an article titled “Oeconomy and Ecology in Early Modern England” in *PMLA* 132, no. 5 (2017): 1117–33. Thank you to the editors of *Studies in Philology* and *PMLA* for permission to reprint this material.