LITERATURE AND NATURE IN
THE ENGLISH RENAISSANCE

Featuring over two hundred nature-themed texts that span the disciplines of literature, science and history, this sourcebook offers an accessible field guide to the environment of Renaissance England, revealing a nation at a crossroads between its pastoral heritage and industrialized future. Carefully selected primary sources, each modernized and prefaced with an introduction, survey an encyclopaedic array of topographies, species, and topics: from astrology to zoology, bear-baiting to bee-keeping, coal-mining to tree-planting, fen-draining to sheep-whispering. The familiar voices of Spenser, Shakespeare, Jonson, and Marvell mingle with a diverse chorus of farmers, herbalists, shepherds, hunters, foresters, philosophers, sailors, sky-watchers, and duchesses – as well as ventriloquized beasts, trees, and rivers. Lavishly illustrated, the anthology is supported by a lucid introduction that outlines and intervenes in key debates in Renaissance ecocriticism, a reflective essay on ecocritical editing, a bibliography of further reading, and a timeline of environmental history and legislation drawing on extensive archival research.

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LITERATURE AND NATURE IN THE ENGLISH RENAISSANCE

An Ecocritical Anthology

Edited by
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In a feverish effort to compile an exhaustive survey of England’s topography and natural history, the Tudor antiquarian John Leland reportedly “fell beside his wits” (Smith xiv). There were moments during the preparation of this anthology when those around me may have wondered if I were destined to suffer the same fate. Fortunately, my mental balance was kept within a half bubble of plumb by the encouragement and advice of dozens of wonderful people. Thanks are due first of all to my former research assistant, Clare Egan, who helped unearth and transcribe several of the manuscripts. An ex-student, Clarissa Coffay, volunteered to assist with this project in its early days, and meticulously prepared extensive selections from Topsell and Gerard. This anthology would not have been possible without the generous support I received from the University of Huddersfield in funding many of my numerous trips to archives. I am particularly grateful to my colleague Jessica Malay, who has acted as both a sounding board and pillar of support.

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EDITORIAL PRINCIPLES:
TOWARDS THE ECOCRITICAL EDITING OF RENAISSANCE TEXTS

At the outset, some decisions were made to prepare this anthology in accordance with a few basic guidelines:

- Modernize spelling and punctuation (exceptions noted below).
- Annotate to define archaic words, explain obscure allusions, and record original spellings or textual variants where they may have added significance (particularly if they assist ecocritical interpretation).
- Preserve capitalization when it has rhetorical force, or may imply elevation to a proper noun.
- Preserve original punctuation when it may aid comprehension or enhance rhetorical impact.
- Deploy diacritical marks and syncope in verse to help with scansion.

Each of these choices has significant implications, and thus calls for a brief defence. Modernizing is of course a standard practice with editions intended for classroom use. Thanks to the growing accessibility of Renaissance books in digital format, the need for original spelling is no longer so pressing. Readability seems paramount. Moreover, modernizing should, if only on a subliminal level, help drive home the message that Elizabethan writers, while not exactly our contemporaries, were tussling with and can speak to problems not unfamiliar to twenty-first-century readers. As for punctuation, the plain fact is that in many early modern books it is not authorial but was often left to the whims of the compositors or printers. Snifing at a modernized text thus seems as obstinate as refusing to attend a production of Shakespeare in modern dress or pronunciation.

Nevertheless, during the painstaking process of editing this anthology I became increasingly aware of the pitfalls of strict modernization. Due to the scope of the contents, implementing a rigid one-size-fits-all policy seemed far too constrictive. The verse of Skelton and the prose of Aubrey call for very different editorial interventions in both degree and kind. As its critics have observed, modernized spelling can blunt or efface the polysemous complexity of certain words. For instance, early modern readers encountering a “forrest” are subtly alerted to its status as a game preserve, a shelter where beasts go “for rest.” When a tract by Winstanley spells
mankind as “Manking” and oppression as “oppresin,” can one be confident that these are mere typos and silently emend them? Similarly, it seems almost collusive to ignore that a royal hunt and bear-baiting took place at “Killingworth” (instead of Kenilworth) Castle. Changing humane to faun, fawn to faun, travailling to travelling, arguably diminishes some of the lexical charge these words possessed in early modern usage. When confronted with such cruxes, I have followed Stanley Wells’s advice to adopt the modern spelling for the dominant meaning and to annotate to capture additional resonances lurking in the original.

Capitalization presents a tougher challenge. Most modern-spelling editions today conform to current usage. In an ecocritical edition, however, decapitalizing feels tantamount to decapitation. Beginning a noun with an uppercase letter can endow it with a dignity or honorary subjectivity, which is not necessarily the same thing as anthropomorphism. Texts by the Sidneys, Drayton, Lanyer, Cavendish, and Tyrion often—though maddeningly, not always—capitalize the names of animals or topographical features as they seek to transform our sense of nature’s agency and the ethical status of non-humans. Conversely, other writers like Herbert sometimes deploy a capital M to puff Man up above the rest of creation. These nuances matter. Unlike old spellings, they cannot be documented neatly in a footnote. Consider, for instance, this specimen of Renaissance verse: “The World’s a Book in Folio, printed all / With God’s great Works in Letters Capital.” Many Jacobean readers would have agreed with the insinuation by the poet Du Bartas and his English translator that God’s creatures deserve to be capitalized in the same way one capitalizes the title of a literary work. The recent “materialist turn” makes the argument for preserving original capitalization even more compelling since it seems to bestow a greater existential stature on a word. In a note scrawled on the inside cover of a collection of Thomas Traherne’s manuscripts, his Edwardian editor remarks, “in Traherne’s handwriting there is an abundance of capital letters – so much so that this is a distinguishing feature” (Bodleian MS Eng. poet c.42). With a writer like Traherne, this blitz of capitals is more than an idiosyncracy; it is symptomatic of the poet’s quasi-animistic spirituality. Admittedly, capitals at times do seemingly sprout up at random, but wrestling with these texts forced me to revise my initial policy and let readers decide for themselves which instances are rhetorically significant. While not every single capitalized letter can be assumed to be authorial or to deliver an animating jolt, this edition asks readers to entertain the possibility that the liberal capitalization that prevailed during the Renaissance reflects a pre-mechanistic worldview that was perhaps closer to what contemporary theorists would call object-oriented, and could, before we were modern, amplify the non-human voice in a Parliament of Things.

The prevalence of rhythm and rhyme in Renaissance literature, meanwhile, speaks to the cultural yearning for a cosmos (and polity) pervaded
by order. Consequently, editors should try to avoid interfering with these patterns, especially as deviations can coincide with outbursts of disorder, like the “swervings” that worried theologian Richard Hooker. The need to accommodate rhythm and rhyme also pushed Renaissance writers to employ a Latinate syntax which can shatter the subject-verb-object mould of modern English and thus allow for more flexible conceptions of agency. On related grounds, it seems worthwhile to differentiate (when possible) between an exclamatory “oh” voicing anguish or surprise and the vocative “O” which can address and personify the inhuman. Editors should also follow this commandment: thou shalt not tamper with “thou,” which, as Martin Buber demonstrated, can bind humans and the environment in a more ethical rapport. For the same reason, it would be a distortion to introduce neutral pronouns, and textual apparatus should note variants in pronoun usage in different manuscripts or editions. When Macbeth gloats that none can “bid the tree unfix his earthbound root” (4.1.111) or Mary Wroth or George Morley refer to the nightingale as her, the pronouns betray the persistent anthropomorphizing and gendering of other species, offering precedents (albeit ambiguous ones) for the challenge to post-Enlightenment usage by some in animal studies and the new field of ecolinguistics.

Could one also argue that there is an ecological undercurrent in pre-modern punctuation? While modern usage prefers to slice and segment thought into tidy, discrete units, the loose-jointed, rambling syntax of the Renaissance seems to emphasize the ecological principle of connectivity: a fluidity of clauses encoding a fluidity of relations between subjects, objects, actions, consequences, and other subjects. Many seventeenth-century writers such as Mary Wroth and John Evelyn composed long sentences like meandering paths through a wood, or like Rube Goldberg devices, where causes trigger effects that in turn trigger other causes and so on. Even when the punctuation is not authorial, it still reflects reading habits of a culture accustomed to tease out complex relationships across grammatical and ontological divides. Since enhancing the perception of connectivity is a cardinal duty of ecocritics there is some justification for retaining this rhetorical punctuation. This edition, while weeding out many commas that retard the reading, preserves some long sentences when occasion demands, deploying the semicolon as a super comma for a brief pause and the colon for a longer pause or amplification.

By following a policy of selective modernization, this anthology could be accused of being “neither fish nor flesh,” a complaint gracefully deflect-ed by the editors of the Digital Renaissance Editions. Such a dish may not be to the taste of purists, but ecology is a discipline that pays little devotion to purity. It seems far more important to make texts accessible for modern readers while also enabling them to glimpse the vitalistic, pre-Enlightenment sensibility interwoven into the stylistic warp and woof.
of Renaissance texts. Instead of choosing to be either stringently historicist or stridently presentist, an ecocritical edition has a divided duty. If this anthology encourages more students and scholars to cross-pollinate the study of Renaissance literature and the environmental humanities, its chief ambition will have been fulfilled.