THE OECONOMY OF NATURE: LITERATURE AND ECOLOGY IN THE ENGLISH RENAISSANCE

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Abstract

My dissertation focuses on the development of the proto-ecological concept of “the oeconomy of nature” in works of literature and natural philosophy of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Tracing interconnections between the discourse of estate management and the rhetoric of natural philosophy, I find that “oeconomy” (the early modern art of household management) provides a conceptual vocabulary through which thinkers understood the natural world as a self-regulating system made up of independent agents. Through readings of Edmund Spenser, Ben Jonson, George Herbert, Kenelm Digby, Margaret Cavendish, and John Milton, my dissertation challenges recent accounts of early modern environmental thought by highlighting the historicity of concepts such as “ecology” and “environment” and by unearthing an alternative terminology that early modern thinkers used to understand the material world.

The first three chapters trace a genealogy of the oeconomy of nature in the writings of natural philosopher Kenelm Digby through the work of his two principal literary influences, Edmund Spenser and Ben Jonson. Spenser and Jonson paved the way for the oeconomy of nature by representing divergent paradigms for understanding the natural world. Through this grouping of texts, I contend that, rather than existing at the margins of scientific epistemology, imaginative literature serves a critical function in the development of new forms of knowledge. I argue that Digby develops the oeconomy of nature as a way of reconciling the discourse of Baconian empiricism, with its tendency to fragment nature into observable parts, with his desire to produce an integrated model of the natural world. Chapters 4 and 5 then focus on the ways in which
George Herbert and Margaret Cavendish respond to ambiguity regarding the human subject’s position in the oeconomy of nature. Attentive to the dynamic interplay between works of imaginative literature and those of natural philosophy, my project asserts that literature plays an important and generally underappreciated role in the development of scientific thought.
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INTRODUCTION

THE OECONOMY OF NATURE: A SURVEY OF SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY IDEAS

In recent years, a number of studies called attention to ways in which early modern writers engaged with ecological ideas.\(^1\) Diane McColley, for example, focuses on how the vitalist poetics of writers like Andrew Marvell, John Milton, and Margaret Cavendish “rejects the fallacy that only human perceptions matter,” and, in turn, offers an ecological alternative to the literature of human dominion.\(^2\) Taking a more historicist position, Todd Borlik considers how various environmental crises in early modern Britain, such as London air pollution and the draining of the fens, occasioned literary responses that reinvigorated the age-old genre of the pastoral. In *Milton and Ecology*, Ken Hiltner contends that Milton’s monist theology anticipates Heidegger’s ecological readings of the Bible. Finally, beginning with the observation that the early modern rubric “man” both includes and excludes women, Sylvia Bowerbank argues that a woman’s liminal position in early modern culture authorizes her to “speak for nature” in ways unavailable to men.\(^3\) These studies have served a number of important functions in further historicizing environmentalist thought—the germ of which had traditionally been located in the romantic period—and in introducing previously unappreciated aspects of early modern representations of nature.

However, these studies also tend to use the term “ecology”—which does not appear in English until 1876 and does not reach theoretical maturity until well into the twentieth century—fairly indiscriminately, without regard to the concept’s complex and theoretically rich history.
One of the central goals of this project is to provide a pre-history of the notion of ecology grounded in seventeenth century ideas and concepts. In particular, I trace the solidification of the discourse of providential design in the seventeenth century into the concept of oeconomy, through which the natural world is beneficently arranged by God for human use. From here I chart the subsequent shift from this theological discourse into the realm of natural history through the less anthropocentric, but still economically based, concept of “the oeconomy of nature.” In both of these iterations of proto-ecological discourse, the preeminently anthropocentric space of the household (oikos)—which supplies the etymological root of both “economy” and “ecology”—provides an oeonomic, that is, rational, use-centered, and anthropocentric, model through which early moderns understood the workings of the natural world. I will retain the early modern spelling “oeconomy” to highlight the extent to which notions of the household structured the understanding of the world. Through the conceptual metaphors of oeconomy—which, as we shall see, enjoy a rich and diverse poetic tradition—the theological and the scientific coalesce into the economic as the central organizational principle of the universe.

While my study engages with the emergence of increasingly rational models for understanding the workings of the natural world, I do not mean to suggest that these narratives were the only ways in which early moderns conceptualized nature. Historian Paula Findlen, for example, points out the notion of lusus naturae, jokes of nature, largely inherited from classical natural historians such as Pliny, served to undermine rational, use-based notions of nature that would become central to the science of the eighteenth century. Indeed, as my study shall make clear, I am more interested in the ways in which early modern writers such as Edmund Spenser, Ben Jonson, and Margaret Cavendish complicate oeconomic narratives of the natural world than
the ways in which they reproduce them. There is a sense in which this project might unfold as theological or scientific history rather than a literary study, but, as I hope to show, literature offers a particularly rich field for studying the ways in which this complex discourse unfolds in the early modern imagination. What a work of literature, as opposed to a scientific treatise or Christian sermon, offers is a site in which disparate discourses can interconnect in experimental and often playful ways. As Harry Berger’s classic study of the renaissance imagination suggests, a literary work allows an author to explore an imaginative “green world” through which he or she can experimentally conceptualize and reconceptualize the world he or she inhabits. Since my study aims to resonate with the concerns of contemporary environmentalists, I am interested in the ethical implications of economic narratives of environmental use. Despite the ostensible simplicity of the term, “use” is an extraordinarily rich and complex concept in early modern thought, with spiritual and ethical as well as economic implications. A crucial aspect of this study is to clarify the complex ways this term is used by thinkers such as John Milton and Henry More. One important implication of this study is that our own ways of understanding the natural world are more mired in the conceptual metaphorics of human economy than most of us acknowledge. As Michael Zimmerman points out, western thought, at a fundamental level, tends to conceptualize the world in instrumentalist and technological terms—a point taken up by Heidegger in his critique of modernity:

The metaphysical schemes of Plato and Aristotle, Heidegger argued, were based on the view that the structure of all things is akin to the structure of products or artifacts. Aristotle’s metaphysics, for example, is ‘productionist’ insofar as he conceived of all things, including animals, as ‘formed matter.’ The most obvious example of such ‘formed
matter’ is the work produced by an artisan who gives form to material. Plato and Aristotle seemingly projected onto all entities the structure of artifacts. We might understand the oeconomy of nature as an historically specific iteration of “productionist metaphysics,” centered on the early modern ideal of the properly managed household. This ideal, driven by the increasing focus on the household as the locus of productive activities, was yoked to theological and scientific discourses in the philosophical concept of the oeconomy of nature. Nature was understood to act, like an efficient householder, with maximum efficiency and productivity. Conversely, this model also suggested that the institution of the household was rooted not in social institutions, but in nature itself.

The concept of use provides a central link between God, the human subject, and the natural world in early modern theological discourse. For many prominent thinkers, not only was the anthropocentric usefulness of a given environment proof of God’s beneficence, his selection of man above all other creatures, and his superlative wisdom, but it also presented a sign of God’s comprehensibility in a complex, chaotic, and often morally opaque world. Naturalist John Ray, whose 1691 *The Wisdom of God Manifested in the Works of the Creation* provides a useful bookend to my study, writes that “There is no greater, or at least no more palpable Argument of the Existence of a Deity, than the admirable Art and Wisdom that discovers itself in the Make and Constitution, the Order and Disposition, the Ends and Uses of all the Parts and Members of this stately Farbrick of Heaven and Earth.” Of course, earthly existence proved much more elusive than such totalizing accounts suggest, for how does one account for, say, fleas, mosquitoes, and ear-mites—not to mention crop failures, famine, and plague—as products of a universe divinely structured for human use? Such arguments seem to conflate prelapsarian with postlapsarian accounts of the world, and, as we shall see, are frequently plagued internal
tensions, which threaten the very structural understanding of the creation that they set out to advance. Indeed, the problem with any such theodicy—an attempt to justify the ways of God to man—is the tendency to collapse under the sheer ontological mass of the universe, revealing incomprehensible complexity rather than order. As contemporary chaos theory displays, even a field as methodical as mathematics tends toward the staccato when applied to extremely complex natural systems such as weather patterns. Nonetheless, many seventeenth century religious thinkers advanced totalizing narratives that integrated God, mankind, and the natural world into an intelligible whole. Such thinkers often strived to fortify their narratives against potential objections. John Calvin, for example, claims that all things in the natural world not perfectly suited to human use are products not of God’s initial creation, but are rather corruptions engendered by sin. Martin Luther takes a decidedly more liberal approach, suggesting that all creatures were created by God to some end, adding that creatures such as mice (generally considered vermin by humans), are, in fact, products of a beneficent God and of “a very beautiful form.”

Cambridge Platonist Henry More, in his 1653 *An Antidote against Atheism*, a polemic largely aimed at the “atheistic” ideas of natural philosophers such as Descartes, expands the parameters of use by suggesting that even “stinking weeds and poysonous plants” are fundamentally useful to mankind in requiring men and women to exercise their industry.”

Faced with various forms of contingency, these thinkers developed malleable definitions of anthropocentric use by sublimating spiritual and aesthetic uses into the oeconomic discourse of use. What all of these thinkers have in common, and what I shall explore in the opening section this project, is a wish to integrate the scriptural with the empirical, the spiritual with the economic, and the cultural with the natural through the concept of anthropocentric use.
Many of the theological notions that I have been thus far describing would have been understood in early modern discourse under the rubric of providential design. Historian Alexandra Walsham points out that the concept of providence was divided into “general providence,” through which God initially modeled the trajectory of the universe, and “special providence,” through which God intervenes in human affairs. My study will focus on the former aspect of providence as a way of discerning God’s imprint on the natural world. While the concept of divine providence was largely temporal in nature—as its etymology pro + videre “to see ahead” suggests—in the seventeenth century, theologians often mapped this model onto the space of physical universe. In doing this, they transformed what had previously been a diachronic concept, used to comprehend the events of human history, into a synchronic strategy for understanding the natural world as the physical manifestation of divine order. Given the bewildering implications of God’s omnipotence, it is perhaps difficult to separate space from time with any certainty in the conceptual scheme of divine providence—the exceptionally complex temporality of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* illustrates this fact. (Think, for example, about the narrator’s restless search for origins in the opening 33 lines of the poem.) But despite such difficulties many seventeenth century thinkers sought to ground the notion of providence in the observable world in effort to establish a natural theology. Henry More, for example, in attempt to persuade non-believers of God’s imprint upon the material universe, argues “[n]ow if I can shew that there are designs laid even in the lowest and vilest products of Nature that respect Man the highest of all, you cannot deny but that there is an Eye of Providence that respecteth all things, and passeth very swiftly from the Top to the Bottome, disposing all things wisely.” More goes on to describe providence in largely naturalistic terms as a force through which “fluid matter” is distributed throughout God’s creation. Despite such naturalism, this system is still fundamentally
oeconomic in structure; that is, providence oversees the distribution of natural resources throughout the universe with an eye toward efficiency and human use. Such attempts to define providence in materialist terms reflect the new epistemological demands ushered in by the emergence of Baconian empiricism as a central mode of understanding the material universe. Indeed, both More’s *An Antidote against Atheism* and Ray’s *The Wisdom of God Manifested in the Works of the Creation* are attempts to integrate residual notions of providential design with the emergent scientific world view without sacrificing the divine structure of the former or the empirical veracity of the latter.

In the seventeenth century, natural philosophers began to use the term “the oeconomy of nature” to describe the predictable, mutually beneficial, use-oriented processes though which the natural world reproduces and regulates itself. This concept gradually assumed, though did not entirely replace, divine providence as the central ordering principle of the material world. Natural historian Donald Worster argues the notion of nature’s economy supplies an early manifestation of the modern concept of ecology. Indeed, Charles Darwin, indisputably the most prominent figure in the history of ecological thought, uses this term throughout his writings to describe the natural laws connecting all living things within a given ecosystem. As the phrase implies, “the oeconomy of nature” represents a systematization of classical and medieval models of nature—often personified as the goddess *Natura*—which celebrate nature’s, often spontaneous, creative potential. (The lines from Shakespeare’s “Sonnet 20,” “Till Nature as she wrought thee fell a-doting, / And adding one thing to my purpose nothing,” display Nature’s capacity for spontaneity within generation.) The term “the oeconomy of nature” first appears in English in 1644 in two simultaneously published treatises by natural philosopher Kenelm Digby entitled *Two treatises in the one of which the nature of bodies, in the other, the nature of mans*
soule is looked into in way of discovery of the immortality of reasonable soules. In these texts, Digby uses the term to describe the interaction between natural elements such as sunlight, heat, and moisture in order to produce “plaine causes” and “knowne effects” within nature. He describes that natural bodies move “not by any intrinsecall quality that worketh vpon them; but by the oeconomy of nature, that hath sett on foote due and plaine causes to produce knowne effects.” The term also came into general use in the late seventeenth century in medical tracts such as Richard Bunworth’s 1656 *The doctresse: a plain and easie method, of curing those diseases which are peculiar to women. Whereunto are annexed physicall paradoxes, or a new discovery of the aeconomy of nature in mans body* in order to describe the human body’s capacity for self-regulation. Like divine providence, the oeconomy of nature provided a model through which nature worked intelligibly to the good of the earth’s creatures, mankind in particular.

When compared to divine providence, the oeconomy of nature seems to present a secular, self-regulating, and impersonal cosmos, but Digby and others insist that such natural systems require the work of God (usually figured as divine providence, which is now relegated to an initiatory position) in order to ensure productive orderliness. Indeed, Carl Linnaeus and Isaac Biberg open their 1749 treatise *The Oeconomy of Nature* (which presents the most complete elaboration of this concept available) with a concise definition of “the oeconomy of nature” as a natural system through which life forms interact, which is set into motion by the “all-wise disposition” God the creator:

> By the Oeconomy of Nature we understand the all-wise disposition of the Creator in relation to natural things, by which they are fitted to produce general ends, and reciprocal uses. All things contained in the compass of the universe declare, as it were, with one
accord the infinite wisdom of the Creator. For whatever strikes our senses, whatever is
the object of our thoughts, are so contrived, that they concur to make manifest the divine
glory, i.e. the ultimate end which God proposed in all his works.\textsuperscript{17}

In this passage, the oeconomy of nature sounds quite similar to divine providence in that both are concerned with the ways in which God oversees the productive ordering of the universe. However, there is a fundamental difference between the “reciprocal uses” of nature’s oeconomy and the insistently anthropocentric use of divine providence. While in a providential scheme the usefulness of the creation is divinely ordained for mankind alone, in nature’s oeconomy usefulness is rather arranged “to the preservation of natural things.”\textsuperscript{18} Indeed, the very notion of “reciprocal uses” implies interdependence rather than the simple dominance of one species by another. Nevertheless, it is ultimately difficult to make such a dichotomy between anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric uses within this text. For as the treatise comes to a close the authors conclude that “all these treasures of nature, so artfully contrived, so wonderfully propagated, so providentially supported throughout her three kingdoms, seem intended by the Creator for the sake of man. Every thing may be made subservient to his use; if not immediately, yet mediately, not so to that of other animals.”\textsuperscript{19}

It is as if the authors are unwilling fully to abandon the anthropocentric oeconomic order organized through divine providence, even though it contradicts much of their previous analysis of the workings of nature. Indeed, what appeared initially as a radical departure from mankind’s monopoly of natural uses—in a conceptualization that appears quite similar to modern ecology—ultimately serves to reinforce providence’s focus on human beings as the sole locus of God’s grace. It is precisely this dogged insistence on the primacy of the oeconomic that differentiates the modern concept of ecology from early modern iterations of this notion.
The ease by which “the oeconomy of nature” becomes “ecology” in modern parlance relies upon the common etymological root of these two terms—the Greek word *oikos* for “household.” While this detail often goes unacknowledged, the conceptual metaphorics of the household lie at the root of two of the primary terms through which we understand the workings of the natural world: “economy” and “ecology.” Economics assumes an unmistakably anthropocentric position, as it interprets “the law of nature’s house” (*oikos* + *nomos*) as the transformation of the natural world into human goods. In this conceptual scheme, the household, the fundamental technological innovation through which humans adapt their environment to meet their own wants and needs, expands to encompass the entire non-human world. Indeed, in early modern usage, the term “oeconomy” more often points to a localized notion “household management” than to “the management of money or financial resources,” which does not become the term’s primary meaning until the late eighteenth century. The etymological idea of ecology—“the study of [nature’s] household” (*oikos* + *logos*)—connects the order of nature to the order created by a well managed estate. Early moderns understood the idea of the household—represented in popular texts such as Xenophon’s *Oeconomicus* and Gervase Markham’s twin tracts *Cheape and Good Husbandry* and *The English Husband-wife*—as a nexus of rational environmental utilization through which various productive activities such as agriculture, animal husbandry, and simple manufacturing were structured for the good of those belonging to the household. Similarly, in scientific discourse, the term “ecology” implies a rationalization of our understanding of the processes by which organisms interact with one another within a given ecosystem. Samuel Jonson’s definition of “economy” as the “[d]isposition of things, regulation” is useful in identifying the way in which the eighteenth century notion of “economy” quite explicitly anticipates the modern concept of ecology. The Cary Institute of
Ecosystem Studies defines “ecology” as “the scientific study of the processes influencing the distribution and abundance of organisms, the interactions among organisms, and the interactions between transformation and flux of energy and matter.” While the concept of ecology has clearly evolved significantly from its seventeenth-century counterparts, we can see even in this contemporary definition, with its emphasis on “distribution,” “abundance,” and knowable “processes,” the persistence of oeconomic metaphorics.

The idea that the natural world is structured like a household predates the term “the oeconomy of nature.” Theologians often conceptualized God’s creation of the Garden of Eden—and indeed the world in whole—as the construction of a beautiful and accommodating household intended for human use. For example, in his commentary on Genesis, Martin Luther writes of the now completed, though yet unpopulated, world: “[God] has built the first parts of the house. It has a most elegant roof, the heaven, though this is not yet fully adorned. Its foundation is the earth. Its walls on every side are the seas. Now he also makes provision for our sustenance, so that the earth brings forth herbs and trees of all kinds.” John Calvin, in his commentary on Genesis, employs a similar metaphorics, suggesting that the prelapsarian world contained all of the “proper furniture” for mankind to thrive. (Although this household was soon to be irrevocably corrupted by human sin.) In his famous poem “Providence,” George Herbert conceptualizes divine providence as a force through which goods are beneficently distributed throughout the world, and he concretizes this oeconomic force through the metaphorics of the earth as a household—complete with a “cupboard,” “table,” and various decorations—created and managed by God for the good of mankind. The persistence with which these narratives occur in early modern theological thought suggests a deep structural affinity between the oeconomic
discourse of household management and religious ways of understanding the arrangement of the natural world.

The anthropocentric focus of early modern providential design clearly has ethical implications for mankind’s treatment of the non-human world. Historians have long identified the Judeo-Christian creation narrative as ideologically enabling of the western world’s seemingly unrestrained exploitation of the earth’s resources.\textsuperscript{23} Historian Lynn White, Jr. in his seminal essay “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” which first appeared in \textit{Science} in 1967, famously calls (particularly Western) Christianity “the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen.”\textsuperscript{24} Keith Thomas, following suit, places theological notions of divinely sanctioned use—“dominion”—at the root of the early modern exploitation of nature, and traces the development of various progressive scientific, ethical, and alternative spiritual narratives against this backdrop.\textsuperscript{25} While these scholars are not wrong in evaluating the potential for unrestrained domination of the natural world within Judeo-Christian thought—many early moderns took quite seriously God’s imperative to “fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and every other living thing that moves upon the earth” (Genesis 1:28)—early modern thinkers were, in fact, remarkably varied in their interpretation of how God wished them to interact with the rest of the creation.

Indeed, a survey of relevant early modern writing reveals a bifurcation of thought between those advocating unlimited dominion of the natural world, and employing positivist, often imperialist rhetoric (such as Bacon, Hooke, and Descartes), and those advocating limited dominion of the natural world, and using the discourse of stewardship and moderation (such as Henry More, Godfrey Goodman, John Ray—and in the literary realm Marvell, Milton, and Cavendish). This split reproduces, though does not entirely rely upon, the two different accounts
of creation in Genesis: the “strong interventionalist” first narrative, and the second “stewardship” narrative. Unlike the first creation narrative (1:1-2:4), which advocates seemingly limitless “dominion” and figures the non-human denizens of the earth as mere obstacles to (or perhaps resources for) human progress, the second creation narrative (2:4-3:24) illustrates that God placed man in the Garden of Eden “to till it and keep it” (2:15). In this version, man’s imperative is not entirely to remake the world in the image of his own needs and desires, but rather to work to maintain the integrity of the creation. As Jeffrey Theis points out, the original Hebrew further intensifies this distinction. For in the first version, the Hebrew words for “subdue” and “dominion,” kbš and rdḥ, imply actions taken against enemies and slaves, suggesting an adversarial relationship between mankind and his environment, but in the second narrative, the proper name given to man, ḥā- āḏām, which means “creature of the earth,” suggests a relationship of cohabitation and reciprocity.

Emphasis on the Judeo-Christian dominion narrative seems most pronounced in early modern scientific thinkers such as Francis Bacon, Rene Descartes, and Robert Hooke. Such thinkers tend toward a positivist view of man’s ability to manipulate and control the natural world, and employ an openly imperialist, that is, expansionist, rhetoric championing such environmental manipulation. This expansively economic rhetoric contrasts with the fixed nature of the household metaphorics characteristic of early modern spiritual narratives and poetics that I have been thus far examining. Indeed, Francis Bacon in The New Atlantis imagines a mutually expansive economics in mankind’s quest for knowledge of the created world “whereby God might have the more glory in the workmanship of them, and men the more fruit in the use of them.”27 While knowledge alone does not necessarily imply dominion, Bacon openly states that the end of all learning in this utopian space “is the knowledge of causes, and the secret motions
of things; and the enlarging of the bounds of the human empire, to the effecting of all things possible.”\textsuperscript{28} It is clear in all three of these writers that technology plays a central role in amplifying mankind’s ability efficaciously to manipulate the natural world. Indeed, optical innovations such as Galileo’s telescope have become emblematic of early modern science. In his treatise \textit{Micrographia}, Robert Hooke celebrates the microscope’s “inlargement of the dominion, of the Senses.”\textsuperscript{29} While such thinkers adopt the aspects of Judeo-Christian creation narrative, there is more than a little open blasphemy in the boldness of their claims. Hooke contends that technological innovation of the microscope allows mankind to take part in “not only beholding and contemplating, but by tasting too those fruits of Natural knowledge, that were never yet forbidden.”\textsuperscript{30} It is perhaps no surprise then that Henry More attacks Descartes and thinkers within the Cartesian tradition as atheists. The technocratic nature of these texts highlights the Baconian fantasy that this kind of empirical inquiry takes place not in the chaotic space of the natural world, but rather in the artificial, self-consciously sterile environment of the laboratory. This is most pronounced in Bacon’s \textit{New Atlantis} where the artificial space of the laboratory expands to encompass virtually all the natural world. Likewise, Rene Descartes’ notion that animals were, in fact, automata, devoid of the capacity for thought, joy, or suffering, has famously been tied to his participation in experimental animal dissections. I shall further elaborate this distinction between built and natural environments in my chapter on Margaret Cavendish.

In contrast to the “dominion” camp, a number of thinkers such as John Ray, Henry More, and Godfrey Goodwin constructed models for interacting with the natural world based on restrain of use, stewardship, and at least some degree of reciprocity. Like the natural philosophers in the first camp, these thinkers were also rational empiricists—John Ray was
seventeenth-century England’s most prominent ornithologist, and Henry More and Godfrey Goodwin, while not properly natural philosophers, were clearly close observers of the natural world. However, the space of observation for these thinkers tended not to be the closed, artificial laboratory—where creatures are aesthetized, studied, and dissected—but rather the environment in which these creatures lived. The modern example of the field ecologist is a suggestive, if inappropriate, analogy. In his extraordinary theological treatise *The Creatures Praying God* (1622), puritan theologian Godfrey Goodwin extrapolates a devotional practice of meditation on God’s creatures as the basis for a “naturall religion,” which Goodwin contrasts with the vicissitudes of the new fragmented Christian church.\(^3\) In Goodwin’s scheme, while all creatures are divinely ordained for human use, it is the task of mankind to “shew [the creatures] their right use” and constantly to be mindful to avoid “immoderate and inordinat abuse.”\(^3\) Goodwin even goes so far as to end his text with the warning “[l]et us not be inferior to them,” alluding to mankind’s sole capacity for deviation from God.\(^3\) Henry More, echoing Goodwin’s sentiments, argues that the atheist takes no notice of the aesthetic beauty of the natural world, but rather “relish[es] nothing but what is subservient to his Tyranny and Lust.”\(^3\) Here we can see the political discourse of tyranny being used to mandate restraint in environmental use.

John Ray presents what is perhaps the most complex seventeenth-century example of rethinking the anthropocentric oeconomics of providential design. Ray alternates between the orthodox narrative of divinely-sanctioned human use and more decentered, less oeonomic models of the universe. Ray, a careful empiricist, concludes at one point that “it seems to me highly absurd and unreasonable, to think that Bodies of such vast Magnitude as the fix’t Stars, were made only to twinkle to us.”\(^3\) But Ray quickly back-paddles, reintegrating his observations into the providential scheme by substituting his less use-based spiritual model for an exclusively
oeconomic one: “But though in this Sense it be not true, that all Things were made for Man; yet, thus far it is that all the Creatures in the World may be some way or other Useful to us, at least to exercise our Wits and Understandings, in considering and contemplating of them, and so afford us Subject of admiring and glorifying their and our Maker.”

Perhaps the most radical ethical implication of Ray’s analysis of the physical universe is the idea that the human is not a domineering, autonomous presence in the world, but rather a “Dependent Creature” wholly reliant on other beings for his or her own survival. Ray concludes his narrative with a view of humankind as simultaneously aggrandized and humbled: since God endowed man “with the Skill and Ability to use [God’s creatures], and which by their Help is enabled to rule over and subdue all inferior Creatures, but without them had been left necessitous, helpless, and obnoxious to Injuries above any other.” While Ray’s vision does not entirely eschew the dominion narrative, it does offer an illustration of mankind as part of an interdependent, rather than solely extractive, system of survival; we might conceptualize his model as somewhere in between our own concepts of economy and ecology.

As distinct as stewardship is from dominion as a model for interacting with the natural world, both notions adopt a “resourcist” conception of nature—that is, they subscribe to the idea that the world is essentially a storehouse of potential goods for human use. For although the notion of stewardship implies downward obligation rather than oeconomic opportunity, the conceptual metaphorics of both “dominion” and “stewardship” rely upon the anthropocentric space of the household: the word “dominion” comes from the Latin domus for “house” and the word “stewardship” comes from the Angle-Saxon sti3 and weard for “house keeper” (OED). What the persistence of such metaphorics display is the extent to which the space of the
household, understood as an oeonomic nexus through which the natural world is transformed into productive use, structures our understanding of the world.

This dissertation traces a genealogy of the oeconomy of nature through the close analysis of works of literature and natural philosophy written in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The first three chapters focus on how Kenelm Digby’s two principal literary influences, Edmund Spenser and Ben Jonson, pave the way for the development of the oeconomy of nature. Spenser and Jonson represent for Digby two divergent paradigms for understanding the natural world; the first, represented in The Faerie Queene, is characterized by stochastic creation and entropy and the latter, represented in “To Penshurst,” by order and sustainability. Through this grouping of texts, I contend that, rather than existing at the margins of scientific epistemology, imaginative literature serves a critical function in the development of new forms of knowledge. Chapter 1, “Kenelm Digby’s Empirical Imagination,” constructs a comparative analysis of Digby’s Two Treatises and Francis Bacon’s The Advancement of Learning in order to situate the development of the oeconomy of nature alongside epistemological innovations of the English Royal Society, of which Digby was a founding member. I argue that Digby develops the oeconomy of nature as a way of reconciling the discourse of Baconian empiricism, which has the tendency to fragment nature into observable parts, with his desire to produce an integrated model of the natural world. Relying upon the synthesizing power of the imagination, Digby develops the oeconomy of nature in attempt to connect the observable world of nature to the ineffable realm of the human soul.

Chapter 2, “Spenser’s Sylvan Matter,” then focuses on Digby’s critical essays on the works of Edmund Spenser as attempts to make the poet’s complex representation of the natural
world consistent with his own natural philosophy. Digby achieves this goal by willfully
decontextualizing Spenser’s representation of Alma’s House from Book 2 of *The Faerie Queene*.
Against this reading, I argue that Spenser’s representation of the natural world is more accurately
characterized by the stochastic creation, decay, and mutability embodied in Book 1 in the
creature Errour, and, later in the work, in the Garden of Adonis and the Mutabilitie Cantos. This
vision precludes the possibility of human mastery of the natural world by pointing to nature’s
conceptual slipperiness.

In chapter 3, “Jonson’s Universal Parasite,” I center on Ben Jonson’s “To Penshurst” as a
paradigmatic literary example of the oeconomy of nature and one that closely resembles the
description later employed by Digby—Jonson’s patron and eventual literary executor. The poem
depicts oeconomy as the natural world’s organizing principle through the depiction of a
functioning rural estate. Penshurst is characterized by sustainable resource yields achieved
through a careful balance of production and consumption and by the predictable actions of its
denizens, who willingly sacrifice themselves to the estate’s productive cycles. However, rather
than depicting himself as part of this system, Jonson inserts himself into the poem as a
gluttonous parasite, disruptive of the very balance that the poem takes pains to achieve. I argue
that this disruption enables Jonson exert his autonomy from both oppressively predictable natural
systems and the analogous networks of patronage that facilitate the poem’s creation.
The final two chapters move beyond the genealogical account of the first three in order to
explore the human position within the oeconomy of nature.

In chapter 4, “Herbert’s Providential Oeconomy,” I focus on the theological
underpinnings of the oeconomy of nature through close analysis of the works of George Herbert.
I contend that Herbert, attuned to ambiguity regarding humankind’s position in the world,
oscillates between representations of the human subject as earth’s master and depictions of the human as passive recipient of divine providence. This ambiguity appears throughout *The Temple*, but is particularly pronounced in the poem “Providence,” in which Herbert incrementally unmoors the anthropocentric position. For Herbert, the world is a divinely created household, but the human subject’s position within this household is very much in question.

The final chapter of my dissertation, “Nature’s House: Margaret Cavendish and the Limits of Oeconomy,” centers on Margaret Cavendish’s transformation of the metaphors of the oeconomy of nature. By depicting “Nature’s House” as a particularly feminine domain, and one that refuses claims to human preeminence, Cavendish resists gender and species hierarchies endemic to seventeenth-century scientific thought. In *The Blazing World* and *Poems and Fancies*, Cavendish depicts non-human creatures as active agents in the production of knowledge rather than passive objects to be manipulated and observed. I argue that, in advancing her philosophy of “rational matter” in works of both poetry and prose, Cavendish envisions a non-anthropocentric version of the oeconomy of nature in which humankind’s aims must be balanced with those of non-human creatures. In doing so, she also challenges the Royal Society’s assumption that knowledge of the natural world is best produced through plain, non-poetic language. Cavendish provides a fitting endpoint for my study because her radical version of the oeconomy of nature anticipates the ethical turn in modern ecological thought. By displaying how literary works actively participate in the formation of scientific concepts and ideas, my dissertation challenges assumptions about the epistemological autonomy of science, while expanding the role that the literary plays in intellectual history.


Jesus’ “parable of the talents,” represented in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, and Aristotle’s *Politics* both deal with the ethical implications of the concept of “use.”


As Alexandra Walsham points out in *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1999), the concept of providence is extremely complex and has an extensive history within Christian thought. However, in this study I will confine myself to the ways in which thinkers used providence to understand the useful order of the natural world.


While these texts present the first example of the term “economy of nature” in English, Latin texts had long used the idea of *oeconomia* to refer to God’s “dispensations” (Worster 37).

Kenelm Digby, *Two treatises in the one of which the nature of bodies, in the other, the nature of mans soule is looked into in way of discovery of the immortality of reasonable soules* (London, 1644), 1Bv.
This correspondence between the natural world and the internal world of the human body was well articulated in early modern thought. Indeed, Gail Kern Pastor focuses on what she calls “the ecology of the passions” in *Humoring the Body: Emotions on the Shakespearean Stage* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2004) and in various essays.


Even in Samuel Jonson’s 1755 dictionary, the first definition of “economy” is “[t]he management of a family” rather than a more expansive notion of the political economy.

This definition is located on the Cary Institute of Ecosystem Studies’ website: [http://www.ecostudies.org/definition_ecology.html](http://www.ecostudies.org/definition_ecology.html). I accessed this information 12 October 2009.

Martin Luther, “Commentary on Genesis, Volume 2,” 36


In “Reinventing Eden: Western Culture as a Recovery Narrative,” Carolyn Merchant’s traces similar narrative in the nineteenth-century westward expansion of the United States.


28 Ibid., 181.


30 Ibid., 13.

31 David Glimp in “Figuring Belief: George Herbert’s Devotional Creatures,” *Go Figure: Energies, Forms, and Institutions in the Early Modern World*, ed. Judith Anderson and Joan Pong Linton (New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 2011) posits “Meditation on the creature” as “a form of contemplative practice developed within medieval theology, encouraged the devout to survey the immense complexity and glory of God’s handiwork as a way of intensifying their faith.”


33 Ibid., E4v.

34 Ibid., G3v.


36 Ibid., N1r.

37 Ibid., 1Nv.

38 Ibid., 1Mr.

CHAPTER I

KENELM DIGBY’S EMPIRICAL IMAGINATION

In 1644 natural philosopher Kenelm Digby became the first writer to use the phrase “the oeconomy of nature” in print.¹ This phrase gains significance retrospectively from its role in the development of the modern concept of ecology, most notably through the writings of such prominent ecological writers as Linnaeus, Henry David Thoreau, and Charles Darwin.² In coining the term “ecology” in 1870, German naturalist Ernst Haeckel uses the economy of nature to define the scope of the budding scientific discipline. “By ecology,” Haeckel writes, “we mean the body of knowledge concerning the economy of nature—the investigation of the total relations of the animal both to its organic and its inorganic environment; including above all, its friendly and inimical relation with those animals and plants with which it comes directly or indirectly into contact.”³ Unsurprisingly, Haeckel’s version of the oeconomy of nature bears little resemblance to Digby’s understanding of the concept over two hundred years earlier. While Haeckel confines the oeconomy of nature to what we would now refer to as the life sciences, Digby uses the term more broadly to refer to the universal principle governing the behavior of all animate and inanimate creatures within the sub-luminary world.

This chapter is an attempt to understand Digby’s notion of the oeconomy of nature through the contexts of seventeenth-century natural philosophy and early modern literary culture. My exploration of Digby’s use of this term has three parts. First, I situate Digby’s development of the oeconomy of nature as a response both to Aristotle’s enormously influential animist
account of the natural world as well as to emergent mechanistic depictions of the unswerving laws of nature. Next, I demonstrate how the conceptual innovation of “oeconomy” allows Digby to use the epistemological tools of natural philosophy to explore the otherwise ineffable nature of the immortal soul. Finally, I turn to Digby’s ambivalent relationship to poetic language in order to display the extent to which Digby’s ultimate vision of both physical and metaphysical nature rests upon a mastery of both scientific and poetic forms of language. Although Digby uses the oeconomy of nature throughout his writings, I will focus the majority of my attention on *Two Treatises: in the one of which, the Nature of Bodies, in the other, the Nature of Man’s Soul, is looked into: in way of discovery of the Immortality of Reasonable Soul* (1644), the first text to include the term in print. This chapter does not catalogue all of Digby’s uses of the oeconomy of nature, nor does it provide an exhaustive study of the ecological implications of Digby’s complex and multifarious writings. Rather it situates Digby’s oeconomy of nature within a few conversations central to the scientific and literary cultures of seventeenth-century England. I argue that Digby develops the oeconomy of nature through a combination of empirical observation and imagination, as a strategy for linking together the ostensibly disparate realms of the body and the soul.

The rejection of such forms of dualistic thinking has become a central aspect of the modern ecological thought. For example, Ken Hiltner, in his theoretically informed study *Milton and Ecology*, argues that it is precisely Milton’s deconstruction of dualistic theology (which definitively separates the transcendent soul from the material world) that makes John Milton an ecological writer. In this chapter, I do not wish to dismiss the contributions that scholars such as Hiltner have made to the study of ecological ideas in literature, but rather to engage with an alternative strand in the development of ecological thought based less on the rejection of dualism
or on the development of various forms of environmentalism than on the identification of
complex processes through which the natural world functions. It is this form of proto-ecological
thought that is aptly embodied in the phrase “the oeconomy of nature.” Working primarily with
eighteenth-century texts, Donald Worster, in his history of ecology, points out that early notions
of economy, as both “the grand organization and government of life on earth” and “the rational
ordering of all material resources in an interacting whole,” are central to the pre-Darwinian
development of ecology. Refracted through the religious cosmology of seventeenth-century
England, early iterations of ecological thought cast God as “the Supreme Economist who had
designed the earth household and as a housekeeper who kept it functioning productively.” While
aspects of this pre-ecological thinking, such as the notion that God had specifically intended his
creation for human use, seem antithetical to the modern ecological ethics, the rationality, order,
and comprehensibility embodied in the oeconomy of nature are all central to the development of
both the modern philosophy and science of ecology.

*Digby’s Natural Philosophy: Rewriting Aristotelian Teleology*

Digby developed the concept of the oeconomy of nature in order to create a conceptual
bridge between Aristotelian teleology and mechanistic accounts of the behavior of natural
bodies. Once central to the medieval university curriculum, Aristotle’s authority on matters
ranging from astronomy to chemistry gradually eroded throughout the seventeenth century. One
particular point of contention for early modern natural philosophers rested in Aristotle’s
teleological account of the behavior of both non-living and living bodies. For Aristotle all bodies
exist for the sake of a final cause, and therefore naturally strive toward a single predetermined
goal; acorns become oak trees, Aristotle explains, because this is the final cause for which they exist. This teleological view of nature is aptly expressed in the Aristotelian maxim “nature does nothing in vain.” Aristotle locates the source of all natural motions within the essential qualities of the four fundamental elements of earth, water, air, and fire. Earth and water, Aristotle contends, contain within their natures the quality of gravity and therefore naturally tend to move downward toward the center of the earth (which in Aristotle’s cosmos coincided with the center of the universe). Air and fire, on the other hand, possess the essential quality of levity, which causes them naturally to move upward away from the earth’s center. Because an object’s essence and its propensity to move in a certain manner are one and the same, Aristotle uses the single term “nature” (physis) to refer to both an object’s essence and its fundamental principle of motion. “[I]t is plain that nature in the primary and strict sense is the essence of things which have in themselves, as such, a source of movement,” Aristotle describes, “for that the matter is called the nature because it is qualified to receive this, and processes of becoming and growing are called nature because they are movements proceeding from this.” Likewise, in his Physics Aristotle explains that every material body, be it living or non-living, “has within itself a principle of motion and of stationariness.”

Observing such tendencies, historian Steven Shapin describes Aristotelian physics as “animist” in nature and argues that it relies upon the conceptual metaphorics of biology in its conceptualization of the physical world.

In the seventeenth century, the biologically based model of the physical universe of Aristotle and his followers was increasingly viewed as inadequate to the needs of natural philosophy. In particular, the Aristotelian tendency to personify inanimate objects in order to explain their behavior came to be seen as a sign of incomprehensibility and absurdity. Digby’s contemporary Thomas Hobbes, for example, describes that in the Aristotelian cosmos “[it is] as
if stones and metals had a desire, or could discern the place they would be at, as man does.”

Similarly, thinkers criticized the Aristotelian maxim “nature abhors a vacuum” for its attribution of complex human-like agency to non-living bodies. In place of the Aristotelian model thinkers such as Galileo, Descartes, Hobbes, and Newton constructed mechanistic systems for understanding the workings of nature. In these systems fixed laws replaced diffuse agency. Unlike the Aristotelian system, which relied upon organic metaphors, mechanism drew upon the metaphorics of technological innovations such as clocks and watches in order to conceptualize the rational workings of nature. Rene Descartes, for example, argues that even the most complex functions of the human body such as memory and passion “follow from the mere arrangement of the machine’s organs every bit as naturally as the movements of a clock or other automaton follow from the arrangement of its counter-weights and wheels.” Mechanics provided natural philosophers with a degree of precision absent from models of nature advanced by Aristotle and his followers. Both Aristotelian and mechanical models, however, ran into conceptual limitations. Just as the organic metaphors of the Aristotelians failed to explain phenomena such as the predictable motions of projectiles with the exactitude of mechanical philosophy, the new mechanical systems had trouble accommodating the choice, error, and randomness intrinsic to the study of life. Thus Digby, in attempting to create a conceptual model of the terrestrial world capable of explaining the behavior of both living and non-living bodies, evokes the more flexible metaphorics of oeconomy as a way of negotiating Aristotelian and mechanistic world views. The oeconomy of nature represented a physics of life—a system capable of expressing the orderly, though sometimes unpredictable, interactions of between living creatures and their environments.

Unlike his contemporaries Hobbes and Descartes, Digby was interested in producing a systematic account of nature largely consistent with the principles of Aristotelian natural
philosophy. However, Digby was also interested in reinventing certain aspects of Aristotle’s vision of nature. We can see Digby’s ambivalence toward Aristotelian motion in his creation of the concept of the oeconomy of nature. For Digby the oeconomy of nature develops as a way of reconciling Aristotle’s idea of motion as intrinsic to the nature of a given object with the systematizing drive of the new mechanical philosophy. Following an account of experiments involving the gravity of various objects, Digby concludes that his ultimate intention is to open the way for the discovering how bodies that of themselves have no propension unto any determinate place do nevertheless move constantly and perpetually one way; the dense ones descending, and the rare ones ascending: not by any intrinsecall quality that worketh upon them; but by the oeconomy of nature, that hath sett on foote due and plaine causes to produce knowne effects.16

We can understand this passage, which includes Digby’s first mention of the oeconomy of nature, as a polemic with the Aristotelian account of natural motion. While Aristotle had located the source of natural motions within the essence of bodies themselves, Digby argues that bodies “have no propension unto any determinate place” and that they move “not by any intrinsecall quality that worketh upon them.” Rather Digby places the source of all motions within a unified set of forces that he dubs “the oeconomy of nature.” This passage also evokes the systematizing tendencies of the new mechanical philosophy. Digby imagines the oeconomy of nature as unvarying (bodies move “constantly and perpetually one way”), uncomplicated (their causes are “plaine”), and empirically verifiable (the system produces “knowne effects”). Still Digby does not entirely abandon the animist tendencies of Aristotle’s account of motion. Digby personifies the causes of motion in his suggestion that the oeconomy of nature “hath set on foote due and plaine causes.” Later Digby explains that natural motions have their “birth from the universall
oeconomy of nature here among us.” 17 Similarly, in his treatise on the “Power of Sympathy” Digby writes that what “first might seeme impossible and incredibile, we may leaue to the oeconomy of wise nature.” 18 Such personification evokes Aristotle’s animist cosmos rather than the new mechanical philosophy. By mixing metaphors in his representation of the oeconomy of nature, Digby imagines a concept endowed with the explanatory power of both animist and mechanical systems. After all, for Digby the oeconomy of nature includes not only the simple motions of otherwise inanimate objects such as falling rocks, but also the more complex agency of plants and animals.

The notion of “oeconomy” as a model for understanding the systematic interconnection of the natural world helps us better to understand “the powder of sympathy,” Digby’s most celebrated achievement. 19 The powder of sympathy is a salve designed to cure an injury by being applied directly to the weapon that inflicted the wound. The idea, which Digby insisted was based in science rather than magic, was that the powder would help the vital spirits that had congealed on the offending weapon to travel through the air and to reunite with the victim’s body. While the use of such a treatment seems strange from a contemporary vantage point, the fact that Digby’s treatise on the powder of sympathy went through twenty-nine editions attests to the tremendous contemporary appeal of this peculiar remedy. 20 Digby uses the oeconomy of nature to express the unified system of interconnecting properties and behaviors that underlie the workings of the sympathetic powder. Displaying the natural underpinnings of the powder, Digby writes that “[o]ne may remark within the course, and aeconomy of nature, sundry sorts of attractions.” 21 Later, when describing the application of the powder, Digby writes that “we see plainly by the aeconomy, of Nature, that bodies of the same figure use to mingle more strongly, and unite themselves with more facility.” 22 In Digby’s writings, the oeconomy of nature provides
the most succinct and potent formulation of a cosmology physically linking disparate causes and effects through various invisible forces.

The concept of oeconomy is particularly appropriate for representing the frontier between technological innovation and the organic processes of life because it draws its metaphorical root from the Greek word oikos for “household.” Indeed, the word “oeconomy” was most commonly used in the early modern period to refer to “household management” rather than more abstract and expansive notions of collective financial activity (OED I). In the early modern imagination the household represented not only the physical edifice itself, but also the management of a family’s collective activities including agriculture, animal husbandry, food preparation, and basic political and financial activities.23 We can see the diversity of such activities in Gervase Markham’s twin oeonomic tracts *Cheape and Good Husbandry: For the well-Ordering of all Beasts, and Fowles, and for the general Cure of their Diseases* (1614) and *The English Huswife, Containing the Inward and Outward Virtues Which Ought to Be in a Complete Woman* (1615), which divide the myriad skills of household management between a husband and a wife. As an institution that involves the human management of various non-human forms of life through activities such as animal husbandry and agriculture, the household blurs the boundaries between nature and artifice. Xenophon, whose *Oeconomicus* was enormously influential in early modern England, refers to the household as “the first society in nature, and the ground of all the rest.”24 Xenophon’s somewhat paradoxical phrase “first society in nature” attests to the liminal status of the household as an institution that is both socially constructed and natural. Likewise from a theological vantage point, the household can be read as a pre-social invention. Martin Luther, in his commentary on Genesis, describes the newly formed earth: “[God] has built the first parts of the house. It has a most elegant roof, the heaven, though this is not yet fully adorned. Its
foundation is the earth. Its walls on every side are the seas. Now he also makes provision for our sustenance, so that the earth brings forth herbs and trees of all kinds.”

Oeconomy thus offers Digby a way of conceptualizing the interconnection between life forms and human technology in ways more subtle than those employed by the mechanical philosophers.

For Digby the notion of oeconomy offers a particularly flexible metaphorics for understanding the complex functioning of the life systems. We can see the import of such metaphorics in the conclusion to *The Second Treatise* when Digby imagines God as the architect behind the oeconomy of nature:

> consider how wise nature, that hath prescribed an end and periode unto all her plantes, hath furnished them all with due and orderly meanes to attain thereunto … Why then should we imagine, that so iudicious and farre looking an Architect, whom we see so accurate in his meaner workes, should haue framed this Masterpiece of the world, to perish by the way, and neuer to attaine unto that great end, for which he made it.

This passage allegorizes the differing roles that God and Nature serve in creating and managing the world. God the “Architect” has “framed” with the world with the goal of certain ends, and it is “wise nature” who manages the earth like a divinely-created household. The notion of the household as a rural estate ideally structured for the good of mankind is furthered in Digby’s evocation of the metaphorics of agriculture. God has “frameth such tooles” as to help mankind properly manage the earth, and therefore “[f]ew beasts we see there are, but contribute to our service what we looke for at their hands. The swine affordeth good flesh, the sheepe good wooll, the cow good milke, the sable warme and soft furre, the oxe bendeth his sturdy necke to the yoke, the spiritfull horse dutyfully beareth the soldier, and the sinewy mule and stronger camel conuey weighty merchandise.”

One of the implications of using the metaphorics of household
management to describe the functioning of the natural world is the tendency to conflate the goals of nature with the anthropocentric ends of human society. In this conceptual scheme, the household, the fundamental technological innovation through which humans adapt their environment to meet their own wants and needs, expands to encompass the entire non-human world. Still Digby’s anthropocentric vision of nature falls short of the technocratic utopia represented in Bacon’s *The New Atlantis* and the mechanical representations of nature advanced by natural philosophers such as Hobbes and Descartes. Rather Digby’s representations of the earth negotiate technological and natural metaphorics in order to create a vision of nature that draws upon both animist and mechanical accounts of the world.

The metaphors of oeconomy also offer Digby a way of conceptualizing the sublime complexity of nature within the comprehensible anthropocentric space of the household. Oeconomy becomes a way of rendering comprehensible what is otherwise too complex fully to understand. The Oxford English Dictionary’s second definition of “economy” as “[t]he organization, internal constitution, apportionment of functions, of any complex unity” aptly describes Digby’s use of the word. Following from this definition, what this word offers to Digby is a way of simultaneously expressing complexity and order. While nature in its extreme complexity tends to resist systemization, oeconomy becomes for Digby a way of articulating nature in a single phrase as a unified set of orderly processes. We can see similar tendencies in contemporary uses of the word “economy” to refer to the collective financial activities of large political entities. Digby borrows this strategy from Aristotle, his most significant intellectual influence. In book 2 of *Physics*, Aristotle uses the comprehensible example of the household (*oikos*) to describe his theory of teleology in nature:
[W]here a series has a completion, all the preceding steps are for the sake of that. Now surely as in intelligent action, so in nature; and as in nature, so it is in each action, if nothing interferes. Now intelligent action is for the sake of an end; therefore the nature of things also is so. Thus if a house, e.g., had been a thing made by nature, it would have been made in the same way as it is now by art; and if things made by nature were also made by art, they would come to be in the same way as by nature.\textsuperscript{28}

For Aristotle the household represents an \textit{a priori} example of comprehensible teleology. Since we understand the production of the house as a logical end of society, we can use this institution to grasp the more elusive ends of nature. (The additional implication of this passage is that the household is a form so intuitive that nature itself without the help of art could produce such an institution.) From Aristotle Digby borrows the metaphoric space of the household as a strategy for comprehending the natural world.

It seems likely that Aristotle’s \textit{De Generatione Animalium}, a work which Digby mentions by name in \textit{The First Treatise}, provides the most direct source for Digby’s formulation of the phrase the oeconomy of nature.\textsuperscript{29} Describing the creation of the various parts of an embryo, Aristotle constructs an analogy between the allocation of nutrients through various parts of the nascent animal and the distribution of goods in a household. “For Nature, like a good householder \textit{[oikonomos]}, is not in the habit of throwing away anything from which it is possible to make anything useful,” Aristotle writes, “Now in a household the best part of the food that comes in is set apart for the free men, the inferior and the residue of the best for the slaves, and the worst is given to the animals that live with them.”\textsuperscript{30} This example parallels the above passage from Aristotle’s \textit{Physics} in its use of the household as an \textit{a priori} example of analogical legibility. Nature, here personified as the manager of a large household, is primarily concerned
with the proper distribution of resources throughout the world. This model utilizes the
metaphorics of the household to represent the thrift, division, and complex agency inherent in
nature’s teleological processes. Digby’s adaptation of this phrase translates Aristotle’s
personified simile into technical term embodying the principles through which Aristotelian
teleology functions. The effect of this translation is to diminish the import of Aristotle’s complex
personification in order to create a more scientific language through which to articulate the
workings of nature. Digby, in a sense, sublimates Aristotelian personification—a poetic trope—
to principles that he insists stem from the indifferent empirical observation of natural
phenomena. The effect that Digby attempts to create is an account of nature that draws upon
Aristotle’s principles, but that is not led astray by Aristotelian metaphorics. To be sure, the effect
is ambivalent. Digby’s notion of the oeconomy of nature borrows its comprehensibility from the
anthropomorphic discourse of household management even as it seeks to submerge such
metaphorics within scientific discourse. As we shall see, a central aspect of Digby’s project is to
create a scientific language devoid of the distorting figures of poetic language.

*The Oeconomy of Nature and the Immortal Soul*

While rewriting Aristotelian teleology is a central aspect of *Two Treatises*, Digby
subordinates this conceptual innovation to his exploration of the immortal soul. Unlike most
seventeenth-century natural philosophers who tended to push aside theological questions in favor
of creating accurate models through which to understand the world, Digby sought to utilize the
epistemological tools of the new science in order to explore the nature of the divine. Digby’s
stated goal in writing *Two Treatises* is to prove the immortality of the soul through the
investigation of natural phenomena. Since Digby identifies the soul as that which cannot be comprehended by studying the laws of nature (and it is precisely this inexplicability that proves soul’s transcendence), his project involves the somewhat paradoxical task of delineating as comprehensively as possible the rational, unvarying disposition of the physical world in order to highlight the ineffability of the soul. In his preface to The First Treatise, Digby states that his project is to “shew, that [the soul’s] operations are such, as cannot proceed from those [natural] principles; which [are] adequate and common to all bodies;” since this is true, Digby argues, “we may rest assured, that what cannot issue from them, cannot haue a body for its source.”\(^{31}\) Thus, the grand expression of Digby’s natural philosophy is at the same time an insistently materialist form of negative theology—an attempt to understand God’s ineffable nature by comprehending what he is not—in which the terrestrial is utilized in the comprehension of the divine. For Digby, the nature of the immortal soul lies in those phenomena that have existence and yet exceed the reach of natural philosophy. Indeed, Digby’s description of the soul as “[a]n indivisible substance exempted from place and time, yet present in both,” displays the epistemological strain that results from natural philosophy’s attempts to engage with the soul. Given this fact, we can understand the expansive scope of The First Treatise, which takes up 346 of 464 pages, as an attempt to throw into relief the ineffability of the soul. Because it is impossible to use empirical observation to comprehend the soul positively, Digby attempts to write a work comprehensive enough to circumscribe the soul with a unified, all-encompassing natural philosophy. Despite his manifest subordination of gross material bodies to the sublime transcendence of the immortal soul, Digby’s quest to understand the divine in Two Treatises hinges upon his comprehensive engagement with the material world.
The oeconomy of nature allows Digby to infer the existence of that which lies beyond the grasp of empirical observation. It does this by producing an unbroken chain of causes and effects linking all physical phenomena back to their divine source. Digby continually characterizes the oeconomy of nature as the “continuall and orderly progresse” of all things within the natural world. In his *Observations upon Religio Medici* (1643) Digby uses the Homeric image of a golden chain linking the physical world to the world of the divine in order to explain the functioning of his still undefined notion of the oeconomy of nature:

I beleeeve that all causes are so immediately chayned to their effects, as if a perfect knowing nature get hold but of one linke, it will drive the entire *Series* or pedegree of the whole to each utmost end; (as I thinke I have proved in my forenamed treatis) so that in truth, there is no fortuitnesse or contingency of things, in respect of themselves, but onely in respect of us, that are ignorant of their certaine, and necessary causes. Now a like *Series* or chaine, and complexe of all outward circumstances (whose highest Linke, *Poets* say prettily, is fastned to *Jupiters* chayre, and the lowest is riveted to every individuall on earth) steered and levelled by *God Almighty*, at the first settin out of the first Mover.33

Here we can see Digby fusing the scientific discourse of physical causes and effects to poetic language, which imagines a physical connection between the physical and the divine. Still, there is a disjunction between these two discourses. Since divinity lies beyond the limits of empirical science Digby is able only to imagine the divine source of the physical laws knitting together all material causes and effects. His belittlement of the poetic discourse that he evokes—“*Poets say prettily*”—furthers the sense in which the language of poetry is insufficient to the lofty goal of comprehending the divine through the physical.
The conceptual innovation of oeconomy is ultimately what facilitates the connection between the empirically-based knowledge of nature and the sublime knowledge of divinity. Even though the human mind is physically unable to follow all of the interconnected causes and effects linking the world together, recognizing the oeconomy of nature allows Digby to infer the existence of divinity. While Digby had previously confined his discussion of the oeconomy of nature to the physical world, here he imagines oeconomy as a way of facilitating connection between the study of nature and knowledge of the divine:

And when you have once gayned thus much of your selfe, to grace unto an orderly course and generation of any single effect, by the power of a materall cause working it; raise but your discourse a strain higher, and looke with reverence and duty upon the immensity of that provident Architect, out of whose handes these masterpieces issue, and unto whom it is as easy to make a chaine of causes of a thousand or of a million linkes, as to make one linke alone: and then you will no longer sticke at allowing the whole oeconomy of those actions, to be nothing else, but a production of material effects, by a due ranging and ordering of materall causes.

Here the oeconomy of nature is wedded to divine providence as the means through which God reveals his presence to humankind. Digby suggests that although our senses are too limited to comprehend the immense scope of nature, our recognition that nature works with oeconomy allows us to infer the existence of divinity. Oeconomy becomes a way of recognizing the order behind sublime complexity. Divinity in this conceptual scheme lies in the vanishing point within our vision of nature. It is the point at which our senses become inadequate to the task of comprehension. In other words, while we cannot possibly achieve a vision of the oeconomy of nature in its entirety, its very existence implies the divine architecture of the world.
Oeconomy thus relies upon unthinkably complex spatial and temporal scales. To map its dynamics, we can understand oeconomy as functioning both diachronically and synchronically—diachronically, as the past event in which the laws governing natural phenomena were initially set into motion, and synchronically, as the continuous application of these laws. Given the oeconomy of nature’s role in the development of the modern science and philosophy of ecology, we might conclude that the vast scope of Digby’s empirical inquiry helped to engender expansive, proto-ecological models for understanding the complex interworking of the natural world. After all, modern notions of ecology necessitate ambitiously expansive models for understanding the workings of the natural world. Indeed, ecologist Frank Egler argues that, “ecosystems are not only more complex than we think, they are more complex than we can think.” Rather than dividing nature into manageable parts as contemporaries such as Francis Bacon had, Digby sought to understand nature as a unified, though extremely complex, totality.

Indeed, we can better appreciate the proto-ecological dimensions of oeconomy of nature by comparing Digby’s work with that of his much more famous contemporary Francis Bacon. Scholars have long recognized Bacon’s tendency to divide and dissect the natural world in order to arrive at basic, knowable parts. Describing his new method of scientific inquiry, Bacon writes that “[n]ow what the sciences stand in need of is a form of induction which shall analyze experience and take it to pieces, and by a due process of exclusion and rejection lead to an inevitable conclusion … extracted not merely out of the depths of the mind but out of the very bowels of nature.” While this method is extremely useful in producing reliable knowledge about isolated aspects of nature, it is not likely to arrive at the larger ecological processes that underlie the workings of the natural world. Instead, Bacon’s method tends to produce a fragmented world of experimentally verifiable, though also problematically isolated, facts. We
can see the fictional embodiment of this fragmented world in Bacon’s utopian prose work *The New Atlantis*. In this work, Bacon’s imagines the island of Bensalem divided into useful and knowable artificial parts: mines for producing new artificial metals, towers for studying astronomy and refrigeration, mineral springs for augmenting health, and orchards for producing new kinds of fruit. What unifies this fictional world is not an overarching set of interconnecting laws, but rather faith in the human ability to control and improve upon the works of nature. Digby, on the other hand, works on a much larger ontological scale than Bacon in seeking to produce a systematic account of the workings of nature. While both thinkers championed experimental science, only Digby sought to use this science in order to verify the existence of complex processes functioning within nature. Bacon, to be sure, did not preclude the existence of such processes, but throughout his long and illustrious career he remained interested in reforming systems of scientific inquiry rather than in producing overarching models for understanding the complex workings of nature. In other words, it is the very sublime complexity of Digby’s analysis of the physical world that enables both the oeconomy of nature’s gesture toward the divine and the concept’s subsequent philosophical development.

*Digby and the Language of Science*

In addition to providing a new conceptual framework through which to understand the processes of nature, Digby is also interested in interrogating the language that natural philosophers use to represent the physical world. Understanding Digby’s conceptualization of language is central to my study because it helps both to contextualize his formulation of the phrase “the oeconomy of nature” and because it underpins his ambivalent relationship with
poetry. Like Bacon and other early modern natural philosophers, Digby seeks to produce an “unequivocal” language through which to conceptualize the works of nature. Bacon, for example, writes that he is determined to endeavor “towards restoring or cultivating a just and legitimate familiarity betwixt the mind and things.” Such early modern thinkers sought to correct what they saw as linguistic corruptions produced by generations of scholastic philosophers, whose language failed to properly express the physical world. In his conclusion to *The First Treatise* Digby contends that his study is necessary not because it corrects certain aspect of Aristotle’s account of nature, nor because it produces new experimental proofs of Aristotle’s principles, but rather because it works to redeem Aristotle’s ideas from the linguistic corruptions of subsequent generations of scholars. Referring to Aristotle as “the oracle of nature,” Digby argues that “the sound of his wordes (not rightly vnderstood) do frame a wrong sense of the doctrine he hath left vs” and that his work has helped to restore the true meaning of Aristotle’s words. This passage points to Digby’s larger preoccupation in *Two Treatises* with finding a language appropriate to the proper representation of nature.

Digby uses the oeconomy of nature to articulate the predictable, knowable nature of the natural world, but elsewhere he expresses doubt about language’s ability properly to express such natural order. At the beginning of *The First Treatise*, Digby states that his interrogation of nature will proceed from “that plaine methode which nature teacheth vs,” which involves moving inductively from the simplest observations to the most complex. This methodology replicates the arrangement of Aristotle’s *Physics*, which begins with observations on quantities of physical bodies and moves toward more complex modes of examination. Still, despite the Aristotelian framework grounding his study, Digby expresses anxiety about the necessary linguistic grounding of his philosophical innovations:
But because there is a greate variety of apprehensions framed by learned men, of the nature of *Quantity* (though indeede nothing can be more plaine and simple then it is in it selfe) I conceiue it will not be amisse, before we enter into the explication of it, to consider how the mystery of discoursing and expressing our thoughts to one an other by words (a prerogatiue belonging only to man) is ordered and gouerned among vs: that so, we may auoyde those rockes, which many, and for the most part, such as thinke they spinne the finest thriddles, do suffer shippewrracke against in theirre subtilest discourses. The most dangerous of all which, assuredly is when they confound the true and reall natures of thinges, with the conceptions they frame of them in theirre owne mindes. By which fundamentall miscarriage of theire reasoning, they fall into great errors and absurdities: and whatsoeuer they build vpon so ruinous a foundation, prouueth but vselesse cobwebbes or prodigious Chymeras.\(^{46}\)

Digby’s apprehension is not that the physical world will fail to function in a unified and orderly fashion, but rather that obstacles (here figured as “rockes” to a ship) will arise from the considerably murkier task of navigating human language. We can gain insight into Digby’s thinking by contrasting his representation of “the mystery of discoursing and expressing our thoughts to one an other by words” with his later assertion “that none of natures greatest secrets, whereof our senses giue vs notice in the effects, are so ouershaded with an impenetrable veyle, but that the diligent, and wary hand of reason, might vnmaske them.”\(^{47}\) This contrast between the lucidity of nature and the opacity of language—figured here as the immediacy of the rational hand and the convolution of the word—expresses the central caveat of Digby’s study. If *Two Treatises* fails as a cohesive account of nature, Digby suggests, it is the nature of language rather than the nature of nature that has laid for him so “ruinous a foundation.”
From here Digby moves into a systematic account of the ways in which words function. Digby separates words into two distinct categories in order to delineate a language appropriate to natural philosophy. His first category (which we shall dub “natural” language) involves simple, non-technical words that stem from direct contact between a person and a thing in the world. The second category (which we shall call “artificial” language) comprises words engendered by various forms of formal learning rather than by direct interaction with the material world. Digby argues that artificial language derives from “the wrested or Metaphoricall senses of any learned men.” Conversely, describing natural language, Digby argues that such words “expresse the things [to which they refer] properly and plainly, according to the naturall conceptions that all people agree in making of them.” Elaborating his account of natural language, Digby goes on to describe the near universal availability of such linguistic forms: “Of all which, euery man liuing that enioyeth but the vse of reason, findeth naturally within himselfe at the very first naming of them, a plaine, complete, and satisfying notion; which is the same without any the least variation, in all mankind.” Thus, implicit within natural language is a radically democratic epistemology, in which any reasonable subject is capable of ascertaining the truth of the universe even without any formal education. Of artificial language, on the other hand, Digby writes that “many of the wordes which are proper to it, haue beene by the authors of it, translated and wrested from the generall conceptions of the same wordes, by some metaphore, or similitude, or allusion, to serue theire priuate turns.” While natural words express a self-sufficient relationship between the mind and a thing in the world, artificial words introduce ideology, rhetoric, and showy erudition into the cultural lexicon. In this way, we can see the formal education of scholastic philosophers as antagonistic to language’s ability to render knowable natural phenomena. In some ways, Digby insistence on a universal language free of “priuate
turns” seems problematically optimistic, but we can better understand Digby’s ambitious project by placing it in dialogue with Francis Bacon’s *Novum Organum*, a collection of maxims aimed at banishing various “idols” that impede mankind’s ability to understand nature. Both texts argue that, even if only in ideal circumstances, various forms of thought must be stricken from the mind in order to facilitate the proper observation of natural phenomena.

Both Digby and his commentators viewed the use of natural language as central to the philosophical success of *Two Treatises*. Digby’s early commentators H. Holden and E. Tyrrel boast in their prefatory letter that

> here we find a large & lofty soule, who not satisfyed with vnexamined words & ambiguous termes, longing to know dyues deeply into the bowells of all corporeall & compounded things: and then deuinely speculats the nature of immateriall & subsistent formes. Nor this by wrangling in aerie names with chimericall imaginations & fained suppositions of vnknowne qualities, but strongly stryuing to disclosehereall & connaturall truth of each thing in it self, and of one constant & continued thridde, weaues his whole worke into one webbe. Where many of the most abstruse & enigmaticke questions of natures secrets, (hitherto vnresolued, & for the most part weakely represented in empty language & verball shadowes) are made no lesse plaine & euident in their inward beings & effects, then pleasant & gratefull in their wellclothed outside & expression.52

These writers suggest that the real virtue of Digby’s work lies in its combination of magnitude and clarity: *Two Treatises* is a text that “dyues deeply into the bowells of all corporeall & compounded things,” but that manages to do so using “plaine & euident” language. Holden and Tyrrel construct their praise of Digby’s writing against what they see as the linguistic excesses of Scholastic Philosophy. In his *Observations upon Religio Medici*, published in 1643 shortly
before the first edition of *Two Treatises*, Digby referencing his forthcoming work, argues “[f]or I endeavour to shew by a continued progresse, and not by Leapes, all the motions of nature; & unto them to fit intelligibly the termes used by her best Secretaries: whereby all wilde fantastick qualities and moods (introduced for refuges of ignorance) are banished from my commerce.”

Returning to Digby’s first reference to the oeconomy of nature, we can see this term as an attempt to render into plain language the complex totality of nature’s collective functions. Digby’s description that the oeconomy of nature sets into motion “due and plaine causes to produce knowne effects” displays a fundamental belief in the legibility of both nature and language’s ability to represent nature. The simple diction of this and many other passages on nature’s complex functioning testifies to Digby’s commitment to linguistic simplicity in his interrogation of the world. Everything in nature, Digby suggests, can be understood through a basic, universal vocabulary.

Of course the term “oeconomy of nature”—itself Digby’s neologism—complicates this narrative by placing great weight upon an idiom unfamiliar to the discourse of natural philosophy. Far from attesting to the universality of properly used language, this phrase suggests that linguistic innovation is necessary to the seventeenth century’s evolving portrait of nature. Indeed, by creating a new term Digby runs the risk of simply reproducing the very “vnexamined words & ambiguous termes” he and his commentators criticize. Still, as we have seen, the semantics of the oeconomy of nature do evoke a certain degree of linguistic control. Since “nature” is a problematically ambiguous word, “oeconomy”—a term that suggests both rational organization and semantic predictability—is necessary in delimiting “nature’s” meaning. Indeed (to play with the word’s etymology) we might say that “oeconomy” serves to render the expansiveness of nature domestic, and to impose familiar structures upon what is otherwise
difficult to contain. Indeed, as we have seen, Digby’s adoption of the oeconomy of nature from its most direct source, Aristotle’s book *De Generatione*, involves the negation of artificial poetic tropes in favor of more literal (and Digby would suggest, natural) forms of language.

Given Digby’s quest for linguistic simplicity and directness of representation, poetry appears to Digby as a particularly threatening form of language. We can see this in the fact that he names “metaphore, or similitude, [and] allusion”—the hallmarks of poetic language—among the tropes that distract from linguistic naturalism. In some ways this attack on poetry simply reproduces the familiar poets-are-liars topos, against which writers such as Philip Sidney have constructed apologies. But Digby’s critique is based less in moral judgment than it is in ideas about the very structure of language. For Digby metaphor—literally “to carry across”—embodies a physical shift away from the true direct connection between a word and a thing and toward fantasy and false embodiment. In *The Second Treatise*, Digby argues that rhetorical and poetic tropes are problematic from a rational critical perspective because “when they are fittely placed, they carry the Auditor euen against his will.”54 The problem with poetic language is its ability to carry minds away from proper observation of the world. We can further understand what is at stake in Digby’s critique of poetry by examining his *Observations upon Religio Medici*. In this extended essay, Digby criticizes Thomas Browne’s philosophical work for its problematic use of poetic language:

I may piece to it what our *Author* saith of a *Magazine* of Subsistent formes residing first in the *Chaos*, & hereafter (when the world shall have beeene destroyed by fire) in the generall heape of *Ashes*; out of which Gods voyce did, & shall, draw them out & cloath them with matter. This language were handsome for a *Poet* or a *Rhetorician* to speake.
But in a *Philosopher*, that should ratiocinate strictly and rigorously, I can not admit it, for certainly there are no subsistent forms of *Corporeall* things.\textsuperscript{55}

In this passage, Digby argues that Browne’s use of poetic language, while aesthetically pleasing, works against the goal of articulating the truth of nature. Instead, poetry works to engender things—in this case “subsistent forms”—that do not exist in nature. Browne infers the existence of “subsistent forms”—the physical embodiment of Platonic ideals—not from rational observation, but rather from figurative language. Browne’s entire narrative of divine creation, Digby suggests, appears as a breach of philosophical decorum. In contrast to Browne’s stylistically ornate work, Digby’s *Two Treatises* employs a strikingly pared down language in which simple diction, syntax, and tone replace opulent rhetoric and poetics. In order to produce a proper work of natural philosophy, Digby believes that he must negate all poetic language from his philosophical lexicon. Indeed, Digby opens his *The Second Treatise* by expressing anxiety that critics will “imagine that [his investigation of the soul] is but a poetike Idea of science, that neuer was or will be in act.”\textsuperscript{56}

*Oeconomy and the Poetics of the Soul*

Given his great interest in poetry, however, it seems likely that Digby’s self-conscious negation of all poetic language from his scientific writing was accompanied by a great sense of loss. Simply acknowledging Digby’s self-conscious avoidance of poetic language in his representation of nature provides an insufficient portrait of Digby’s complex work. After all, as literary patron, critic, editor, and amateur poet—Digby is among the poets satirized in John Suckling’s “The Wits”—Digby was acutely aware of potential linguistic potency of poetry.\textsuperscript{57}
And in fact, in many cases, Digby does not entirely separate the language of poetry from scientific endeavor. In his “Discourse on Edmund Spenser,” for example, Digby takes Spenser very seriously as a natural philosopher, arguing that “he had a solide and deepe insight in THEOLOGIE, PHILOSOPHY (especially the PLATONIKE) and the MATHEMATICALL sciences.”

Similarly, in *The Second Treatise*, Digby undertakes a qualified celebration of the art of poetry, by arguing (in Philip Sidney’s terms) that poets can work to produce moral behavior in people. Qualifying this statement, Digby contends that in order for a poet to be able to do this he or she must possess an encyclopedic knowledge of the world:

> But vnto such a Poet as would ayme at those noble effects, no knowledge of *Morality*, nor of the nature and course of humane actions and accidents must be wanting: he must be well versed in *History*; he must be acquainted with the progresse of nature, in what she bringeth to passe; he must be deficient in no part of *Logike, Rhetorike*, or *Grammar*: in a word, he must be consummate in all artes and sciencies, if he will be excellent in his way.

Thus, we can see in Digby a fundamental ambivalence toward poetry. On the one hand, poetry can potentially engender expansive narratives that encourage moral behavior, unify the arts and sciences, and embody the “progresse of nature.” On the other hand, poetic language tends to corrupt the proper relationship between language and nature. Digby, in other words, tends to disparage poetry while allowing for the rare possibility of a true poetic genius, who can properly embody the profound secrets of the universe and thereby illuminate the universe’s oeconomy. As we shall see in the next two chapters, it seems likely that for Digby both Edmund Spenser and Ben Jonson embodied such genius.
In *Two Treatises* poetic language ultimately serves the essential function of facilitating human comprehension of the divine. Just as plain language enables us to understand nature in all its complexity, poetry—a form of language that allows us to “raise but [our] discourse a strain higher, and looke with reverence and duty upon the immensity of that provident Architect”—represents our ability to transcend the physical world. Digby ultimately seems to argue that both poetry and plain language are essential to producing a complete understanding of the world. Indeed, at the end of *The Second Treatise* Digby’s writing becomes saturated with the figures of poetry. In the final pages of the book Digby, seemingly carried off in reverie, imagines the oeconomy of nature as a golden chain linking all things together in universal harmony:

I see that golden chayne, which here by long discourses, filleth huge volumes of bookes, and diueth into the hidden natures of seuerall bodies; in thee resumed into one circle or linke, which containeth in it selfe the large scope of whatsoeuer screwing discourse can reach vnto. I see it comprehend, and master the whole world of bodies. I see euery particular nature, as it were embossed out to the life, in thy celestiall garment. I see euery solitary substance ranked in its due place and order, not crushed or thronged by the multitude of its fellowes; but each of them in its full extent· in the full propriety of euery part and effect of it; and distinguished into more diuisions, then euer nature seuered it into. In thee I see an infinite multitude enioy place enough. I see, that neither hight, nor profundity, nor longitude, nor latitude, are able to exempt themselues from thy diffused powers: they faddome all; they comprehend all; they master all; they enriche thee with the stock of all; and thou thy selfe art all, and somewhat more then all; and yet, now but one of all.60
This passage evokes Homer’s representation of the golden chain linking the mortal world to Jove’s divine throne. Here we catch a rare glimpse of Digby’s potent imagination as he envisions the totality of knowledge that will be granted to him after his eventual death. Digby concludes his beatific vision with an extended apostrophe to his immortal soul:

How is it possible then for my narrow hart, to frame an apprehension of the infinite excesse of thy pleasure (my soule) ouer all the pleasure this limited world can afford, which is all measured by such petty proportions? How should I stampe a figure of thy immense greatnesse, into my materiall imagination? Here I loose my power of speaking, because I haue too much to speake of: I must become silent and dumbe, because all the words and language I can vse, expresse not the thousandeth, nor the millioneth part, of what I euidently see to be treu.

For all of Digby’s focus on expanding the bounds of human knowledge, it is ultimately the breakdown of this knowledge that is most striking. In the face of the sublime scope of the universe human language ultimately fails to express the magnitude of truth. In these final pages what poetic language allows Digby to accomplish is to represent his approach to the ineffable world of the divine. When the language of scientific representation fails, the language of poetry takes over.

Digby returns to the question of poetic representation at the end of his career in a speech on botany delivered before the Royal Academy in 1660, published in 1661 under the title A discourse concerning the vegetation of plants spoken by Sir Kenelme Digby at Greshan College on the 23 of January, 1660. After describing the necessity of a nutrient-rich soil, Digby briefly digresses. “Here, it were not from the purpose to put you in minde how Ancient Poets (who comprised their deepest wisdom in familiar Fables) tell us long stories of their Salt-begotten
Goddesse, and adumbrated their best knowledge of nature under Saline veils” Digby says, “But I should be too prolixe if I hunted too far every chase that riseth before me in this copious Forrest. I will come back to my own and others plain experiences.” Given Digby’s poetic obsessions, it is difficult not to read in this reference to the classical poets echoes of his two English favorites, Spenser and Jonson. After all, Digby’s evocation of the “copious Forrest” of poetry points both to the ontological space of Spenser’s great work *The Faerie Queene* and to Ben Jonson’s most significant collection of poetry, entitled *The Forest*. In the next two chapters, I shall explore the ways in which the differing representations of nature by these two Renaissance poets influenced Digby’s notion of the oeconomy of nature. Such an exploration not only offers a way of understanding poetry’s influence on an important strand of natural philosophy of early modern England, but it also enables new readings of the works of these two canonical poets. As I shall argue in the following chapters, these poets offer Digby contrasting models for understanding the workings of the natural world. For Spenser, particularly in his *Mutabilitie Cantos*, nature embodies the principles of flux and unpredictability woven into the fabric of the terrestrial world. Conversely, Ben Jonson’s country house poem “To Penshurst” represents nature as fundamentally orderly and predictable through the governed space of the country estate.

1 Throughout this study, I retain the early modern spelling of the word “oeconomy” precisely to highlight the vast differences between modern notions of economy as the organization of the production and consumption of goods by a nation or other form of community and early modern versions of the term, which tend to acknowledge more explicitly the weight of the word’s Greek root: *oikos* meaning “household.” As we shall see, both major definitions of economy in early
modern England—“[t]he organization, internal constitution, apportionment of functions, of any complex unity” and “[t]he way in which something is managed; the management of resources; household management (OED I, II)—are reflected in Digby’s oeconomy of nature.

2 In lieu in the term “ecology,” Darwin consistently uses “the oeconomy of nature” to describe interactions within a given environment.


4 Admitting minor variations, Digby uses the phrase “the oeconomy of nature” seven times in his collective writings: three times in Two treatises (1644), three times in A late discourse made in a solemnne assembly of nobles and learned men at Montpellier in France touching the cure of wounds by the powder of sympathy: with instructions how to make the said powder: whereby many other secrets of nature are unfolded (1658), and once in A discourse concerning the vegetation of plants spoken by Sir Kenelme Digby at Greshan College on the 23 of January, 1660 (published in 1661).

5 Worster, Nature’s Economy, 37.

6 Ibid., 37


8 Following Aristotle, Digby draws the distinction between “natural motions”—those that occur within the oeconomy of nature—and “violent motions”—those that are the result of outside force. The former gestures toward the physics of life that is the oeconomy of nature, and the latter toward Newton’s mechanical universe of inert bodies in motion.

10 Ibid., 192b10-20.

11 Shapin, *The Scientific Revolution*, 29

12 Ibid., 11.


14 Amos Funkenstein, *Theology and Scientific Imagination from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1989) describes the replacement of Aristotelian teleology by mechanistic accounts of physical movement as a central drive in the development of the seventeenth-century scientific imagination (37). While scholars disagree about the extent to which mechanism replaced teleology in early scientific thought,

15 René Descartes, *Treatise on Man*, trans. John Cottingham, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985), 108. Digby does employ a number of mechanistic metaphors to describe the motions of inanimate bodies, but he shifts to the metaphorics of oeconomy to describe life.

16 Digby, *Two Treatises*, 83.

17 Ibid., 100.

18 Kenelm Digby, *A late discourse made in a solemne assembly of nobles and learned men at Montpellier in France touching the cure of wounds by the powder of sympathy: with instructions how to make the said powder: whereby many other secrets of nature are unfolded* (London, 1658), 5


21 Digby, *A late discourse*, 54

22 Ibid., 75.


25 Martin Luther, “Commentary on Genesis, Volume 2” Project Gutenberg

http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/27978, 32.

26 Digby, *Two Treatises*, 121.

27 Ibid., 121.


29 Digby directly references this text in *Two Treatises*, page 155.


31 Digby, *Two Treatises*, 19.

32 Ibid., 192.

Digby’s representation of nature seems to contribute to the scientific “disenchantment of the world,” as it is described by Horkheimer and Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Sanford Univ. Press, 2002).

Digby, *Two Treatises*, 325.

Digby’s style shifts toward the end of *Two Treatises*, when he describes the actions of the soul using overtly poetic descriptions.


Ibid., xi.


> [s]urely, like as many substances in nature which are solid do putrify and corrupt into worms; so it is the property of good and sound knowledge to putrify and dissolve into a number of subtle, idle, unwholesome, and, as I may term them, vermiculate questions, which have indeed a kind of quickness and life of spirit, but no soundness of matter or goodness of quality. This kind of degenerate learning did chiefly reign amongst the
Schoolmen: who having sharp and strong wits, and abundance of leisure, and small variety of reading, but their wits being shut up in the cells of a few authors (chiefly Aristotle their dictator) as their persons were shut up in the cells of monasteries and colleges, and knowing little history, either of nature or time, did out of no great quantity of matter and infinite agitation of wit spin out unto those laborious webs of learning which are extant in their books. For the wit and mind of man, if it work upon matter, which is the contemplation of the creatures of God, worketh according to the stuff, and is limited thereby; but if it work; upon itself, as the spider worketh his web, then it is endless, and brings forth indeed cobwebs of learning, admirable for the fineness of thread and work, but of no substance or profit. (17)

For Bacon the self-referentiality of scholastic philosophy coupled with the worm-like proliferation of inefficacious questions produces a jumble of idle and ultimately inconsequential knowledge. Conversely, Bacon argues that human thought can be productively limited by being confined to “the contemplation of the creatures of God” rather than endlessly turned in upon itself.

44 Digby, Two Treatises, 343.

45 Ibid., 2.

46 Ibid., 3.

47 Ibid., 192.

48 Ibid., 6.

49 Ibid., 5.

50 Ibid., 6.

51 Ibid., 6.
Digby was himself a poet as well as a patron, and prominent literary critic. He wrote two essays on the works of Edmund Spenser (“Discourse on Edmund Spenser” and Observations on the 22. Stanza in the 9th. Canto of the 2d. Book of Spencers Faery Queen) and served as Ben Jonson’s patron and eventual literary executor.


We can catch a glimpse of Digby’s (later negated) wish to engage poetry’s power to represent nature in his Observations upon Religio Medici:

I believe that all causes are so immediately chained to their effects, as if a perfect knowing nature get hold but of one linke, it will drive the entire Series or pedegree of the whole to each utmost end; (as I thinke I have proved in my forenamed treatisfe) so that in truth, there is no fortuitnesse or contingency of things, in respect of themselves, but onely in respect of us, that are ignorant of their certaine, and necessary causes. Now a like Series or chaine, and complexe of all outward circumstances (whose highest Linke, Poets say prettily, is fastned to Iupiters chayre, and the lowest is riveted to every individuall on
earth) steered and levelled by *God Almighty*, at the first setting out of the first Mover.

(28-9)

In this passage (which Digby paraphrases from Francis Bacon’s *The Advancement of Learning*) the oeconomy of nature—familiarly figured as a chain of causes and effects—gains from the power of poetry a divine embodiment.

62 Digby, *Two Treatises*, 455

CHAPTER II

SPENSER’S SYLVAN MATTER

As we have seen in Chapter 1, Digby’s formulation of the oeconomy of nature draws upon both philosophical and literary sources. In this chapter, I turn to Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*, Digby’s most significant literary influence. However, what Digby sees in Spenser, a poetic manifestation of his own vision of nature, is not what my reading ultimately yields. While Digby, given a contemporary critical vocabulary, would understand the systems structuring the natural world as a confluence of ecology and economy—with the ecological always serving economic, that is to say human, ends—Spenser centers on how these two models for understanding the world are fundamentally incompatible with one another. In place of the oeconomy of nature, a version of which is presented in the “wandering wood” episode, Spenser offers a representation of the natural as always eluding anthropocentric modes of apprehending the world.

Even if Kenelm Digby experienced difficulty using the epistemological tools of the new science to comprehend the material unity of the body and the soul (the stated task of his *Two Treatises*), he did recognize one place where such integration was possible: the poetry of his favorite writer, Edmund Spenser. In his *Observations on the 22 Stanza in the 9th Canto of the 2d Book of Spenser’s Faery Queen*, Digby undertakes a close reading of a stanza from *The Faerie Queene* that describes Alma’s House—a dwelling that achieves the ideal proportions of the human body. Drawing upon the discourses of geometry and platonic philosophy, Digby
concludes that “Tis’ evident that the Authors intention in this Canto is to describe the bodie of a man inform’d with a rationall soul, and in prosecution of that designe he sets down particularly the severall parts of the one and of the other: But in this stanza he comprehends the general description of them both, as (being joined together to frame a compleat Man) they make one perfect compound.”¹ Spenser affords Digby the opportunity to imagine a perfect unity between the human body and the human soul. Indeed, Digby interprets Spenser’s line, “All which compacted, make a goodly Diapase,” by asserting that the body and the soul of man “make the most perfect Harmony that can be imagined.” In advancing this reading, Digby transforms Spenser’s vision of nature into his own: an oeconomy of nature predicated on unity, predictability, and legibility. Applying this ontology to literary interpretation, Digby writes that “although the beginning of his Allegory or mysticall sense, may be obscure, yet in the processe of it, he doth himself declare his own conceptions in such sort as are obvious to any ordinary capacity.” Of course, Spenser’s representation of the natural world does not always suggest such a predictable ontology, as is evidenced by his *The Cantos of Mutabilite*. As I shall display in this chapter, Digby’s reading of Spenser is a creative and willful decontextualization, designed to make the poet’s vision of nature conform to his own. This chapter explores a foundational moment in Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, Redcrosse Knight’s progression into the “wandering wood,” in order to show how Spenser resists instrumentalist interpretations like the one advanced by Digby. What Digby’s creative misreading offers is a lead into how the scientific appropriates the literary, often to hindrance of interpretative coherence. Still, as we shall see, Digby’s (mis)reading of *The Faerie Queene* stems in part from internal tensions in the text itself, which are apparent from the very opening canto.
The connection between Errour and “the wandering wood” in Book 1, canto 1 of The Faerie Queene is typically made by way of etymology: Errour takes her name from the Latin errare, “to wander.” The woods, thus, provide a topographic corollary to the spiritual error represented by the monster. As the Redcrosse Knight loses his way in the forest, wandering comes to represent moral transgression, the inability to distinguish worldly delight from religious truth. Still, there is a palpable disjunction between Errour and her environment. While the tree catalogue that initiates the episode is a site of anthropocentric utility, the creature Errour figures cycles of production and consumption that elude the rational calculus of human use. In this chapter, I argue that these connected episodes point to two models for understanding matter that circulated in Elizabethan England. The first, given shape in the tree catalogue of stanzas 8-9, represents the perspective of instrumental materialism: the idea that the material world comprises of a vast storehouse of resources for human use. The second, dramatized by the Redcrosse Knight’s ensuing battle with the monster Errour, suggests that humanity’s entanglement in the material world, coupled with matter’s overwhelming diversity and unavoidable “mutabilitie,” preclude the possibility of transforming matter into humanity’s toolshed. Taken together, these episodes represent how the failure of instrumentality reconfigures humankind’s relationship with the material world; the economic tenor of the tree catalogue gives way the grotesque ecology of Errour. Moreover, this shift away from the instrumental encodes Spenser’s negotiation of the Elizabethan ideal that literature should profitable (in both a moral and material sense) with his marked interest in novelty and creativity. These two poles of literary production represent for Spenser the divergent threats of excessive imitation and chaotic formlessness.

In the past ten years, a growing number of critics have turned their attention to how the study of material things can impact our understanding of Renaissance literature. As Jonathan Gil
Harris observes, “[f]or a growing number of Renaissance and Shakespeare scholars, the play is no longer the thing: the thing is the thing.”\(^3\) Influenced by the work of Bruno Latour and Michel Serres, scholars have turned their attention to the ways in which intellectual engagement with materiality enables new epistemological possibilities within the familiar discourses of textual studies, theology, political philosophy, and sexual politics. If we are to extend notions of materiality to the stuff of non-human life—the material bodies of flowers, trees, sheep, and gnats—then we might add the recent “green turn” in literary studies, broadly dubbed “ecocriticism,” to this movement. Ushering ecocritics into the fray of Renaissance material studies broadly expands the scope of scholarship focused on the non-human world.\(^4\) What superficially separates ecocritics from the previously mentioned scholars is a tenuous division between the natural and the artificial (Yates, for example, focuses on portrait miniatures and priest-holes) coupled with the explicitly activist position of ecocriticism, in which the study of literature serves “to promote the understanding of nature and culture for a sustainable world.”\(^5\) Still, an engagement with both strains of scholarship reveals that these two ostensibly disparate camps are remarkably similar in that they are motivated by analogous sets of questions and concerns: namely, an awareness of the narratives that we humans have used to separate ourselves from, and to understand our relationship to, the world in which we live, whether it consists of the clothing we use to shield ourselves from the elements or the sheep that supply the raw materials from which this clothing is made. My chapter seeks to engage both strains of criticism by attending to how Spenser’s different paradigms for understanding matter mobilize alternative sets of responses to the non-human world.

Favoring Muir to Milton and Shelley to Shakespeare, environmental criticism has been relatively slow in turning its attention to Renaissance literature. Spenser scholarship, however,
has enjoyed a long, though somewhat unappreciated, tradition of exploring ideas of ecology. Sean Kane’s 1983 essay “Spenserian Ecology,” for example, significantly predates Laurence Buell’s *The Environmental Imagination* (1995) and Jonathan Bate’s *Romantic Ecology* (1991), both of which stand as landmarks of environmental criticism. Kane considers how Spenser’s focus on “time, change, randomness, [and] variety” in Book 3 of *The Faerie Queene* parallels the “living world made up of levels of disparate but mutually determining activity, where meaning is immanent rather than transcendent, to be experienced in the play of circumstance rather than in an abstract framework.” Observing a similar dynamic in Spenser’s representation of the body, Gayle Kern Paster shows how the subject’s affective state spills out into its environment, blurring the boundaries between abstraction and materiality. Paster refers to this as “a premodern ecology of the passions,” and points to the crucial role it plays in Spenserian allegory. While Harry Berger, jr. influentially describes the topography of *The Faerie Queene*’s first book as an “inscape”—a projection of the psychology of the major characters—Paster’s analysis suggests that the boundary between inside and outside may be more fluid than previously thought. Turing to the ethical implications of ecology, Linda Gregerson explores how Spenser’s use of the georgic in Book 1 of *The Faerie Queene* exposes an impasse: “a double allegiance to peaceful or ameliorative co-existence and to the violent imposition of human will.” None of these accounts figure Spenser as a modern environmentalist, eager to free the natural world from human control. However, they all call attention to Spenser’s uncommon awareness of how human and natural systems converge in complicated and often unpredictable ways.

Spenser’s representation of matter at the beginning of *The Faerie Queene* juxtaposes two paradigms for apprehending the material world: the economic and the ecological. The economic, represented by the tree catalogue (1.1.8-9), apprehends the material world instrumentally as a
series of useful objects, and the ecological, represented by Erreur (1.1.14-26), exposes matter’s role in complex systems ungoverned by human prerogatives. The material basis of each of these perspectives is introduced through linguistic association. The first can be seen in the fact that classical etymologies available to Spenser connected *sylva*, the Latin word for “forest,” to the Greek word *hyle*, signifying “raw materials” or “matter” in a more general sense. If we are to take this association seriously, then the tree catalogue, an extensive inventory of the human uses of trees, becomes a repository for the raw materials out of which human civilization is built. The tree catalogue, thus, stands for an instrumental view of the material world in which things are apprehended as use values. The second, connection to materiality is inscribed within the grotesque maternal body of the monster Erreur. By representing Erreur as a mother, Spenser invokes the Aristotelian duality “linking the male to spirit or form and the female with matter,” a point substantiated in the fact that the word “mother” is cognate with the Latin *mater* for “material.” This second evocation of materiality is more troubling from a humanist perspective in that it positions the human subject within rather than without networks of material existence. Matter, in this sense, includes not only the raw materials used to build houses and ships, but also the moribund tissue of a person’s own flesh.

Scholars have interpreted Spenser’s tree catalogue in a variety of ways: as an elaborate intertextual allusion, as a warning to the reader against overindulging in visual pleasure, and as a vaunting display of poetic virtuosity. While such readings tend to marginalize this passage as a formal maneuver undertaken primarily for aesthetic effect, Maureen Quilligan argues for the centrality of the tree catalogue to Spenser’s work by interpreting it as a place “for the poet to acknowledge the very fallenness of all fiction, its essential mediate errancy from truth.” Quilligan contends that this passage, with its dense tangle of allusions to classical and medieval
texts, represents the Christian poet’s attempts “to grapple with the primacy of classical form,” the formal parameters of which “hem in” his religious work. But if the tree catalogue displays its own fictitious nature through textual allusion and formal conventionality, it is a fiction that bears traces of the material reality of Spenser’s own historical situation. As Thomas Herron demonstrates, this passage assumes new levels of meaning when placed in the context of Spenser’s vocation as a New English colonist in Ireland. Noting the importance of Irish timber imports to Elizabethan England—along with the contemporary relevance of images such as “Sallow for the mill” and “Aspine good for staves”—Herron argues that Spenser evokes the georgic mode in the tree catalogue in order to forge a homology between poetic composition and the English colonization of Ireland: “This [poetic] craft, in georgic fashion, was analogous to the mercantile ordering and exploitation of the Irish countryside, a process of turning chaotic energy into labor and land into the poetic-utilitarian landscape exemplified by the tree catalog.”

By acknowledging the relevance of real trees to Spenser’s landscape, Herron offers an important lead to those interested in the ecocritical implications of this passage. Still, Herron’s assessment of the georgic potential of the tree catalogue may be overly optimistic. After all, as Linda Gregerson points out, the woods represent a kind of georgic hubris, in which trees from different environments “are unnaturally forced together in a single figurative place, which makes that place, by incremental and seductive stages, monstrous.” Ultimately, this catalogue leads the characters down the wandering path of error rather than to a georgic utopia.

Spenser’s tree catalogue serves to bridge the ontologically intelligible space of the “plaine” described in the book’s opening line with the morally opaque forests that provide the setting for much of The Faerie Queene. Linked to Spenser’s conception of allegory, the forest is important because it provides the topographic corollary to the author’s “darke conceit.” But the
opacity of the forest is initially obscured by the fact that the forest’s trees are so neatly organized:

Much can they prays the trees so straight and hy,
The sayling Pine, the Cedar proud and tall,
The vine-prop Elme, the Poplar neuer dry,
The builder Oake, sole king of forrests all,
The Aspine good for staues, the Cypresse funerall.

The Laurell, meed of mightie Conquerours
And Poets sage, the Firre that weepeth still,
The Willow wore of forlorn Paramours,
The Eugh obedient to the benders will,
The Birch for shaftes, the Sallow for the mill,
The Mirrhe sweete bleeding in the bitter wound,
The warlike Beech, the Ash for nothing ill,
The fruitfull Oliue, and the Platane round,
The caruer Holme, the Maple seeldom inward sound.19

Through syntactical parallelism, alliteration, and metrical regularity, Spenser creates the impression of an ordered environment apprehended as a series of useful objects. By listing the dominant material, moral, and emblematic uses of each of the twenty trees catalogued, the narrator produces a teleological account of the forest’s diverse anthropocentric utility. Each tree
is conceptualized through a single use value. The majority are identified as sources of specific building materials: “The sayling pine,” “the builder Oake,” “The Aspine good for staues,” “The Birch for shaftes,” and “The caruer Holme.” Others inscribe forms of practical knowledge that inform the human use of trees: “the Poplar neuer dry” should not be used as firewood, “The Eugh obedient to the benders will” supplies material for making bows, and “The fruitfull Oliue” provides an abundant supply of food and oil. And still others serve as “object lessons” centered on conveying social and political wisdom: the oak is “sole king of forrests all,” implying that the human monarchy is endorsed by the natural world; and “The Laurell, meed of mightie Conquerours / And Poets sage” reminds us of those worldly vocations, poetry and military conquest, worthy of supreme praise. Even those trees assigned more dubious functions—“The warlike Beech” and “the Cypresse [good for] funerall”—contribute to the overall portrait of a natural world perfectly amenable to human prerogatives.

However, the discordant final entry in this long list, “the Maple seeldom inward sound,” subverts the instrumentalist ideology by alerting the reader to the potential for failure. If the raw materials from which civilization constructs itself do not work as they should, the entire notion of instrumental materialism begins to crumble. After all, this outlook represents a naively positivist view of civilization, which is rarely borne out in the Spenser’s work. The ensuing Errour episode is only the first in a long series of unfortunate events that call into question humanity’s ability to better its lot through material endeavor. Indeed, the next oak tree we encounter in The Faerie Queene is not being used to build, but rather as an enemy’s weapon. Setting up the Redcrosse Knight’s battle with Orgoglio, the narrator describes the giant’s “stalking steps are stayde / Vpon a snaggy Oke, which he had torne / Out of his mothers bowelles, and it made / His mortall mace, wherewith his foemen he dismayed.” Instead of
aiding human progress, like the “trees so straight and hy” depicted in the catalogue, this “snaggy Oke” stands as a physical impediment. Moreover, the violence figured in Orgoglio’s procurement of the tree, an act of grotesque matricide, highlights the problematic nature of the exploitation of the material world. Linda Gregerson argues that even as Spenser uses the georgic to highlight the ethics of human habitation, he also exposes the inextricable violence of human interactions with the earth. In the context of such violence, we can understand the allegorical figure of Errour as an embodiment of the failure of the instrumental materialism. Not only is Errour a “ghastly parody of intellectual mastery,” as Linda Gregerson points out, but she also represents matter’s stubborn resistance to an instrumentalist paradigm.

Still, Errour is not simply a figure of critique; she is also generative. As Julian Yates argues in *Error, Misuse, and Failure*, the breakdown of instrumentality renders visible alternative epistemologies: “with these unexpected, illicit, parasitical turns away or into the spaces that fall beside the subject, into the world of the ‘para,’ that we move through the binary logic of the subject and object, of pollution and danger, into the world of things.” The distinction Yates makes between “object” and “thing” is elaborated in the work of Bruno Latour. Drawing upon Heidegger’s musings on the etymology of the word “thing,” Latour writes that, while an object is “abandoned to the empty mastery of science and technology” a thing is able to “deploy and gather its rich set of connections.” If Spenser’s tree catalogue represents the objectified world of technological mastery, the allegorical figure of Errour opens up the fecund thingness of the material world. Spenser, thus, works to expose the limitations of an instrumental understanding of matter, while alerting the reader to the hazards of attempting to move beyond it.

Heidegger’s critique of modern industrialism further illuminates the stakes of Spenser’s assessment of the instrumental. Focusing on modern technology, Heidegger considers how
instrumental materialism works by “bringing-forth” or “revealing”—\textit{alētheia}—the anthropocentric function of all things within the natural world.\textsuperscript{26} Heidegger contends that, in doing this, the human subject transforms the entire world into a vast “standing-reserve \textit{[Bestand]}.”\textsuperscript{27} Viewed through this lens, natural things are exposed an evolving—and, in some important ways, devolving—teleological formations. The natural world’s fulfillment is, thus, precipitated by a human “setting-upon” which exposes chains of productive utility: “Agriculture is now the mechanized food industry. Air is now set upon to yield nitrogen, the earth to yield ore, ore to yield uranium … uranium is set up to yield atomic energy.”\textsuperscript{28} Recast in Heidegger’s terminology, Spenser’s tree catalogue represents a poetic representation of the human attempt to “set upon” the material world in order to reveal it as a vast “standing-reserve” of resources attendant to our needs and desires.

While Heidegger’s critique is aimed at modern industrial society, Michael Zimmerman points out that Heidegger’s philosophy draws upon a long tradition of “productionist metaphysics,” reaching back to Plato and Aristotle.\textsuperscript{29} This broader timeline enables us to consider Spenser’s engagement with instrumentality as an early iteration of what would become Heidegger’s critique. Todd Borlik, focusing on a similar tree catalogue in Sidney’s \textit{Arcadia}, considers that such lists embody “the age’s increasingly proprietary attitude toward nature [by visualizing] the woods as a storehouse of raw materials.”\textsuperscript{30} This proprietary attitude was manifested in the large body of sixteenth-century literature aimed at maximizing human efficiency in dealing with the material world. John Fitzherbert’s agricultural manuals, for example, were published 26 times between 1523 and 1573 and versions Thomas Tusser’s \textit{A hundredth good pointes of husbandrie} (later updated to “\textit{Five Hundreth Points} …”) went through 18 editions between 1557 and 1599. Such texts often included lists of useful things found in the
natural world similar to Spenser’s tree catalogue. John Maplet’s 1567 natural history, aptly titled *A greene forest* (which comprises an extensive alphabetic inventory of animals, minerals, and vegetables), pays particular attention to trees and the “profite [that] cometh to man by them.”^31^ A more explicitly mercantile iteration of this discourse can be seen in Thomas Harriot’s popular colonial treatise, *A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia*, which comprises, among other things, an extensive inventory of “marchantable commodities” with a particular emphasis on various kinds of trees listed according to their diverse commercial uses.\(^{32}\) The paratactic structure that Spenser’s tree catalogue shares with these texts embodies the positivist, accumulative logic underpinning these instrumental models for apprehending the material world. In this context of such textual proliferation, we might understand the “bookes and papers” found in Errour’s vomit not only as doctrinal treatises, but also as practical manuals.\(^{33}\)

Forestry, the manifest subject of the tree catalogue, provides a suitable vehicle for revealing the limitations of instrumental materialism. By the later decades of Elizabeth’s reign, the destruction of England’s woodlands, a problem centuries in the making, became a subject of serious concern.\(^{34}\) Exacerbated by rapid population growth, agrarian enclosure, and the development of new industry, England’s acute timber shortage inspired an array of practical responses. Aristocrats such as Lord Burghley planted timber farms on their estates, the Elizabethan government issued a number of proclamations aimed at ameliorating the problem, the lawyer John Manwood published a voluminous treatise arguing to reinvigorate England’s canon of Forest Law, and colonists such as Thomas Hariot sought new sources of timber abroad.\(^{35}\) As an English colonist living in Ireland, Spenser proposed his own solution to the exhaustion of England’s timber supply, outlined in his posthumously published dialogue *A View of the State of Ireland*. The dialogue’s colonial protagonist, Irenaeus, boasts that the Irish
countryside is “adorned with goodly woods even fit for building of houses and ships, so commodiously, as that if some Princes in the world had them, they would soone hope to be lords of all the seas, and ere long all the world.” This passage reveals two important details about Spenser’s view of woodlands. First, the conditional phrase, “if some Princes in the world had them,” demonstrates Spenser’s knowledge of the fact that England, like its powerful European rivals, lacks the ready supply of timber necessary for substantiating imperial desires. Implicit in this statement is a powerful argument for the English colonization of Ireland because of the suggestion that if another country such as Spain or France were to gain a foothold in Ireland, England’s naval security would be irrevocably compromised. Second, it positions trees as the physical materials upon which epic poems, works notable for their celebration of imperial expansion, construct their grand narratives. Without an abundant supply of timber for the construction of fleets of ships, Agamemnon, Odysseus, and Aeneas would remain forever landlocked.

This connection between building materials and the stuff of literary composition is substantiated in the writings of the Roman poet Statius, whose epic poem *Thebaid* contains an analogue to, and possible source for, Spenser’s tree catalogue. Statius, who was operative in promulgating the connection between trees and raw materials, also connects the practice of poetic composition to this nexus of ideas. By titling his loose collection of poetry *Silvae*—“the forest”—Statius likens a single poem in an anthology to an individual tree in a forest; each supplies the “material” out of which the collective is formed. In this vein, the world *silva* in classical rhetorical usage refers to a hastily-composed collection of poems or prose works, which, like trees, grow together into a loose aggregate. The poet, like the carpenter, is imagined piecing together woody materials into finished works. Ben Jonson, a writer notable for his
materialist imagination, evokes this notion in preface to Under-wood: “With the same leave, the Ancients call’d that kind of body Sylva, or Υλη, in which there were works of divers nature, and matter congested; as the multitude call Timber-trees, promiscuously growing, a Wood, or Forrest: so am I bold to entitle these lesser Poems, of later growth, by this of Vnder-wood, out of the Analogie they hold to the Forrest, in my former booke, and no otherwise.” Jonson represents his gathering of poems in explicitly physical terms as “kind a body,” consisting of “works of divers nature, and matter congested.” The suggestion is that Jonson’s verdant art has produced a wellspring of material abundance ready to yield its harvest to the worthy reader.

Jonson’s The Forrest and Under-wood are the most famous renaissance anthologies to be titled after Statius’ collection, but by the time Spenser initially published the first three books of The Faerie Queene in 1590, a number English publications already bore arboreal titles. Among these are Thomas Fortescue’s 1576 translation of Pedro Mexia’s collection of prose essays, The forest or Collection of historyes no lesse profitable, then pleasant and necessary, doone out of Frenche into English, and H. C.’s 1579 collection of poems, The forrest of fancy Wherein is conteined very prety apothegmes, and pleaasunt histories, both in meeter and prose, songes, sonets, epigrams and epistles, of diuere matter and in diuere manner. VVith sundry other deuises, no lesse pithye then pleaasunt and profitable. George Gascoigne prefacess his collection A Hundred Sundry Flowers (1573) with the claim that the poems are “Gathered partely (by translation) in the fyne outlandish Gardins of Euripides, Ouid, Petrarke, Ariosto, and others: and partly by invention, out of our owne fruitefull Orchardes in Englande.” By linking poetic composition to the materialist discourse of the “profitable,” these collections foreground the association between poetry and physical matter. Connecting poetry with forestry is different from the more traditional association of poetry with flowers (an “anthology” is literally “a
gathering of flowers”) insofar as trees provide durable raw materials. Flowers may be useful as medicinal herbs, but they cannot be used to build a ship. Given the prevalence of this discourse in sixteenth-century England, it seems likely that Spenser would have been familiar with such associations.

This specific iteration of instrumental materialism illuminates a wider obsession with the profitable in sixteenth century literary culture. The idea that literature should not merely produce pleasure, but should contribute to the moral and economic health of the commonwealth informs the writing of a number of Spenser’s contemporaries like Gascoigne, Lyly, Greene, Nash, and Sidney. Richard Helgerson connects the Elizabethan obsession with prodigal son story to anxiety as to the moral and material efficacy of literary production: “Unable to ignore the suspicion that poetry was morally harmful, and equally unwilling to forgo it, they had to prove again and again that it might be made more beneficial.”

In the same vein, Lorna Hutson emphasizes the extent to which humanist discourse conflates the mastery of literature with the exploitation of the material world: “humanist education, with its emphasis on the mastery of self and of circumstances through the mastery of literary discourse, helped to bring about changes in England’s economic structure by encouraging more masterful, resourceful attitudes towards the material and temporal environment.”

Perhaps the most perspicuous example of this perspective occurs in Erasmus’ influential rhetorical manual De duplici copia verborum ac rerum commentarii duo. Focusing on literature as an inventory of useful tropes and phrases, Erasmus considers how literary texts “provide the raw material for future work,” which can be “extracted” by enterprising readers.

Philip Sidney, similarly, defends poetry in terms of “profit,” conceiving of writing as a calculated expenditure of raw materials. “For if it be, as I affirm, that no learning is so good as that which teacheth and moveth to virtue, and that none can both teach and move thereto so
much as poesy,” Sidney contends, “then is the conclusion manifest, that ink and paper cannot be to a more profitable purpose employed.” Sidneý’s focus on the physical implements of writing, “ink and paper,” which may be used to some other purpose, suggests a calculation of opportunity costs. Given the value of the physical materials from which books were made, poetry had to be justified in economic terms.

This context helps to illuminate a second sense in which Spenser’s tree catalogue embodies the perspective of instrumental materialism. Understood primarily as materials for human use, the trees in Spenser’s forest are constituted as the material foundations upon which the edifice of human civilization is constructed. However, as Quilligan suggests, this passage also serves a critical metapoetic function as a medium through which Spenser grapples with his source materials. To this point, the tree catalogue comprises an intricate series of intertextual allusions to contemporary, medieval, and classical works. Similar tree catalogues appear in Virgil’s *Aeneid* (6.179-82) and *Georgics* (2.440-53), Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (10.86-105), Statius’ *Thebaid* (6.98-106), and Chaucer’s *Parliament of Fowls* (176-82). Spenser’s tree catalogue, thus, appears as a strategy for self-consciously refashioning the literary materials he has inherited from previous generations of poets. In this vein, many of Spenser’s descriptions of individual trees simply transpose his source materials: “The sayling pine” translates Virgil’s “navigis pinos” and “The builder Oake,” modernizes Chaucer’s “byldere ok.” Through this elaborate tissue of echoes and allusions, the discourse of environmental exploitation coalesces with the poet’s ability to refashion past materials for his own use. This passage is, thus, mimetic in a double sense: it both represents a legible version of the visible features of the natural world and, at the same time, imitates the conventions set forth by past authors. Just as the industrious husbandman conceives of trees as raw materials ready to be put to use, the poet, guided by
writers like Erasmus, views past literary works as inventories of tropes, poetic devices, and rhetorical strategies. As distinct as these practices appear, both involve a refashioning of existing materials (natural re-sources and poetic sources) for the purposes of working them into a new, more efficacious form.

But the fact that Spenser inscribes these forms of instrumental materialism within his forest landscape does not imply an endorsement of this perspective. On the contrary, understanding this passage in context entails an acknowledgement of the erroneousness of viewing the material world as a storehouse of material resources and a literary work as an inventory of source material. While Judith Anderson points out that “[l]ike the infusing of spirit, strength, or archival treasures of which Spenser’s poet speaks, influence can, and often does, work against stagnation,” in the tree catalogue, Spenser parodies a particular form of imitation: that which objectifies and simply reproduces features of past literary works. This form of imitation is embodied in the Renaissance notion of copia—the idea that tropes and passages can be stored up like raw materials for future use. It also manifests itself in the anthology impulse, which conceives of poems as resources to be gathered. Indeed, this is precisely how the tree catalogue functioned for a number of Renaissance readers. For example, Robert Albott, promising “various discourses, both pleasaunt and profitable,” includes the tree catalogue in his 1600 anthology England’s Parnassus under a section, “Proper Epithets and Adjuncts to diurse things. Of Trees, and Hearbes.” Nearly a century later, John Evelyn includes Spenser’s tree catalogue in his 1664 tract promoting better forestry, Silva, or, A discourse of forest-trees and the propagation of timber in His Majesties dominions, under the assumption that Spenser’s text promotes “the Improvement, and preservation of Woods.” Evelyn’s willful decontextualization
combines the literary currency of *copia* with the assumption that the information stored in poetry has practical application for dealing with the material world.

However, the ultimate function of Spenser’s tree catalogue is not practical but critical: it encodes and undermines the discourse of instrumental materialism by introducing it as a species of error. Juxtaposing Spenser’s text with its most direct predecessor, a stanza from Chaucer’s *Parliament of Fowls*, highlights the dubious nature of Spenser’s take on this well-known material. As he crosses the threshold into a dream-world of profound natural beauty, Chaucer’s narrator constructs a familiar inventory of the forest’s material bounty:

The byldere ok, and ek the hardy asshe;
The piler elm, the cofre unto carayne;
The boxtre pipere, holm to whippes lashe;
The saylynge fyr; the cipresse, deth to playne;
The shetere ew; the asp for shaftes pleyne;
The olyve of pes, and eke the dronke vyne;
The victor palm, the laurer to devyne.\(^{50}\)

This inventory reveals a worldly hierarchy culminating in “the laurer to devyne”—an image that blends the poet’s craft with spiritual divination—signifying the poet’s preeminence among all other vocations. Spenser, on the other hand, depicts the poet in his tree catalogue as lost within the thicket of worldly life. The enjambed line, “The Laurell, meed of mightie Conquerours / And Poets sage,” marginalizes the poet by positioning him as an afterthought, attached only tenuously to the victor’s laurel. Rather than culminating in the poet, the stanza continues its survey of useful trees before finally landing on “the Maple seeldom inward sound”—an image that probes deeper into the materiality of the world and exposes the uncomfortable fact of physical decay.
Since the heart of instrumental materialism lies in the human subject’s ability to control the external world, it is fitting that the “wandering woods”—which lead the characters away from this perspective and toward another paradigm for understanding materiality—are a catalyst for the incremental loss of human agency. The characters first realize that they are lost when they cannot find “that path, which first was shown” and after wandering “too and fro in waies vnknowne” the dizzying topography “makes them doubt, their wits be not their owne.” The woodlands, which had in the previous stanza appeared as passive emblems of epistemological clarity, now become a source of disorienting and malevolent agency. The human subject no longer lies comfortably outside the objectified space of the material world. In a literary register, we might understand these lines as the poet’s response to the hyper-conventionality of the tree catalogue. After all, the poet, like the characters, has hitherto chosen to take the path “that beaten seemd most bare” by simply imitating his source materials. From the point of view of the poet, the topography of the road-most-traveled represents the error of uncritical imitation.

As the Redcrosse Knight enters the den of Errour, the poem’s vision of the material world shifts from the categorical knowledge of instrumental materialism into the more problematic realm of maternal/material birth:

his glittering armor made
A little glooming light, much like a shade,
By which he saw the vgly monster plaine,
Halfe like a serpent horribly displaide,
But th’other halfe did womans shape retaine,
Most lothsom, filthie, foule, and full of vile disdaine.
And as she lay vpon the durtie ground,
Her huge long taile her den all ouerspred,
Yet was in knots and many boughtes vpwound,
Pointed with mortall sting. Of her there bred,
A thousand yong ones, which she dayly fed,
Sucking vpon her poisnous dugs, eachone
Of sundrie shapes, yet all ill fauored:
Soone as that vnco
uth light vpon them shone,
Into her mouth they crept, and suddain all were gone.⁵³

Significantly, the Redcrosse Knight’s encounter with Errour is accompanied by the failure of instrumentality: the Dwarf hands the knight “his needlesse spere” just as he dismounts from his horse. “Needlesse” here means “useless” because the spear is a weapon intended for use on horseback. To this point, when doing battle with the monster, the knight’s attempt to subdue her with weapons quickly gives way to bodily struggle, as the two become entwined together, each attempting to strangle the other.

Moreover, the fact that the useless spear is also an obvious image of sexual impotence calls attention to the failing materiality of the male body. To this point, Errour, the first overtly allegorical figure in the poem, embodies the Biblical account of the fall from Eden: she is both woman and snake, tempted and tempter, human and animal. By inscribing this story into Errour’s flesh, Spenser highlights the fallen nature of the material body. Janet Adelman describes the cultural associations condensed in this kind of material image: “matter itself is the diseased
inheritance of the female body: the myth that made Eve responsible for the Fall and hence for the mortal body is played out in any ordinary birth.” Drawing upon such associations, David Lee Miller reads this passage as an elaborate gynophobic fantasy: “as the episode develops its phantasmagoric nexus of theological error, imperfect formation, slimy fertility, prodigious birth, vomit, defecation, ‘deadly stinke,’ and hermaphroditism one begins increasingly to wonder the underlying scene of horror may not be that of the womb itself as it haunts the Renaissance male conscious.” Still, this episode has implications that transcend sexual, social, and even species boundaries. The effect of this passage is to force the reader to confront his or her own entanglement in the material. Reading the Redcrosse Knight as symbolic of bodily existence, Jonathan Goldberg asserts that “[e]very house he visits, each cave he explores, is but another chance for the reader to see again and to grapple with the question of what it is to be in the body.” In this vein, as the Redcrosse Knight does battle with Errour, he finds his own body increasingly intertwined with hers; after his initial stoke fails, “her huge traine / All suddenly about his body wound, / That hand or foot to stir he stroue in vaine.” Errour’s attempt to strangle with knight incapacitates the most immediately instrumental parts of his body, the hand and foot, and, in doing so, reveals the more general inadequacy of the instrumental. Indeed, it is eventually revealed that the Redcrosse Knight is, in fact, named Georgos, literally “worker of the earth,” suggesting the extent to which human bodies are intertwined with their environments. Similarly, the appearance of “bookes and papers” within Errour’s vomit, images that problematically blur the lines between biology and technology, suggests that the instruments of information distribution fail to escape the grotesque materiality Errour represents. Even the pages on which Spenser’s text is printed dwell in imperfect, failing materiality.
For all of the phantasmagoric, self-consciously fictionalized imagery in these stanzas, this is the first time in the poem that the Redcrosse Knight is able to perceive matter “plaine” without the veneer of instrumentality. Harry Berger points out that, “[t]he controlling literary form of the first book is that of apocalypse, which means literally a stripping away, a rending of the veil in which ‘the substance of things hoped for’ is manifested in its visible embodiments.” To this point, we might interpret the Den of Errour as “a stripping away” of the enameled materiality of the tree catalogue in revelation of material entanglement. The tree catalogue’s manifest order and epistemological clarity are, thus, exposed as parts of a ruse designed to undermine a falsely objectified understanding of the material world. In place of this false understanding, Spenser forces the reader to confront the uncomfortable reality that each and every worldly body (be it animal, mineral, vegetable, or human) is inexorably mired in materiality. This dynamic precludes the separation of subject from object, and highlights the grotesque thingness of the world. In doing this, Spenser foregrounds his “displeasant” method of moral pedagogy: “To some I know this Methode will seem displeasing, which had rather have a discipline delivered plainly in ways of precepts, or sermoned at large, as they use, then thus cloudily enwrapped in Allegorical devises. But such, me seeme, should be satisfied with the use of these days, seeing all things accounted by their shows, and nothing esteemed of, that is not delightful and pleasing to commune sense.” If the tree catalogue is what his reader expects, something “delightful and pleasing to common sense,” the grotesque Errour episode introduces the more opaque and ambivalent world of material things.

Spenser’s turn toward a more inclusive representation of matter also has epistemological implications. In the world of things (as opposed to objects), categorical knowledge is difficult if not impossible; hybrid forms, monstrosities, and other ineffable bodies proliferate at an alarming
rate; and liminal creatures such as the snake-woman, the blind amphibian, and the hermaphrodite seem designed to overwhelm human taxonomy. Forms of life are always in the process of becoming. And cycles of life and death are short and grotesque: once the knight has slain Errour, her progeny, fed by her “poisnous dugs,” destroy themselves by feeding of their mother’s poisonous blood. If instrumental materialism gestures toward the rational empiricism, than Spenser’s representation of imprecise images, such as monsters of “sundrie shapes,” and overwhelming quantities—“Ten thousand kindes of creatures”—is proleptic of fissures within this discourse. From the point of view of the reader, these stanzas, with their semantic enjambment and ambiguity, reinforce the confusion fostered by the world in which the Redcrosse Knight finds himself: the reader is left to pause momentarily over which half of Errour’s body is snake and which half “did womans shape retaine.” The polymorphous texture of this passage represents what Sean Kane refers to as “Spenserian Ecology” in that it “admits into his narrative the very principles that most codes are designed to resist: time, change, randomness, variety.”

To this point, Spenser’s poetry reaches new levels of originality as it abandons the perspective of instrumental materiality, figured in the economics of subject and object, for ecological entanglement. If this ecological matter is nauseating, grotesque, and hideously ugly, it is also polymorphous, spontaneous, and immensely creative. In other words, creation ungonvernved by the laws of instrumental materialism and aesthetic decorum enables more expansive, though also threatening, possibilities for Spenser’s art.

Read in the context of the tree catalogue, the most striking feature of Spenser’s representation of ecological matter is its indifference to human use. This point is powerfully illustrated in Spenser’s simile in stanza 21 comparing Errour’s vomit to the fecund shores of the Nile River:
As when old father Nilus gins to swell
With timely pride aboue the Aegyptian vale,
His fattie waues doe fertile slime outwell,
And ouerflow each plaine and lowly dale:
But when his later spring gins to auale,
Huge heapes of mudd he leaues, wherein there breed
Ten thousand kindes of creatures partly male
And partly femall of his fruitful seed;
Such vgly monstrous shapes elswher may no man reed. 63

It is the failure of Errour’s digestive system, her forced vomiting, that is ultimately most productive. Like Errour’s fecund body, Nilus’ “fruitful seed” generates multitudes of swarming monsters—an image which brings male sexuality into the fray of the material. It is notable that similar Renaissance accounts of the Nile’s fertile floods suggest the extent to which the ensuing fecundity might be put to human use. Thomas Cooper, among Spenser’s direct sources, writes that “Nilus was famous for the virtue of the water thereof, whiche ouerflowynge the country of Aegypte, made the grounde woonderfull fertile many yeres after, so that without labourynge, the earth brought foorth abundaunce of sundry graynes and plantes” 64 Rather than generating vast provision for humanity, Spenser’s version of Nilus, after he did “ouerflow each plaine and lowly dale”—effectively disrupting the human economy of food production—produces only “vgly monstrous shapes” of no benefit to humanity. In representing the materiality of the world, Spenser insistently denies the efficacy of human endeavor; even the “weedy gras” upon which Errour vomits falls appears conspicuously resistant to cultivation. 65 Unlike the tree catalogue, Spenser’s representation of Errour exhibits neither the controlling hand of divine providence, nor
the “oeconomy of nature” described by seventeenth-century natural philosophers. Rather, anticipating Darwin, creation in the *Faerie Queene* seems driven by stochastic mutations, which occur with indifference to human needs and desires.

However, the final line in this stanza, “Such vgly monstrous shapes elswher may no man reed,” does point to one human use to which this form of materiality might be put. “Reed” in this sentence means “see”—suggesting the geographic specificity of these creatures—but it also self-reflexively points to the activity of reading. In this later sense, Spenser refers to the new heights of originality that his work has achieved by representing the grotesque materiality of the world in such unprecedentedly visceral and creative detail. Indeed, the proliferation of images of birth and generation in the aforementioned passage highlights Spenser’s immensely original poetics. If the tree catalogue represents the error of adhering too closely to poetic convention, then Errour, and the grotesque materiality that she embodies, points to the possibilities enabled by the complex thingness of Spenser’s art. By shifting focus away from mimesis and toward processes of autochthony and autopoiesis within the material world, Spenser produces an account of matter that enables the possibility of endless creative potential; the entropy of static borrowing—and its material corollary, instrumental materialism—gives way to an productive, though largely uncontrollable, environment.

This environment is most fully represented in Spenser’s account of the Garden of Adonis in Book 3, canto 6 of *The Faerie Queene*. Noting the influence of Lucretius on Spenser’s representation of matter, Jonathan Goldberg argues that this episode “find[s] terms for the life of the world that coincide with sexual fulfillment” and “unites principles of spirit and matter in a form that is emphatically material.” This all-encompassing materiality, figured in terms evocative of both sensual pleasure and visceral horror, presents the possibility (or perhaps threat)
of endless literary material: “Long worke it were, / Here to account the endlesse progeny / Of all the weeds, that bud and blossome there.”67 The irony is, of course, that the “endlesse progeny” can never be catalogued, and that the poet’s account must always necessarily be incomplete. This point is reiterated in the narrator’s description that “Infinite shapes of creatures there are bred, / And vncouth forms, which none yet euer knew.”68 Apropos of this sentiment is the fact that Spenser’s work—long understood as characterized by “[e]ndless acts of undoing, denial, and frustration”—ultimately remains incomplete.69 Spenser’s problem was not a lack of inspiration, but the unavoidable finitude of life.

Given Spenser’s focus on the forest as a sign of materiality, it is fitting that arboreal images pervade Book 1. Shortly after overcoming Errour, the Redcrosse Knight encounters two lovers, Fradubio and Fraelissa, who have been transformed into trees (1.2.30-44). Una is later rescued from Sansloy by a group of “wyld woodgods” whose leader is named Sylvanus, whose name means “useless wood,” silva + vanus (1.6.7-33) Finally, the Redcrosse Knight’s battle with the dragon takes a fortunate turn when he stumbles in “mire” emanating from the Tree of Life, which stands beside The Tree of Knowledge (1.11.46-48). This proliferation of trees suggests the extent to which Spenser’s engagement with the world is mediated by the materiality of the forest. These later images, however, tend to conflate the bodily and the arboreal, the subject and the object, in a manner not possible in the tree catalogue. In the ecological world of things, such distinctions are no longer possible. Rather, the reader is invited to contemplate the blurring of epistemological, moral, and material boundaries.

If internal tensions in Spenser’s representation of the material world are apparent in the poem’s opening canto, they are also central to the closing book. The Cantos of Mutabilitie supply an etiological myth for this split in Spenser’s representation of the material world. In this
addendum to *The Faerie Queene*, nature has been divided into two distinct entities: the goddess Nature (who represents the orderly government of the material world) and Mutabilitie (who stands for the inevitability of change and decay). Figuring their conflict in Greco-Roman terms as the struggle between Titans and Olympians, Spenser depicts the Titan Mutabilite claiming hereditary right to the kingdom of nature, and the ruling Olympian Nature as the regal judge, governing the natural world. Although Nature ultimately prevails in sublimating mutability to the orderly government of seasonal time, Mutabilitie’s claim to the throne (along with her account of the material world) seems much more compelling than Nature’s, particularly in the context of the poem as a whole. In fact, in the final two stanzas, the narrator comes out in agreement with Mutabilite’s version of the natural world: “Me seemes, that though she all unworthy were / Of the Heav’ns Rule; yet very sooth to say, / In all things else she beares the greatest sway.” What is significant about this unresolved conflict is that Spenser uses it to produce a dialectic between the oeconomy of nature (in yet unnamed form) and a version of nature resistant to order, objectification, and instrumentality. Spenser describes the primordial state of the natural world:

> For, she [Mutabilitie] the face of earthly things so changed,
> That all which Nature had establisht first
> In good estate, and in meet order ranged,
> She did pervert, and all their statues burst

For Spenser, the oeconomy of nature—figured here as “good estate,” suggesting household government—is precisely what was lost when Mutabilite first asserted her rule over the material world. Even as Spenser foregrounds the possibility of an oeconomy of nature, his poem again and again subverts such forms of natural order.
From an ecocritical vantage point, Spenser’s eschewal of instrumental materialism in favor of a more “vibrant” view of matter—to borrow a term from Jane Bennett’s recent book—enables a vision of the world that refuses to transform non-human things, both living and non-living, into passive objects. As Bennett points out, such an understanding of the material world has intrinsically political implications. Echoing the Nicene Creed, Bennett writes, “I believe that encounters with lively matter can chasten my fantasies of human mastery, highlight the common materiality of all that is, expose a wider distribution of agency, and reshape the self and all its interests.” While Spenser was not in any recognizable way an “environmentalist” thinker, his representations of matter do precipitate a radical unmooring of the human subject’s relationship to the non-human world.


2 Among the most prominent of these studies are Julian Yates’ Error, Misuse, and Failure: Object Lessons from the English Renaissance (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2002); Jonathan Gil Harris’ Untimely Matter in the Age of Shakespeare (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); and Jonathan Goldberg’s The Seeds of Things: Theorizing Sexuality and Materiality in Renaissance Representations (New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 2009).

3 Harris, Untimely Matter, 1.

4 In the last 10 years literary scholars have assembled an impressive list of book-length studies of early modern representations of the natural environment. See Ken Hiltner, Milton and Ecology (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2003) and What Else is Pastoral? Renaissance Literature


8 Gayle Kern Paster, Humoring the Body: Emotions and the Shakespearean Stage (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2004), 9. Paster further applies the ecology of the passions to Spenser’s works in “Becoming the Landscape: The Ecology of the Passions in the Legend of Temperance,” Environment and Embodiment in Early Modern England (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). “Amavia and Pyroches may seem to represent humoral and environmental opposites—the one overwhelmed by grief and longing for dissolution, the other overwhelmed by choler and endlessly engaged in combat,” Paster considers, “Yet each, in different ways, enacts a deeply reciprocal relation with their environments—Amavia dissolves into a ground eager to receive
both flesh and blood while Pyrochles battles an environment always ready to embattle him”
(150).

9 Harry Berger, jr., *Revisionary Play: Studies in Spenserian Dynamics* (Berkley: Univ. of
California Press, ), 23. Given his early interest in the subject, Berger might be understood as the
founder of ecological criticism. In a series of essays published in the 1960s, Berger explores how
an ecological criticism might work and what its implications might be: see Berger’s “The
(1964): 409-35; and “The Ecology of the Medieval Imagination: An Introductory Overview” *The


Press, 1963), pages 158-60 and Robert Harrison, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (Chicago:
Univ. of Chicago Press, 1993). Harrison also points out that the Latin word *materia* was used to
refer not only to abstract notions of matter, but also to “the useable wood of a tree as opposed to
its bark, fruit, [and] sap” (28).

12 Janet Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare’s Plays,
Hamlet to The Tempest* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 6.

13 A. C. Hamilton, *The Spenser Encyclopedia*, ed. A. C. Hamilton, et.al. (Toronto: Univ. of
Toronto Press, 1990) points out that “Spenser often selects his trees for their emblematic
meaning in order to make a significant statement about this context. The trees that introduce the
labyrinth of Error are symbols of our passage through life, being emblems of secular activities—
shipbuilding, agriculture, love, and warfare—set against reminders of human mortality and weakness” (697-8). Earnest Gohn, “A Note on Spenser’s Use of Trope” *Modern Language Notes* 64.1 (1949), contends that “The tree passage … can easily be interpreted as Spenser’s attempt, by means of trope, to indicate the allurements of the sense of sight” (55).


15 Ibid., 99.


20 See Jillian Yeats, *Error Misuse and Failure* for an overview of the concept of object lessons.

21 Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, 1.7.10.7-9.

22 Ibid., 1.1.8.5.


24 Yates, *Error, Misuse, and Failure*, 27


27 Ibid., 298.

28 Ibid., 296.


33 Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, 1.1.20.6.

34 As historian Charles Wilson, *England’s Apprenticeship, 1603-1763* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1966) points out, the “acute shortage of timber which had been growing steadily ever since the accession of Elizabeth reached in the seventeenth century the dimensions of a national crisis” (80-1). Arthur Standish’s tract published 10 times between 1611 and 1616 entitled *The Commons Complaint* (London, 1611) laments “the general destruction and waste of wood made within this … Kingdom, more within twenty or thirty last yeares then in any hundred yeares before” (B2r).

35 See Borlik, *Ecocriticism and Early Modern Literature*, 75-104, and Robert Harrison, *Forests*, 61-105. A number of recent studies have highlighted Spenser’s understanding of the material, economic, social, and political status of the early modern forest. Judith Owens, “Professing Ireland in the Woods of Spenser’s *Mutabilitie*” *Explorations in Renaissance Culture* 29.1 (2003) argues that by organizing his landscape through the forest trope “Spenser taps into a cluster of
long-standing cultural and political associations that render ambivalent his philosophical and political positions in the poem” (10). And Elizabeth Weixel, “Squires of the Wood: The Decline of the Aristocratic Forest in Book IV of *The Faerie Queene,*” *Spenser Studies* 25 (2010), argues that Book 4 of *The Faerie Queene* dramatizes the forest’s transformation from a space defined by aristocratic needs and desires to a commercial space associated with the emergent merchant class.


37 William Rueckert, “Literature and Ecology” in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* ed., Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1996) provides an interesting analogue to classical and renaissance models for understanding poems as plants. Rueckert contends, “if poets are suns, then poems are green plants among us for they clearly arrest energy on its path to entropy and in so doing, not only raise matter from lower to higher order, but help create a self-perpetuating and evolving system” (111).


39 Pedro Mexia, *The forest or Collection of historyes no lesse profitable, then pleasant and necessary, doone out of Frenche into English,* trans. Thomas Fortescue (London, 1571); H. C., *The forrest of fancy Wherein is conteined very pretty apothegmes, and pleasauent histories, both in meeter and prose, songes, sonets, epigrams and epistles, of diverser matter and in diverser manner. VVith sundry other deuises, no lesse pithye then pleasauent and profitable* (London, 1579).


49 John Evelyn, *Silva, or, A discourse of forest- trees and the propagation of timber in His Majesties dominions* (London, 1664), 201.


51 Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, 1.1.10.4, 5, 7 (emphasis mine).

52 Ibid., 1.1.11.3.

Janet Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers*, 6; Quilligan, *Milton’s Spenser*, argues that the grotesque imagery of this passage encoded “the effects of nauseated horror at the facts of monstrous female creation” (82).


Goldberg, *The Seeds of Things*, 83

Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, 1.1.18.6-8.

Ibid., 1.10.66.6.

Ibid., 1.1.20.6.


Thomas Cooper, *Thesaurus linguae Romanae et Britannicae* (London, 1565), [quoted from Hamilton, 37].


Ibid., 3.6.35.1-2.


Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, 7.3.1.3-5.
71 Ibid., 7.1.5.1-4.


73 Ibid., 122.
CHAPTER III

JONSON’S UNIVERSAL PARASITE

History hides the fact that man is the universal parasite, that everything and everyone around him is a hospitable space. Plants and animals are always his hosts; man is always necessarily their guest. Always taking, never giving. He bends the logic of exchange and of giving in his favor when he is dealing with nature as a whole. When he is dealing with his kind, he continues to do so; he wants to be the parasite of man as well. And his kind wants to be so too.

--Michel Serres, *The Parasite*

Almost
All the wise world is little else, in nature,
But parasites or sub-parasites.
---Ben Jonson, *Volpone*

Having seen in Chapter 2 how Spenser’s representation of the material world in *The Faerie Queene* foregrounds the possibility of a natural economy, only to reveal how the intrinsic complexity of matter subverts any such orderly and hospitable cosmology, I will now turn to Ben Jonson, whose “To Penshurst” provides the fullest literary embodiment of the oeconomy of nature. While Spenser is interested in humankind’s inability to objectify (and thereby fully disenable ourselves from) the mutable nature of the physical world, Jonson represents the natural world as a perfectly functioning household (*oikos*) that functions with systematic precision. Without any external compulsion, Penshurst’s animals, vegetables, and even minerals, order themselves according to the edicts of human use, specifically the use of the estate’s masters. Within this predictability, however, Jonson posits the poet’s ability to subvert this strict order by
adopting the figure of the parasite. Taking on the role of parasite enables Jonson to subvert the economy of nature, figured socially in the dynamics of patronage, even as he celebrates it.

Displaying a characteristic mixture of ambition and self-loathing, Ben Jonson’s brief epigram “To My Muse” casts the poet’s career as a struggle for autonomy in a culture devoted to sycophantic flattery and shifting court fashions. Jonson, having resolved himself to abandon his muse in favor of “welcome povertie,” gestures toward an alternative path led by poverty’s guidance: “She shall instruct my after-thoughts to write / Things manly, and not smelling parasite.”¹ The olfactory register Jonson uses to assess his previous literary output drives home the point that works created under unsavory conditions (in this case, the loathsome economy of flattery) are tainted by the abject terms of their production. Jonson, however, quickly reverses the course set in this seemingly conclusive couplet by finally attempting to reconcile himself with his muse: “But I repent me: Stay. Who e’re is rais’d, / For worth he has not, He is tax’d, not prais’d.”² These final lines make the surprising assertion that the poet’s apparent attempts to flatter his “worthlesse lord” through poetry were in fact acts of veiled criticism aimed at exposing his anonymous patron’s inadequacy.³ In this way, the poem reveals that the poet indebted to networks of patronage does not have to retreat into a life of poverty in order to criticize the system within which he writes; this role is built into his very position as parasite. The poet who has seemingly praised his patron has, in fact, revealed the patron’s tenuous position as one whose status is built upon the shaky foundation of parasitical flattery. Like Shakespeare’s Timon, the patron’s supposed wealth and social standing rests upon those who, while appearing to prop him up, ultimately precipitate his destruction. The dynamic illustrated in this poem (of the poet who transforms his seemingly abject position as parasite into a source of power) has broad significance within Jonson’s literary canon.⁴ Conscious of the opportunities
enabled by this dynamic, Jonson willingly assumes the role of parasite in this and other poems in order to raise questions regarding the very system of literary production in which he so adroitly participates.⁵

This chapter focuses on Jonson’s use of the parasite as a strategy for both occupying and subverting systems of literary production. Drawing upon the critical theory of Michel Serres, I consider the parasite as a figure that introduces “noise” or “interference” into an otherwise orderly system in order to rewrite that system for personal advantage. By working both within and against notions of “oeconomy”—a term that designates the early modern art of household management—the parasite enables Jonson to criticize patronage networks even as he participates in them. Specifically, I argue that Jonson’s incongruous appearance as a gluttonous parasite in “To Penshurst” works to reconfigure the social and natural hierarchies upon which the poem is structured in order to enable alternative social interactions aligned on a horizontal, rather than vertical, axis. This allows Jonson temporarily to level distinctions between poet and patron by displaying the fact that the patron, like the poet, participates in the abject sociality of the parasite.

Recent scholarship has been curiously silent on the prominent role that the parasite plays in early modern literature. This is perhaps because of the parasite’s perceived conventionality as a stock character borrowed from classical models. Indeed, early studies of the Tudor-Stuart parasite tend to focus on tracing lines of filiation between classical, Italian, and English examples and on constructing taxonomies through which to organize dramatic parasites.⁶ Central to these studies are the generic parasites found in Roman comedy, which provide the principal literary models for the more nuanced parasites that inhabit the early modern stage. These studies focus on how such celebrated early modern characters as Merygreek, Mosca, and Falstaff are modeled after the dramatic parasites of Plautus and Terrance.⁷ Such scholarship is useful in
displaying how early modern authors drew upon and refashioned classical material, but—by constituting the parasite primarily as a generic convention established in classical works—they also divert attention away from the fact that the parasite foregrounds an issue central to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century literary production: namely, the parasite’s role in the networks of patronage that underpinned much of the writing of this period.

Jonson and his contemporaries were acutely aware of the implications that the parasite held for a literary culture devoted largely to the struggle for patronage. Jonson’s contemporary and sometime collaborator, John Marston, for example, succinctly expresses the dilemma posed by this dynamic by contemplating his own participation in a literary system based on flattery:

Nor can I make my soule a merchandize,  
Seeking conceits to sute these Artlesse times.  
Ordaine for base reward to Poetize:  
Soothing the world with oylie flatteries.  
Shall mercenary thoughts prouoke me write?  
Shall I for lucar be a Parasite?  

In Marston’s satirical verse, to choose to participate in the world of contemporary literary production is to transform oneself into a base commodity—to “make [one’s] soule a merchandize”—and to “sute” the poetic craft to the exigencies of the time. Put simply, Marston suggests that to earn a living by writing in early modern England necessitated playing the parasite—a proposition formally reinforced by the couplet rhyming “write” with “Parasite.” Jonson certainly shared Marston’s disenchantment with the “[a]rtlesse times” in which they lived, as is evidenced by the vitriolic rhetoric of his famous “Ode to Himself,” which rails against “the loathèd stage, / And the more loathsome age.” Articulating the ideal poet against

the parasite, Jonson represents Asper, the author figure in *Every Man Out of His Humour*, as “an ingenious and free spirit, eager and constant in reproophe, without feare controuling the worlds abuses” and “[o]ne, whom no seruile hope of gaine, or frosty apprehension of danger, can make to be a Parasite, either to time, place or opinion.” Negating the parasite’s tendency to bind the author to “time” (position in history), “place” (geographic location), and “opinion” (social and political convention), Jonson envisions an author detached from the material circumstances that delimit poetic creation. However, as Jonson understood, this authorial ideal was all but unattainable in a literary culture committed to entrenched hierarchical obligations. Even Jonson’s friend John Selden, who the poet describes as “a Compasse keeping one foot still / Upon [his] Center”—the very image of constancy—was often accused of “parasitic careerism” by his detractors. Reid Barbour points out that “[l]ike Ben Jonson … Selden was obsessed with the figure of the wit-turned-parasite, with intellectual or literary talent that was sold away for the hire of an often corrupt patron’s whims and desires.” For Selden, as for Jonson, the problem was that engaging in public life in Jacobean England necessitated playing the parasite. Historically, then, the parasite represents a pervasive model for representing the worldly dimensions of seventeenth-century authorship, particularly the author’s perpetual search for patronage.

More recently, in the realm of poststructuralist literary theory, the parasite has gained prominence as a metaphor for expressing ambivalence engendered by the relationships between authors, critics, and literary texts. Describing networks of textual filiation, J. Hillis Miller contends that “[t]he new poem both needs the old texts and must destroy them. It is both parasitical on them, feeding ungraciously on their substance, and at the same time it is a sinister host which unmans them by inviting them into its home, as the Green Knight invites Gawain.” As compelling as Miller’s deconstructive analysis of textual filiation is it fails to embrace the
parasite’s essential materiality. It is precisely this materiality that renders the parasite a particularly apt figure for exploring the relationship between the material conditions of literary production (the means through which the poet earns a living as an author) and the ethereal stuff of poetic creation. Enter Michel Serres. Working in French, Serres uses the word *parasite* in three ways: as a biological parasite (a tapeworm), a social parasite (a sycophant), and “noise” or “interference” within a system (static on the radio). These three meanings enable Serres to incorporate the natural, the social, and the semiotic into a single (albeit excessively complex) network of interrelation. In doing so, Serres, who is committed to forging webs of exchange between the humanities, the social sciences, and the natural sciences, produces a figure through which to understand the relationship between systems of communication and systems of biological necessity: the parasite is one who, like the poet, “obtains energy and pays for it in information.” This discursive liminality enables the parasite, a seemingly marginal figure, to rewrite systems of information and energy exchange by “introduce[ing] disorganization into the system and then, a new order.” In this way, the parasite provides a structural model for understanding the poet’s relationship to economic systems as well as his or her ability to manipulate such systems through creative acts of disobedient self-indulgence.

Serres’ multifaceted conception of the parasite as a model for understanding the social, the natural, and the systemic helps to illuminate the complexity of the Jonsonian parasite. Like Serres, Jonson is interested in the parasite as a relational position that occurs both in the social sphere (between humans and other humans) and in the quasi-natural sphere (between humans and animals). Since the word “parasite” is, at its etymological root, a spatial metaphor—a being that dwells “next to” (*para*) a source of “food” (*sitos*)—the relationship between a parasite and its host gains coherence from a shared space. For Jonson this space is most fully embodied in the
aristocratic household: the institution in which social relationships are configured and food is produced and distributed. The processes that constitute the household coalesce in the concept of “oeconomy,” which in early modern usage connotes values of order, thrift, industriousness, and careful management, and denotes both the organization of literal households and of analogously arranged structures such as the nation, the church, or even the human body. Central to oeconomy is the notion of efficient management of resources in which everything is used and nothing is stored or wasted. Illustrating this point, Aristotle, a thinker operative in the development of this concept, writes that “Nature, like a good householder [oikonomos], is not in the habit of throwing away anything from which it is possible to make anything useful.”

Oeconomy, thus, represents an early model for thinking about a system of resource management that appears both within and without the world of human relations. The theory of “the oeconomy of nature”—first developed by Kenelm Digby, Jonson’s patron and eventual literary executor—speaks to the pervasiveness of this model for understanding the world.

If we are to understand oeconomy as the system through which the household is kept in order, then the parasite (a figure that weasels its way into the household) represents the disruption of this system, and thereby embodies Serres’ notion of systemic “interference.” Identifying Odysseus as a foundational literary parasite, Elizabeth Ivony Tyalwsky describes the spatiality of the text’s narrative trajectory: “[t]he Odyssey’s hero started out on the very edge of the oikos, unrecognized and unwanted; he gained access to the house, to the table, and finally to recognition and resumption of control of the household through the functions of hospitality.”

The parasite’s formation by and exploitation of the logic of oeconomy can similarly be seen in Jonson’s representation of the parasite as an abject creature dwelling at the margins of the household. To this point, Jonson describes parasites in Discoveries as “an odious, and vile kind
of creatures, that fly about the house all day; and, picking up the filth of the house, like Pies or Swallowes, carry it to their nest.”\textsuperscript{22} Likewise, in Jonson’s famously ill-received comedy, \textit{The New Inn}, Nurse castigates Fly: “Hang thee thou \textit{Parasite}, thou sonne of crums, / And ottes.”\textsuperscript{23} In both of these examples, the parasite, figured as an intrusive animal, interferes with the proper functioning of the household. Represented by creatures with a penchant for thriving in a domestic ecosystem—certain species of birds and flies—the parasite points to imperfections in the oeconomy of the household. More specifically, the parasite stems from these imperfections—these acts of bad housekeeping generative of “filth” and “crums”—and it therefore embodies a critique of the household oeconomy. While oeconomy is ostensibly a model of order and proper resource management, the parasite reminds us that any such managerial system is always necessarily defective, never capable of achieving the level of perfection that it ostensibly seeks to achieve.

In the aforementioned examples, the parasite exists primarily as a figure of derision, through which those deserving of scorn, such as flatterers and sycophantic poets, are rendered homologous to abject animals. However, Jonson’s fascination with the parasite also stems from its proximity to the social position of the poet. As Bruce Boehrer has aptly demonstrated, Jonson persistently draws upon the conceptual metaphorics of the alimentary canal in producing his account of literary authorship. The parasite’s irreverent eating habits are, therefore, easily assimilated into the dominant tropes Jonson uses to narrate his career as poet.\textsuperscript{24} What is often ambiguous about Jonson’s representation of the parasite is whether the position is intended as an insult aimed at sycophantic contemporaries or rather as a positive source of self-identification. Describing parasites as “[f]latterers for their bread, that praise all my oraculous Lord do’s or sayes, be it true or false: invent tales that shall please: make baites for his Lordships eares,”
Jonson represents himself in competition with parasites for his lord’s favor. On one hand, this passage works to separate Jonson, the true servant, from the abject flatterers that threaten to usurp his position. On the other, Jonson’s overtly flattering description of his “oraculous” lord betrays the poet’s participation in the very economy of sycophantic flattery from which he ostensibly seeks to exculpate himself. Moreover, this passage reveals uncanny similarities between parasitism and his own literary production: both the parasite and the poet “invent tales that shall please” and, in doing so, seek to transform the ineffable stuff of language into material sustenance.

In this vein, Jonson, dividing contemporary poets into the divergent categories of the “honest servant” and “the Parasite,” laments that the latter receives from Poetry a “judicious, but perposterous bounty” and the former is “bound by his place to write, and starve.” The obvious paradox in the fact that the parasite’s bounty is both “judicious” (sensible) and “perposterous” speaks to the ambivalence of the parasitical poet’s social position. Again Jonson’s attempt to distance himself from the parasite proves fraught with ambiguity, for while Jonson no doubt identifies with the category of the honest servant, who has given his name “up to [Poetry’s] family,” he—a poet infamous for culinary overindulgence—cannot entirely deny his affinity to the parasite. In both of these examples, Jonson employs the parasite as a strategy for distancing himself from his venal contemporaries—those parasites who in this “latter Age” have corrupted poetic creation. Paradoxically, however, Jonson also finds in the parasite a model for structuring his own much-desired worldly success: of turning his poems, masques, and plays into royal pensions, admission fees, and bottles of Sack wine. The parasite thus emerges in Jonson’s writings as a highly ambivalent trope simultaneously desired and reviled for its base materiality,
its disenchanted take on contemporary human relations, and its ability to manipulate social
structures for personal gain.

In the social realm, the parasite serves the ambiguous function of simultaneously
reinforcing social hierarchy and degrading the material foundations on which this hierarchy is
built. Shakespeare’s *Timon of Athens* provides an illuminating example of this dynamic. The
parasites that appear to provide both social and material bounty to Timon’s estate in the play’s
opening two acts—including sycophantic poets, artists, merchants, and artisans—ultimately
prove destructive of the very household that they appear to support. For Shakespeare, the moral
foundations of this dynamic are fairly clear-cut; the parasites embodied by characters with
generic names such as “A Poet,” “A Painter” and “An Old Athenian” elicit none of our
sympathy, while Timon’s loyal steward Flavius, a personification of the principles of oeconomy,
is a catalyst for many of the play’s most engaging interactions. Politically, this dynamic veers
dangerously close to explicit critique of the profligate spending of upper members of the
Jacobean aristocracy and even of King James himself, which involved, among other things,
lavish entertainments. Since Jonson was among the principal producers of court masques in
Jacobean England, it seems likely that he was among the targets of Shakespeare’s satire. Indeed,
Jonson, a poet fully-immersed in the Jacobean economy of flattery, stands in dubious relation to
the parasite, which appears within his works both as a figure of denigration and, as we have seen,
a trope for authorial self-assertion.

Jonson’s somewhat unconventional understanding of the parasite as a model for authorial
identity follows the dynamic outlined in Lucian’s *The Parasite*, a work translated into English by
Francis Hicks and published as part of a larger collection in 1638 and, in an expanded version, in
1663. This tongue-in-cheek dialogue depicts a conversation between Simo, identified simply as
“The Parasite,” and his sole interlocutor, Tychiades. Discussing the “art” of parasitry, Simo argues that “[p]arasitry is an Art of meates, and drinkes, and of the things to be done and sayd for them, whose end is pleasure.” Lucian’s description of the parasite’s participation in an economy of pleasure has obvious parallels in the fiscal position of the poet, who gains material sustenance from artistic endeavor. Lucian, moreover, represents the life of the parasite as one of ease precisely because of its lack of attachment to more traditional economic means: “the Parasite hath no Cooke to quarrell with, nor Farm, nor Steward, nor money to vex him. Yet hath all things, and is the only man who eates and drinkes, disturbed with none of the incumbrances which trouble others.” In this way, Lucian transforms what would generally be construed as a limitation—the parasite’s lack of material possessions—into a source of virtue. Focusing on Lucian’s influence on early modern literature, Douglass Duncan contends that Jonson was both drawn to and repulsed by Lucian: “the very factors which made it difficult for the Renaissance to feel at home with Lucian as a man made it easy to recognize him as a type of uncommitted thinker and the artist dedicated only to his art.”

Jonson draws upon Lucian’s notion of parasitry as a form of artistic production in *Volpone*, in which the character Mosca (Volpone’s “Parasite,” as he is described on the title-page of the 1616 version) occupies the role of parasitical poet attached to a wealthy household. Throughout the play Mosca entertains his patron Volpone with poems, songs, brief dramatic performances, and cunning schemes, and is rewarded with companionship, housing, sustenance, and eventually a fleeting stint as master of the household. The sycophantic nature of the parasite’s relationship with his patron can be seen in Volpone’s reaction to a brief play performed at Mosca’s direction by Nano and Androgyno—a dwarf and hermaphrodite kept in Volpone’s service: “Now, very, very pretty! Mosca, this / Was thy invention?” Volpone asks, to
which Mosca responds, “If it please my patron, / Not else.” In a literary system devoted to
abject flattery, the parasite-poet’s creative output is entirely contingent upon the whims of the
patron. The poet is one who, in Mosca’s words, has “no house, / No family, no care, and
therefore mold[s] / Tales for men’s ears.” It is certainly no stretch to envision Mosca as an
iteration of Jonson’s own position within society. The stylized, ethereal entertainment performed
at Mocsa’s direction in Act 1.2 bears uncanny resemblance to the very court masques upon
which Jonson built his career. These continuities are more than acts of playful self-deprecation.
Rather they are methods for embedding social critique into a marginal, seemingly insignificant
position. Like the fool, who holds a mirror to society, forcing others to confront their own foolish
nature—as in Feste’s game of “take away the fool” in Twelfth Night—the parasite reflects
humanity’s flaws, forcing recognition of the chain of parasitical relations that constitute the
world.

To this point, it is Mosca’s identity as a parasite that draws attention to other parasites in
the play. What quickly becomes clear is that Volpone, too, is a parasite, leeching wealth from
others without producing anything himself. Driving this point home, Volpone confesses,

I gain
No common way; I use no trade, no venture;
I wound no earth with plowshares, fat no beasts
To feed the shambles; have no mills for iron,
Oil, corn, or men to ground them into powder;
I blow no subtle glass, expose no ships
To threat’nings of the furrow-facèd sea;
I turn no moneys in the public bank,
Nor unsure private. Volpone, in other words, does not participate in any recognizable way in a seventeenth-century economic system—he doesn’t grow, harvest, trade, manufacture, process, or even invest anything—but rather, occupying a role not unlike that of the poet, invents entirely new methods for gaining wealth. Indeed, much of the play’s comedic pleasure derives from Volpone’s immensely creative schemes for gaining money, goods, and sexual favors at the expense of others. And yet the parasitic chain does not end here. Toward the beginning of the play, three men, Voltore (a lawyer), Corbaccio (an elderly gentleman), and Corvino (a merchant)—having been convinced that Volpone is dying alone and childless—attempt to weasel their way into Volpone’s will. Not suspecting that this is all part of Volpone’s ruse, these would-be-parasites fall victim to the parasite. It is precisely these events that occasion Mosca’s succinct expression of the play’s world view: “Almost / All the wise world is little else, in nature, / But parasites or sub-parasites.”

Refracted through the consciousness of the parasite, all social relations are exposed as opportunistic strategies for feeding at the expense of one’s neighbor.

The play’s satire of acquisitive impulses has long been viewed both explicitly and implicitly through a Marxian lens as a response to emergent capitalist impulses in a world still shrined by traditional social and religious institutions. The logic of the parasite, however, encourages a less centered approach to the opportunism binding together human aggregates. Rather than charting the rise of a capitalist class eager to exploit the disenfranchised masses, the play envisions a world in which competition for resources extends across political, gender, class, and even species boundaries; master exploits servant and servant master. Mosca’s assessment of his master’s economic position testifies to this dynamic:

You are not like a thresher that doth stand
With a huge flail, watching a heap of corn,
And, hungry, dares not taste the smallest grain,
But feeds on mallows, and such bitter herbs;
Nor like the merchant, who hath fill'd his vaults
With Romagnia, and rich Candian wines,
Yet drinks the lees of Lombard's vinegar:
You will not lie in straw, whilst moths and worms
Feed on your sumptuous hangings and soft beds;
You know the use of riches, and dare give now
From that bright heap, to me, your poor observer,
Or to your dwarf, or your hermaphrodite,
Your eunuch, or what other household-trifle
Your pleasure allows maintenance.\(^{37}\)

While this passage ostensibly illustrates Marx’s concept of alienated labor—specifically the alienation of laborers from the commodities they produce—the presence of “moths and worms” that feed upon rich tapestries and beds points to the interspecies parasitism that characterizes Mosca’s vision of the world. The rewards of bountiful consumption go not to those on top, but to those willing and able to exploit the position before them. Aristocrats and insects alike feed at the expense of their neighbors. The rhetorical import of this flattering speech, designed both to whet Volpone’s acquisitive appetite and appropriate some of his master’s gold, suggests that even seemingly insignificant “household-trifles” such as Volpone’s eccentric servants participate in the economics of parasitism. There is no escape from such relations.
Indeed, the play’s vision of parasitical relations frequently traverses species boundaries. This is most clearly expressed in the fact that the many of the character’s names come of the Italian words for scavengers, animals understood as parasites: Volpone (the fox), Mosca (the fly), Voltore (the vulture), Corbaccio (the raven), and Corvino (the crow). This convention stems from a long tradition of morally-didactic animal fables spanning from Aesop to Spenser as well as from the plays of Plautus and Terrance, which frequently cast their parasites as abject animals. (The parasitical title character of Plautus’ Curculio, for example, takes his name from a weevil.) But this conventionality does not entirely efface the troubling notion that both people and animals participate in the same forms of parasitical exploitation. The effect of Jonson’s evocation of animals is not simply moral, but also structural. Rather than simply positing the animal world as humanity’s mirror, a static emblem through which we gain moral insight, Jonson’s representation suggests a fluid chain of interaction linking together humans and animals. Like Hamlet’s grotesque assertion that “[w]e fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots,” Jonson’s vision of humanity relies upon a disconcerting porosity between the behavior of humans and animals. The presence of moths and worms alongside merchant investors and landowners in Mosca’s aforementioned speech illuminates a single parasitical economy linking together all creatures. Each organism feasts at the expense of its neighbor and narratives of human exceptionality provide little solace from this basic fact.

In Volpone, both patron and servant are implicated in a universal network of parasitical relations. Through the impersonal lens of Jacobean drama, Jonson is able to create a scathing portrait of the state of contemporary society that obscures his own (potentially dubious) position. But what of a poem like “To Penshurst,” which encodes a very personal relationship between himself and a specific patron? While Jonson made use of virtually every medium available to a
seventeenth-century author—writing prolifically for both the public theater and the court, and making unprecedented use of the burgeoning technology of print—he was particularly invested in networks of patronage. Referring to Jonson as “the most spectacularly successful patronage poet of his era,” Robert Evans argues for the pervasiveness of patronage relations in Stuart England: “few texts could escape being conditioned or affected by the ways of behavior and habits of mind a patronage culture encouraged.” At a basic level, we might understand literary patronage as a tacit contract in which the poet provides the patron with a flattering portrait—a legitimatization of his or her wealth and social status—and is in turn rewarded with some form of compensation be it professional advancement, protection from censorship, or monetary payment. As reciprocal as this dynamic appears, it reflects an historical situation in which the means of material and cultural production were placed firmly in the hands of a few extremely powerful individuals. As such, patronage relations were always necessarily aligned vertically in a manner that placed the poet decisively below the patron in the grand social hierarchy. For a poet of immense personal ambition such as Jonson the patronage system presented two major problems: first, it subordinated the poet to the patron in a manner that highlighted the poet’s abject status as social parasite; and, second, it undercut the poet’s creative autonomy by allowing the patron to define the parameters of the literary work. Although Jonson was particularly adept at fostering patronage relations, works such as “To Penshurst” reveal a deep ambivalence about the very system within which they were created.

Jonson’s famous poem “To Penshurst” (a panegyric celebrating the Kentish estate of patrons Lady Barbara and Sir Robert Sidney) highlights Jonson’s great debt to the material benefits provided by literary patronage and, at the same time, offers a critique of that institution through the figure of the parasite. This poem has traditionally been read as a reaction to
contemporary political and economic developments associated with the decline of aristocratic values and the emergence of capitalist ideologies. Such readings, while useful in delineating the historical moment within which the poem was written, tend to isolate “To Penshurst” from the larger concerns of Jonson’s literary career. It is clear that the institution of patronage is central to this poem on both thematic and constitutive levels. From a thematic standpoint, the poem—addressed not to the patrons but the patrons’ estate—works to foreground the material foundations on which relations of patronage are built. After all, the estate stands as a metonymy for the complex web of social, political, and economic forces that separate aristocrat from commoner, rich from poor, patron from poet, producer from parasite. On a constitutive level, the poem represents a particularly important bid for literary patronage. For, as his carefully-edited collection *The Forest* makes clear, Jonson worked sedulously to foster patronage relations among the famous Pembroke-Sidney circle—an aristocratic dynasty famous for producing such literary figures as Sir Philip Sidney; Mary Sidney Herbert, Countess of Pembroke; and Lady Mary Wroth. However, Jonson also uses this poem to explore the much more personal issue of how he poet fits into the social structures of patronage. This issue is highlighted by Jonson’s strange act of self-assertion within the poem. For while the poem is devoted to a vision of economic harmony achieved by virtuous government, hierarchical obligation, moderate consumption, and syntactical parallelism, Jonson writes himself into the estate as an overindulgent parasite characterized by “gluttony” and immoderate ambition. In a poem where even fish obey the edicts of hierarchal obligation, Jonson, bloated with excess, sits at the Sidney table as a highly disruptive figure, a bad dinner guest who brazenly flouts social convention.

Biographical evidence provides us reason to believe that Jonson’s behavior at such convivial gatherings was often disruptive to the point of social subversion. A letter James Howell
wrote to Sir Thomas Hawkins describes Jonson’s indecorous conduct at one such get-together:
“There was good company, excellent cheer, choice wines, and jovial welcome. One thing intervened which almost spoiled the relish of the rest, that B[en] began to engross all the discourse, to vapor extremely of himself, and by vilifying others to magnify his own Muse. T[homas] Ca[rew] buzzed me in the ear that, though Ben had barrelled up a great deal of knowledge, yet it seems he had not read the *Ethics*, which, among other precepts of morality, forbid self-commendation, declaring it to be an ill-favored solecism in good manners.”42 We might glean from this episode Jonson’s perverse willingness to deprecate others for the purpose of self-aggrandizement. In the setting of a formal gathering, when great attention is paid to manners and social conventions, Jonson stands out precisely for his unwillingness to follow the rules. Because Jonson was in all likelihood quite familiar with Aristotle’s *Ethics*, along with the social conventions of a formal gathering, we might understand this behavioral breach less as “an ill-favored solecism in good manners” than as a self-conscious strategy for self-promotion through the subversion of social mores.43

Such social subversion, which I shall refer to as “embodied critique,” is central to the conspicuous manner in which Jonson inserts himself into his poetry. For example, “To My Book,” the second poem in Jonson’s 1612 collection *Epigrams*, opens with an acknowledgement of the baggage carried by the poet’s infamous reputation:

> It will be looked for, book, when some but see
> Thy title, Epigrams, and named of me,
> Thou should'st be bold, licentious, full of gall,
> Wormwood, and sulphur, sharp and toothed withal,
Become a petulant thing, hurl ink and wit

As madmen stones, not caring whom they hit.\textsuperscript{44}

In these lines, Jonson understands, and indeed fosters, the unsavory connotations evoked by both his name and the title of his collection. Aware of these associations, Jonson catalogues the grotesque bodily associations carried by his moniker; readers assume the book to be “licentious,” “toothed,” and “full of gall” based simply on the presence of Jonson’s name. Likewise, while \textit{Epigrams} primarily comprises laudatory poems addressed to friends and patrons, Jonson, in an opening epistle, calls attention to the necessity of satire in a culture devoted to flattery: “in their ignorant and guiltie mouthes, the common voyce is (for their securitie) \textit{Beware the Poet}, confessing, therein, so much loue to their diseases, as they would rather make a partie for them, then be either rid, or told of them.”\textsuperscript{45} By appearing as a disruptive presence, a grotesque body occupying the rarefied space of praise, Jonson achieves his dual purpose of inserting satire into a laudatory collection. Jonson’s embodied critique, thus, allows the poet to use his own reputation to redirect our understanding of his poetry.

A particularly subtle version of this dynamic occurs in Jonson’s “To the Immortall Memorie, and Friendship of that Noble Paire, Sir Lucius Cary and Sir H[enry] Morison.” Occasioned by Morrison’s death in 1629, this poem adopts the high style of the Pindaric ode in order to suit the serious matter of the content. The arguable crux of this poem occurs between stanzas 8 and 9 when Jonson inserts himself into the verse just as he apotheosizes Morrison:

\begin{quote}
He leap'd the present age,

Possest with holy rage,

To see that bright eternall Day:

Of which we \textit{Priests}, and \textit{Poets} say
\end{quote}
Such truths, as we expect for happy men,
And there he lives with memorie; and Ben

The Stand

Jonson, who sung this of him, e’re he went
Himselfe to rest,
Or taste a part of that full joy he meant
To have exprest,
In this bright Asterisme.\(^{46}\)

The conspicuous stanzaic enjambment of Ben Jonson’s name suggests the poet’s attempt to magnify his own presence in the poem. Although the poem is ostensibly a celebration of others—Lucius Cary and his late friend Henry Morison—Jonson cannot help but highlight his own stake in this literary essay: the apotheosis of Morison also serves to immortalize the immortalizer, as the poet’s name will always coexist with those titular characters. On one hand, this is a fairly conventional assertion of the poetry’s role in immortalizing both patron and poet alike. On the other hand, the fact that Jonson’s appearance bears traces of his indulgent, corporeal persona—one able to “taste a part of that full joy he meant / To have exprest”—represents a disruption of the ethereal imaginary that structures much of the poem. It is as though Jonson, parasite to his own art, must make sure that he is given a part of the metaphorical feast his poetry engenders. Jonson’s gluttony, these lines assume, will continue long after the poet has passed on. The potential failure registered by verb “meant,” moreover, narcissistically points to the fact that the entire project is contingent upon Jonson’s skill as a poet.
The dynamic of embodied critique finds its fullest expression in Jonson’s famous poem “To Penshurst.” My specific claim is that Jonson uses the figure of the parasite in “To Penshurst” in order to disrupt the strict hierarchical relations engendered by the poetics of patronage. This allows Jonson temporary autonomy through which to assert radical fantasies about the poet’s place in the social, economic, and political spheres and, thereby, to problematize the very system of literary production in which he participates. In this way, Jonson uses a dynamic internal to the system—the fact that the institution of patronage positions the poet as parasite—as a means for enabling alternative forms of social and environmental exploitation. The parasite is thus a generative figure capable of modifying systems of exchange through creative acts of disruption. While the subversive fantasies in which Jonson indulges are ultimately bracketed by the poetics of patronage, the alternative space enabled by the parasite is not sublimated to the all-too-familiar new historical dynamic of subversion and containment, in which the act of rebellion is revealed as a method for reinforcing existing power structures. Rather the figure of the parasite enables uneasy coexistence between dominant power structures: in this case, the poetics of patronage and poetic self-assertion.

Scholars focusing on “To Penshurst” have long struggled to make sense of the strange manner in which Jonson chooses to insert himself into the poem. Those stressing the poem’s embodiment of order and harmony often simply ignore Jonson’s indecorous persona. G. M. Hibbard (the first critic to identity the seventeenth-century country house poem as a discrete genre) sees no tension within the poem, but rather argues that Jonson represents Penshurst as a place of perfect reciprocity in which “poet and patron are parts of an organic whole, each recognizes the importance and place of the other in the life of the community.” Other critics have worked sedulously to sublimate Jonson’s gluttonous presence into the dominant ethical
structures of the poem. Robert Evans, for example, sees no tension in Jonson’s self-representation, but rather contends that, like the rustic peasants who come to the estate, “Jonson emerges as a bit of a clown … bibulous, even humorously gluttonous, but also innocent of courtly guile or false sophistication. More than merely decorous, the very simpleness of this persona helps highlight the skillfulness and accomplishment of the poem. Here, as so often in his work, his willingness to poke fun at himself helps promote his serious interests.” In interpreting Jonson’s gluttony as “decorous”—entirely in line with the dominant tone of the poem—Evans works to salvage an unequivocal reading Jonson’s great homage to patronage. William Cain comes closer to the mark when he argues that by appearing as a glutton within the poem Jonson “is claiming recognition for the poet’s place in society”—a place in which the poet, beholden to the economic structures of patronage, is finally given as much as he deserves. But Cain’s analysis falls short of grasping the full weight of Jonson’s audacious gesture. In this respect, Heather Dubrow’s post-structuralist reading of the country house genre offers what is perhaps the best critical account of Jonson’s autobiographical foray into Penshurst. Dubrow argues that “when Jonson refers to his ‘gluttony’ in a text celebrating moderation and order, his corpulent body both deflects and represents other types of excess that threaten the poem, notably flattery.” In other words, Dubrow understands Jonson’s gluttony as a trope for adjacent genres that threaten to intrude upon the carefully moderated space of the poem. Dubrow’s reading is particularly useful in understanding the pressure that this moment of authorial intervention places on the poem as a whole.

Jonson’s “To Penshurst” provides an unusually reflective (if sometimes flippant) meditation on the networks of agency that constitute good oeconomy. While aspects of Jonson’s representation are indebted to medieval fantasies of “the Land of Cockaigne”—an imaginary
place of limitless abundance—much of the poem appears as a direct response to the economic concerns of patrons Sir Robert and Lady Barbara Sidney. As critic L. C. A. Rathmell demonstrates, Jonson seems to have been aware of the increasingly desperate financial situation of his patrons. In a 1607 letter to Barbara, Robert writes, “as my state is now I cannot consist, I will not say in respect of myne honor and credit, but even for things of necessary maintenance.” In this context, the opening lines of the poem—“Thou art not, Penshurst, built to envious show, / Of touch, or marble; nor canst boast a row / Of polish’d pillars, or a roofe of gold”—seem calculated to distract attention from the financial shortcomings of the Sidney estate. In particular, the “roof of gold” built to inspire envy stands as a metonymy for the corrupt networks of financial activity from which Penshurst is admirably excluded. Indeed, the vibrant oeconomy featured in the poem, which flows with “free provisions” functions entirely without currency. Positing an alternative to the negated markers of wealth described in the poem’s opening lines, Jonson writes that Penshurst “joy’st in better markes, of soyle, of ayre, / Of wood, [and] of water.” By approximating the four classical elements (though substituting the fuel “wood” for the element “fire”) these lines position Penshurst as a self-sufficient microcosm capable of autochthonly producing wealth. In contrast to the stony sterility of other houses, emblematized in the negative by the “polished pillars” and the “roof of gold,” Penshurst teems with renewable abundance.

As these lines suggest, Jonson draws upon the ideal of oeconomy in order to imagine a solution to the financial problems facing his patrons. This solution relies upon the principles of good oeconomy in which the production and consumption of resources are carefully balanced. Alastair Fowler and Don E. Wayne (both attentive readers of the poem’s structure) comment on Jonson’s painstaking attention to balance and order. Indeed, Jonson is interested in articulating
a sustainable vision in which the estate’s cornucopian abundance perfectly matches consumptive need: while wealth flows freely through Penshurst’s inviting gates toward the “open table” and “liberall boord,” these “tables hoord not up for the next day.” In other words, nothing in Penshurst is accumulated, wasted, or idly stored, but rather—abiding by the principles of thrift, utilization, and efficiency—the estate functions with systematic precision. The Sidney household may not be capable of increasing its monetary revenue, but its managerial skill (implied everywhere in the poem) ensures a constant supply of all that is necessary. Through the careful balance of production and consumption, Jonson produces what Gabriel Egan (drawing upon physics) refers to as a “negative feedback loop” capable of sustaining itself without gaining or losing energy.

The core of this representation lies in an eternally present temporality. Jonson writes the poem as an unbroken chain of present-tense verbs in order to represent Penshurst a constant flow of productive agency. Describing the teeming fecundity of the estate, Jonson moves schematically across the landscape:

The lower land, that to the river bends,
Thy sheepe, thy bullocks, kine, and calves doe feed:
The middle grounds thy mares, and horses breed.
Each banke doth yeeld thee coneyes; and the topps
Fertile of wood, Ashore and Sydney’s copp's,
To crowne thy open table, doth provide
The purpled pheasant, with the speckled side:
The painted partridge lyes in every field,
And, for thy messes, is willing to be kill'd.
And if the high-swoln *Medway* faile thy dish,
Thou hast thy ponds, that pay thee tribute fish,
Fat, aged carps, that runne into thy net.
And pikes, now weary their owne kinde to eat,
As loth, the second draught, or cast to stay,
Officiously, at first, themselves betray.⁶¹

As these lines make clear, the production of food at Penshurst is always in the process of happening. Even as plants and animals rush to sacrifice themselves to the table, the productive capacity of the estate always remains fundamentally intact. The fact that the conditional—“if the high-swoln Medway fail thy dish”—briefly registers the possibility of productive failure, only to offer an alternative source of food, speaks to Jonson’s concern with sustainability. In a time before refrigeration, when crop-failures and famines occurred with frequency, Jonson’s representation of an unfailing supply of fresh food presents a particularly salient culinary fantasy. For Jonson was aware that what appears now as cornucopian abundance might before too long transform into a cesspool of fetid decay. Indeed, Robert Herrick, in the Jonsonian country house poem “A Panegyrick to Sir Lewis Pemberton,” sardonically reminds his guests, “[t]wo days you’ve larded here; a third ye know, / Makes guests and fish smell strong; pray go.”⁶² We might take Herrick’s comical wisdom as a reminder that fresh fish, Penshurst’s most ubiquitous fare, must be consumed promptly in order to avoid spoilage.⁶³

The manifest order of the Penshurst’s oeconomy highlights the radical nature of Jonson’s appearance in the poem. Occupying only 13 of 102 lines, Jonson’s presence hardly dominates the poem. But the contrarian values that the poet willfully embodies in these lines cast dubious light on the oeconomic principles that I have been thus far describing. At this key metapoetic moment,
Jonson chooses to occupy not the role of loyal servant—one who has graciously served his patrons—but that of social parasite. The poet describes Penshurst as a place,

    Where the same beere, and bread, and selfe-same wine,
    That is his Lordships, shall be also mine.
    And I not faine to sit (as some, this day,
    At great men's tables) and yet dine away.
    Here no man tells my cups; nor, standing by,
    A waiter, doth my gluttony envy:
    But gives me what I call, and lets me eate.\(^{64}\)

The key feature of this representation is Jonson’s depiction of his own “gluttony”—a sin that represents the antithesis of proper oeconomic balance. For while the poet describes the deference shown by the estate’s other guests in the lines—“no one [comes] empty-handed, to salute / Thy lord, and lady, though they have no sute,” Jonson refuses his own place within the hierarchy.\(^{65}\)

Rather Jonson, occupying the table of his patrons, chooses to consume more than his share of the feast. This, of course, alludes to Jonson’s infamous overindulgence and prodigious weight, but it also points to the extent to which Jonson’s physical presence chides with the oeconomic decorum upon which the entire poem is structured.

    Today we tend to regard gluttony as a distinctly personal sin, the consequences of which accrue solely upon the body of the offender. Renaissance thinkers, however, understood gluttony as an economic threat as well as a personal transgression. In a time of relative dearth, when famines occurred with frequency, overindulgence represented a threat to the entire community.

We can see these features of gluttony in the works of Jonson’s near contemporaries Edmund Spenser and Christopher Marlowe. In Book 1 of *The Faerie Queene*, for example, Spenser
describes how the allegorical personification Gluttony “swallowd vp excessiue feast, / For want whereof poore people oft did pyne.” The social consequences of gluttony reach a more intimate level in Marlowe’s popular tragedy *Doctor Faustus*. In a comical, though eerily foreboding, procession, personifications of the seven deadly sins address Faustus. Gluttony, paying particular attention to his genealogy, delivers the following speech:

Who, I sir? I am Gluttony. My parents are all dead, and the devil a penny they have left me but a bare pension, and that is thirty meals a day and ten bevers—a small trifle to suffice nature. O, I come of a royal parentage, my grandfather was a gammon of bacon, my grandmother a hogshead of claret wine; my godfathers were these: Peter Pickled-Herring, and Martin Martlemas-Beef.’ O but my godmother! She was a jolly gentlewoman, and well-beloved in every good town and city; her name was Mistress Margery March-Beer. Now, Faustus, thou hast heard all my progeny; wilt thou bid me to supper?

This speech, for all of its comic pleasure, carries the serious message that gluttony can utterly destroy a household oeconomy. Gluttony’s already bloated presence expands to encompass all familial relations in a single consumptive urge. Why then would Jonson choose to represent himself in this manner? What, if anything, does he stand to gain from disrupting the smooth progression of his otherwise idyllic poem?

The answer to these questions lies in the double-edged logic of the parasite. By refusing his position within the hierarchy of the household, a structure that his poem is operative in supporting, Jonson rescues himself from passive absorption into household oeconomy. In doing so, Jonson transforms the role of parasite from a position of abjection forced upon the poet by the need to dwell within patronage’s oeconomic structures into a role of relative autonomy. Jonson’s
freedom within the poem can be measured against that of the waiter, who is not permitted to “envy” the poet’s gluttony. Jonson, in other words, does not allow the would-be-glutton to mirror his own parasitical behavior; this is a special position afforded only to the poet.

Indeed, Jonson is interested in exploring the radical potential of his own marginal economic position as parasite. Not only does he indulge in fantasies of leveling the economic distinction between poet and patron—as in the line, “That [which] is his Lordships, shall be also mine”—but he contemplates still more subversive political ideas.68 Jonson writes,

Nor, when I take my lodging, need I pray
For fire, or lights, or livorie: all is there;
As if thou, then, wert mine, or I raign’d here:
There's nothing I can wish, for which I stay.69

Bracketed by the conditional “as if,” Jonson’s brief but bold fantasy of either economic appropriation or political dominance provides a register for the radical possibilities opened up by the figure of the parasite. By inscribing these threatening fantasies within hyperbolic praise of the hospitality of his patrons, Jonson unleashes the subversive potential of the parasite, whose creative acts of disobedience transform social structures. For if Jonson is gluttonous in his consumption then so, too, is Penshurst’s lord, Robert Sidney, whose consumptive position Jonson shares. Suddenly the bucolic peasants, verdant plants, and self-sacrificing animals that constitute the estate’s wealth seem victims of an overreaching landlord rather than participants in a benevolent household oeconomy.

Moreover, Jonson’s conspicuous position as parasite in Penshurst draws our attention to other parasites in the poem. The most obvious of these is King James. While the majority of the poem unfolds in the present tense, the king’s visit marks an abrupt verbal shift into the past. This
suggests a temporal rupture—a transformation from oeconomic time into historical time in which the estate’s productive processes are disrupted; with the King’s visit everything screeches to a halt. This disruption is registered by the proliferation of images of fire associated with James’s visit as well as by the double-edged rhetoric that Jonson uses to describe the occasion. Jonson remarks that it was as if “the countrey came, / With all their zeale, to warme their welcome here.” These lines (with their use of the word “zeal,” a term connotative of immoderate religious devotion) hyperbolically enlarge James’s consumptive capacity in a way that threatens to undermine the estate’s oeconomy. And while Jonson elsewhere takes pains to avoid images of static hording, he describes that during the visit praise “was heap’d” on Lady Barbara Sidney. Finally, Jonson’s sardonic exclamation—“What (great, I will not say, but) sodayne cheare / Did’st thou, then, make 'hem!'”—positions King James not as the guest of honor, but as an uninvited visitor, a social parasite intent on dining at the table of another. Jonathan Goldberg argues that the homology between the positions of the poet and the king in this poem—the fact that James “duplicates the poet’s experience of wish fulfillment and provides a model for it”—serves to express Jonson’s admiration for absolute monarchy. But this juxtaposition does as much to denigrate the king’s position as it does to aggrandize the poet’s.

The fact that Jonson’s description also registers a deep ambivalence toward James’s presence suggests that other ideologies are at work. Since the political position of king is the ultimate marker of hierarchy, James’s very presence threatens to undermine the alternative social vision that Jonson is so intent on fostering. Indeed, as Lorna Hutson demonstrates, Jonson was deeply committed to the horizontal sociality of male friendship: a sociality in which the king—the *parens patriae*, “parent of the fatherland”—cannot easily participate. As such, James embodies the very foundation on which the institution of patronage is built, and it is only by
casting James as a fellow parasite that Jonson can temporality level the distinction between them. This radical social leveling produces a brief view of a space that runs counter to the smoothly functioning estate. In this alternative space, the king, like all other organisms, must participate in the abject dynamics of parasitical consumption.

Through the willful abjection of self, Jonson is able to articulate dissent while participating in the very patronage networks that he seeks to criticize. By mirroring the social position of both patron and king, the Jonsonian parasite reflects back a critical portrait of those responsible for the conditions of literary patronage. The parasite, thus, allows Jonson to have it both ways: to maintain his status as poetry’s “honest servant”—capable to criticizing his “loathsome age”—while, at the same time, refusing to be “bound by his place to write, and starve.”

A principled though opportunistic feeder, Jonson never missed the chance to transform the ineffable stuff of poetry into his next (hopefully bountiful) meal.


3 Jonson, “To My Muse,” 2.

4 Jonson has long been understood as a critic of the society in which he lived. In his classic study Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson (Chatto & Windus: London, 1962), L. C. Knights, setting Jonson’s works against the backdrop of the development capitalist enterprise, identifies Jonson’s “general anti-acquisitive attitude” (200). Responding to this reading in the important article Don E. Wayne, “Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson” Renaissance Drama 13
(1982): 103-29 argues that Knights “overlooks the ways in which Jonson is himself implicated in what he criticizes” (28). As a consequence, “Jonson begins to show signs of a disturbed awareness that his own identity as poet and playwright—and therefore his personal transcendence of the still ridged social hierarchy in which he lived and wrote—depend on the same emerging structure of social relationships that he satirized in his plays” (29).

5 Jonson was among the most successful professional authors of his time. See David Riggs, *Ben Jonson: A Life* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1989). Specifically, Joseph Loewenstein argues that by intervening in unprecedented ways in the printing process, Jonson helped to forge notions of commercial copyright before the institutionalization of such ideas. See Loewenstein’s *Ben Jonson and Possessive Authorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002) and *The Author’s Due: Printing and the Prehistory of Copyright* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2002).


7 Drawing attention to the parasite’s role in the development of early modern tragedy, Vandiver and Withington contend that even Machiavellian villains like Iago and Barabas owe a great debt to the classical parasite insofar as they function as sycophantic “councilors of evil” who seek personal gain from malevolent advice (743).


Jonson, *Every Man Out of His Humour*, title page.


Jacques Derrida, *Deconstruction and the Visual Arts*, ed., Brunette & Wills (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1994) uses the metaphor of the parasite in order to describe the project of deconstruction: “All I have done ... is dominated by the thought of a virus, what could be called a parasitology, a virology, the virus being many things … The virus is in part a parasite that destroys, that introduces disorder into communication” (12). J. Hillis Miller, “The Critic as Host” in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Seabury Press, 1979) uses the parasite as a metaphor for interrogating the relationships between poets and critics. For Miller, the poet’s relationship to the literary past engenders a radical indeterminacy regarding the dividing line between parasite and host: “It is impossible to decide which element is parasite, which is host, which commands or encloses the other … the distinction between inside and outside cannot be held to across that strange membrane” (233). Miller observes that rather than relying upon a stable binary opposition between terms, the logic of the parasite creates “a strange sort of chain without beginning or end” (224).

Miller, “The Critic as Host,” 244.


18 *Oxford English Dictionary*: 1a, 2a, 6a, 8a, 8b, 8c.


22 Jonson, *Discoveries*, 1615-17.

23 Jonson, *The New Inn*, 5.5.4-5.


27 Jonson, *Discoveries*, 624.

28 Jonson, *Discoveries*, 622.


Jonson, *Volpone*, 1.1.31-8.

Jonson, *Volpone*, 3.1.11-13. Serres expresses a similarly expansive sentiment regarding the human world: “history hides the fact that man is the universal parasite, that everything and everyone around him is a hospitable space. Plants and animals are always his hosts; man is always necessarily their guest. Always taking, never giving. He bends the logic of exchange and of giving in his favor when he is dealing with nature as a whole. When he is dealing with his kind, he continues to do so; he wants to be the parasite of man as well. And his kind wants to be so too” (24).

See, for example, L. C. Knights, *Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson* (Chatto & Windus: London, 1962).


Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 4.3.21-3.


See Brennan, *Literary Patronage in the English Renaissance.*


This letter sheds light on the final lines of Jonson’s “Inviting a Friend to Supper” in which the speaker evokes the possibility that what is said and done at his dinner party might make “guiltie men:”

And we will have no *Pooly*, or *Parrot* by;
Nor shall our cups make any guiltie men:

But, at our parting, we will be, as when

We innocently met. No simple word

That shall be utter'd at our mirthfull board

Shall make us sad next morning: or affright

The libertie, that wee'll enjoy to-night. (36-42)


49 Evans, *Ben Jonson and the Poetics of Patronage*, 122.


51 Heather Dubrow, “Guess who's coming to dinner? Reinterpreting Formalism and the Country House Poem” *Reading For Form* (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 2006), 68.
For a good critical discussion of the Land of Cockaigne see Stephen Greenblatt’s “Martial Law in the Land of Cockaigne” in *Shakespearean Negotiations*, 129-64.


Quoted from Rathmell, 255.


Jonson, “To Penshurst,” 58.


Wayne argues that the essential structure of the poem is chiasmic, moving from cultured nature to natural culture. This allows Jonson to image the institutions of aristocratic (and later bourgeois) culture as rooted in nature itself. Fowler in “The 'better marks' of Jonson's 'to Penshurst'” *Review of English Studies*, 24 (1973): 266-82, comments on the numerical precision with which the Jonson structures his representation of the natural world.


Jonson, “To Penshurst,” 49-50. Jonson’s depiction of the fact that peasants bring “their ripe daughters, whom they would commend/ This way to husbands” to Penshurst suggests another more decorous method for overcoming social hierarchy (54-5).


Jonson, “To Penshurst,” 64.


Jonson, “To Penshurst,” 83.

Jonson, “To Penshurst,” 82-3.


CHAPTER IV

HERBERT’S PROVIDENTIAL OECONOMY

The previous chapters consider the economy of nature as a largely secular concept, albeit one with considerable theological implications. For Digby, Spenser, and Jonson, God is seen primarily through his indirect effects, rather than through his direct interventions in the world. However, the oeconomy of nature is not the mechanistic model of the Enlightenment, with an impersonal and detached God at the helm, setting into motion the divine system of the universe. Instead, the oeconomy of nature requires God’s active hands, constantly tending the garden of the world, and ensuring that each thing finds its proper place. It is a laboring agrarian God rather than a mechanist clockmaker. George Herbert’s writings, particularly his poetry collection *The Temple* (1633) and his *A Priest to the Temple, or The Country Parson* (1652), provides the fullest realization of the theological implications of the oeconomy of nature. Figured in the complex theological concept of divine providence, Herbert’s version of the oeconomy of nature presents a solution to the problem of how humankind is able to perceive divinity by contemplating and interacting with the natural world.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, in his seminal work *Nature*, quotes the first five stanzas of Herbert’s poem “Man” as an example of a perspective that appreciates the “wonderful congruity which subsists between man and the world; of which he is lord, not because he is the most subtle inhabitant, but because he is its head and heart.” Emerson argues that unlike empirical scientist who “evermore separates and classifies things, endeavoring to reduce the most diverse to one
form,” Herbert is the kind of thinker who “finds something of himself in every great and small
thing, in every mountain stratum, in every new law of color, fact of astronomy, or atmospheric
influence which observation or analysis lays open.” Emerson, in other words, ascribes to
Herbert an expansive, integrating perspective capable of accommodating a great diversity of
phenomena—an ecological persona able to understand the extent to which the self is integrated
into its own environment. In doing this, Emerson, of course, anachronistically reads Herbert’s
devotional lyric as an expression of his own nineteenth-century preoccupations, but Emerson’s
reading does point to a certain truth of Herbert’s poetry. For Herbert, with his sophisticated
understanding of Providence, produces unusually integrated and empathetic representations of
the natural world well before the emergence of ecological thought. Indeed, this link between
Herbert and Emerson (understood as an important proto-ecological thinker) displays that the path
to ecology may be worn by more renaissance feet than contemporary narratives suggest.

In A Priest to the Temple (1652) George Herbert describes God as “the true householder,
who bringeth out of his treasure things new and old.” This conceptual metaphor, which is
repeated throughout Herbert’s works, conflates God’s terrestrial actions with the organization of
a human household, and thereby renders in unmistakably human terms the physical traces of
God’s continuing presence within the structures of the material world. Herbert further elaborates
this metaphor by describing how a skeptic might come to perceive God within the continual
preservation of the material universe:

For [in] Nature, he sees not how a house could be either built without a builder, or kept in
repair without a house-keeper. He conceives not possibly, how windes should blow so as
much they can, and the sea rage so much as it can, and all things do what they can, and
all, not only without dissolution of the whole, but also of any part, by taking away so
much as the usuall seasons of summer and winter, earing and harvest … He conceives not possibly, how he that would beleev e a Divinity, if he had been at the Creation of all things, should lesse beleev e it, seeing the Preservation of all things; For Preservation is a Creation; and more it is a continued Creation, and a creation every moment. 4 

Thus Herbert posits the household as an apt conceptual metaphor for the ontological stability of the world. Just as the household, with its stable foundation and sheltering roof, allows the physically frail human subject a certain measure of stability within a potentially hostile world, so too do the structures of God’s household allow for the continuing preservation of all aspects of the creation even in ostensibly hostile circumstances. The household in this metaphor comes to signify the systematic manner through which God continues to govern his creation to the good of all that dwell therein. Centering this metaphor more closely on the human subject, Herbert draws elaborate analogies between the work of his country parson and the larger structures of the creation. Doing so allows Herbert to cast the daily toils of his country parson, a rural householder engaged in managing his estate, as venerable imitations of divinity rather than as worldly distractions from the parson’s proper spiritual focus. In a section entitled “The Parson in his house” Herbert develops this metaphor by describing the extent to which God engages not only in high-minded spiritual tasks but also in seemingly abject physical labors. Herbert writes of the priest that “His fare is plain, and common, but wholesome, what he hath, is little but very good” and adds, those which his home produceth, he refuseth not, as coming cheap, and easie, and arising from the improvement of things, which otherwise would be lost. Wherein he admires and imitates the wonderfull providence and thrift of the great householder of the world: for there being two things, which as they are, are unuseful to man, the one for smalnesse, as
crums, and scattered corn, and the like; the other for the foulnesse, as wash, and durt, and things thereinto fallen; God hath provided Creatures for both; for the first, Poultry; and for the second, swine.\textsuperscript{5}

This description, with its attention to the domestic uses of natural things coupled with its faith in the innate goodness of even the basest aspects of the creation, introduces a discursive practice that I shall dub “Oeconomic Providence”—a term that stems from the etymological root of the word “economy,” the Greek \textit{oikos} for “household”—as a central feature of Herbert’s depiction of the natural world.\textsuperscript{6} The passage suggests that by properly imitating the divine management of the creation, the human is able to tap into the systematic structures of the creation and thereby to achieve an ideal state of worldly existence. The discursive practice of Oeconomic Providence gains from the conceptual metaphorics of the household an \textit{a priori} model for understanding the ways in which God manages the creation; God’s status as the divine householder of the world prefigures and provides an exemplary model for humankind’s technological improvement of the creation. Oeconomic Providence thus enables Herbert to employ a set of assumptions about humankind’s relationship with the natural world—that the technology of the household finds its basis in divinity, that each aspect of the world locates its teleological fulfillment in proper human use, and that the postlapsarian world retains fundamentally accommodating structures—in order to foster a mode of being that combines devotional prerogative with contemporary forms of oeconomic positivism.

In this chapter, I consider how Oeconomic Providence provides Herbert with structural principle through which to conceptualize the systematic nature of the creation. Herbert employs this discursive practice in \textit{The Temple} (1633) in order to posit large-scale questions about the proper relationship between God, human beings, and the rest of the creation. While poems such
as “Man” seem to suggest that the human subject might use the oeconomic structures of the creation to her advantage, other poems such as “The World,” “Redemption,” “Affliction (I),” and “The Pulley” point to an anxiety about the human ability to locate herself within the totality of the creation. In these poems, Herbert employs the metaphor of earth as divinely-created household in order to produce the illusion of an accommodating world, intended to make the human at home within the larger structures of the creation. However, as these poems quickly reveal, human interaction with the creation tends to highlight man’s alienation from the natural world rather than his mastery of it. This dynamic points to the fact that in Herbert’s poetry it is human nature and not the natural world that is fallen—a point that is most fully developed in the poem “Nature”—and that the idealized oeconomic structures of the natural world are intended not to posit man’s preeminence, but rather to highlight the extent of the loss created by the fall; man has paradoxically come to be homeless within his home. This narrative is most fully developed in “Providence,” a poem that provides the centerpiece of my chapter. In “Providence” Herbert dramatizes the speaker’s incremental discovery of his place within the world, first through a recognition of what Herbert elsewhere defines as Providence’s “sustaining power,” then of its “governing power,” and finally of its “spiritual power.” Coming to terms with Providence’s threefold power forces the speaker first to recognize God’s handiwork within the oeconomic structures of the creation, then to recognize the possibility of contingency within these seemingly accommodating structures, and finally to acknowledge that the human is no more able to discern God’s will than is the rest of the creation. In accepting the vanishing point at which human knowledge fails to comprehend God’s prerogatives, the Christian subject is left to rely upon faith alone (a point painstakingly developed by Richard Strier) in order to achieve salvation. This means that Oeconomic Providence serves not simply as a means through which
man might better his lot on earth, but also as part of a devotional progress that ultimately decenters the human subject. After all, the idealized household Herbert depicts in “Providence” and other poems belongs not to man but to God. Finally, I turn to the poem “Vanity (I)” in order to explore alternative ethical and spiritual modes of dwelling within the world that are enabled by decentered narratives of Oeconomic Providence. Overall, I argue that Oeconomic Providence is an intricate part of Herbert’s devotional project because it provides a means through which the Christian subject can grasp God’s beneficence and at the same time recognize her own inability to achieve mastery over the natural world. In order to contextualize my readings, I will first delineate the complex notion of Providence that Herbert develops in *A Priest to the Temple* and ground my reading of Oeconomic Providence within developments in seventeenth-century agrarian economics before turning to Herbert’s poetry. In all of poems I explore, despite Herbert’s attempts to move beyond the perspective of Oeconomic Providence, local notions of household management supply the central conceptual metaphorics for dramatizing God’s continuing relationship to his the creation. The pervasiveness of such metaphorics displays the fact that even before the “Oeconomy of Nature” was fully formulated as a philosophical concept, its conceptual core—the notion of the world as a divinely managed household—circulated in poetic representations of the natural world.

Scholars have struggled to produce adequate accounts of Herbert’s complex and seemingly contradictory representations of the material world. Richard Strier, in arguing for the centrality of the Lutheran doctrine of justification by faith to Herbert’s poetry, emphasizes the ways in which the earth’s vast abundance and divine order are for Herbert obstacles to the Christian subject’s properly individual relationship with God. “The models of the cosmos as chain or book are not personal, dynamic, or responsive enough, and it is the personal response,
above all, that the speaker craves.” Strier contends, “His interest, ultimately, is not in ‘all things’ and the grand patterns and regularities of the cosmos, but in the possibility of radical and decisive change, of interlining the book and finding a place in spite of the fullness of God’s ‘board.’” For Strier the immense diversity of the natural world, represented in poems such as “Providence,” allows no room for “the dynamic movement” necessary for divine intervention on the scale of the individual believer, and is therefore “incompatible with the conception of a God who enters into intimate personal relationships with men.” Unlike Strier, who views the material world as a potential obstacle to personal devotion, Christina Malcolmson argues for the centrality of the protestant doctrine of vocation to Herbert’s writing, and in doing so situates economic engagement in worldly matters as an intricate part of Herbert’s devotional subjectivity. Thus Malcolmson contends that Herbert’s complex representations of the natural world, particularly his figures of plant growth, provide models “of success, advancement, and expansion that [are] ‘natural’ and therefore exclude […] the pursuit of power and wealth.” In this way, Malcolmson displays the natural world as intricately involved in, rather than antithetical to, the ethos fashioned by Herbert’s poetry. Noticing this bifurcation in the critical reception of Herbert’s poetry, Jonathan Gil Harris points out that scholars have produced both “unworldly and worldly Herberts.” In attempt to resolve this contradiction, Harris argues that while Herbert’s poetry is teleologically anti-material—that is, it strives for the ultimate immateriality of heavenly existence—matter (which Harris associates with the stony materiality of Jewish scripture) interrupts the temporal and spatial progression toward the spiritual in the form of what he refers to as “untimely oriental matter.” Harris contends that Herbert exhibits such matter in The Temple in his representations both of stony hearts and goods that stem from the Near East. Finally, David Glimp, in focusing on Herbert’s engagement with theological notions of the
creature, argues for the centrality the creature—that is, the totality of the created world—to Herbert’s representation of both the political and the theological. Glimp contends that in Herbert’s poetry creatureliness “defines the creation as a vast network of human and nonhuman agents, establishes a way of apprehending the world as a collective in ways that … cut against the grain of humanist or legal accounts of community and political obligation.” And in doing so, Glimp displays the extent to which Herbert’s representation of the natural world is paradoxical in that it reiterates anthropocentric narratives of human dominion and at the same time allows for potentially disruptive notions of a radically decentered creaturely polity.

My own reading focuses on the crucial role that Herbert’s expansive representations of the natural world play in forging a devotional subjectivity. As we shall see, Herbert views Providence not as a static system but as a dynamic devotional paradigm designed to allow the individual to recognize the imprint of God’s hand upon the natural world and at the same time to grasp the extent to which she must humble herself before God in order to receive salvation. In this way, I accept Strier’s primary claim that the individual is wholly dependent on God’s grace, but disagree with his assessment of the natural world as a hindrance to, rather than vehicle for, spiritual devotion. I am also greatly indebted to Malcolmson’s account of Herbert’s insistent representation of the economic, but I suggest that the natural world is for Herbert not an allegory for worldly success but rather paradigm that encodes a complex process of spiritual devotion. Indeed, Malcolmson is curiously silent on poems such as “Providence” and “Man,” which depict the natural world’s dynamic oeconomic processes. While my argument mirrors Harris’s in seeking to produce an account of the material world that syncs with Herbert’s devotional project, I contend that Harris’s relatively limited account of matter as limited to stony hearts and imported goods fails to appreciate the complex vitality of Herbert’s cosmos. Finally, I seek to
build on Glimp’s insights about the centrality of creaturely devotion to Herbert’s poetry by suggesting that Providence offers a principle through which the creaturely can be understood as part of a larger, more integrated devotional schema. Overall, this chapter seeks to expand upon existing accounts of the natural world in Herbert’s poetry in order to display the extent to which an intimate understanding of the creation is central to Herbert’s devotional ethos.

*The Threefold Power of Providence*

Before progressing into a reading of Herbert’s poetry it is first necessary to delineate Herbert’s complex and dynamic understanding of divine Providence. In this study, I use the term “Oeconomic Providence” to refer to a specific subset of divine Providence, which is a concept used by Christian theologians to conceptualize the nature of God’s intervention within the material world. Scholars typically divide early modern notions of Providence into two camps: “General Providence” through which God works upon the world through forms of secondary agency, and “Special Providence” through which God intervenes as a primary cause in human affairs. Maurice Hunt points out that puritan thinkers, who were heavily indebted to John Calvin’s notion of nature’s total depravity, rejected the secondary cause model of Providence because of its reliance on nature in order to fulfill God’s will. Rather puritan theologians tended to emphasize God’s direct intervention in human life through the, often punitive, prerogatives of Special Providence. However, moderate thinkers such as Richard Hooker, Hunt argues, understood Providence as the ways through which God intervenes within the world by means of the secondary processes of nature. Hooker contends that “Those things which nature is said to do, are by divine art performed, using nature as an instrument; nor is there any such art or
knowledge divine in nature herself working, but in the Guide of nature’s work.”18 While Hooker’s vision of Providence is reassuring in its affirmation of God’s continuing presence within nature, it is also potentially troubling in that it asserts the ultimate ineffability of divine purpose. Hooker, argues that “The manner of this divine efficiency, being far above us, we are no more able to conceive [of it] by our reason, than creatures unreasonable by their sense are able to apprehend after what manner we dispose and order the course of our affairs.”19 Thus Hooker’s schema uneasily collapses the distinction between humankind and the rest of creation in the collective inability to comprehend the sublimely exalted will of God. Both forms of Providence described in Hunt’s account present the human subject with potential problems: Special Providence (that of Calvinist theologians) is troubling in that it provides a fundamentally pessimistic account of nature as utterly incapable of carrying out God’s will, and General Providence (associated with Hooker and the nascent Anglican establishment) is problematic in that it deprives the human subject of her superior devotional position in relation to the rest of the creation. The notion of Oeconomic Providence provides one possible solution to this dilemma in that it produces an account of humankind’s relationship with the natural world that is both anthropocentric and optimistic about the inherent usefulness of all aspects of the creation. Oeconomic Providence, consequently, provides a model for thinking about the natural world that conflates devotional practice with forms economic improvement and therefore situates a person’s vocation (so long as that vocation conforms to certain rural values) as fundamental to her spiritual wellbeing.

Returning to the previously cited passage from Herbert’s A Priest to the Temple, we can understand Oeconomic Providence as an alternative to modes of belief that, following Calvinist principals, emphasize the fallen state of the world. In his description of the parson’s rural labor,
Herbert works to integrate potentially negative aspects of nature—the wasteful “smalnesse” of crumbs and the “foulnesse” of dirt and dishwater—into a Providential narrative in which all things serve some kind of anthropocentric use. By describing products of the household in abject terms, only to reveal their ultimate utility—crumbs and dirty food scraps, it turns out, can be useful as food for poultry and swine—Herbert fosters the interpretive perspective of Oeconomic Providence. In this context, Herbert’s evocation of “wash, and durt, and things thereinto fallen” can be read as a reevaluation of the postlapsarian perspective on nature; maybe “fallen” things aren’t so bad after all. Likewise, while this passage is interested in promoting values of “improvement” and “thrift,” terms typical of early modern agrarian improvement literature, there is no hint of the painful labor central to the postlapsarian perspective. Rather to the country priest goods come “cheap, and easie” and are produced by his “home”—an institution that when structured properly seems, like Providence itself, to work on its own accord to the good of the householder. Such a reading suggests that the proper observer of nature, whose foresight allows her to recognize the proper uses of all of God’s creatures, adopts the perspective of Oeconomic Providence.

Yet Herbert’s vision of Providence cannot be fully incorporated into an economic paradigm. In a chapter of A Priest to the Temple entitled “That Parson’s Consideration of Providence,” Herbert divides the power of Providence into three distinct parts: “a sustaining power,” “a governing power,” and “a spiritual power.” Herbert describes that “By his sustaining power he [God] preserves and actuates every thing in his being; so that corne doth not grow by any other vertue, then by that which he continually supplyes, as the corn needs it.”

While this power seems to suggest that the creation follows the inevitable course of nature in fulfilling God’s will—that is, the course of nature is always none other than God’s will—Herbert
points out that this course is actually subordinate to God’s governing power. “By God’s governing power he preserves and orders the references of things one to the other, so that corn do grow, and be preserved in that act by his sustaining power,” Herbert writes, “yet if he suite not other things to growth, as seasons, and weather, and other accidents by governing power, the fairest harvests come to nothing.” Herbert’s notion of governing power, which approximates theological discussions of Special Providence, introduces God’s punitive will to the otherwise naturalistic concept of sustaining power. The fact that Herbert uses natural forces such as “seasons” and “weather”—the most phenomenologically unstable of terrestrial events—to describe God’s governing power displays the poet’s struggle to accommodate the potentially ineffable nature of divine government; although God’s governing power always has a purpose, its effects appear to the human observer as mere “accidents.” Finally, Herbert introduces the spiritual power of Providence through which “God turns all outward blessings to inward advantages.” Providence’s spiritual power, the ultimate end of any providential perspective, uses the model of Oeconomic Providence as a vehicle through which the devout subject can ultimately achieve spiritual salvation. Indeed, Herbert’s notion of spiritual power requires economic engagement with the natural world so that “outward blessings” can be sublimated to a spiritual state of inward devotion; in such a framework, the outward and the inward are mutually constitutive. Still, Oeconomic Providence presents potential obstacles to the subject seeking to transcend the worldly in realization of the spiritual power of Providence. Herbert describes “that if a Farmer hath both a faire harvest, and that also well inned, and imbarred, and continuing safe there; yet if God give him not the Grace to use, and utter this well, all his advantages are to his losse. Better it were burnt, then not spiritually improved.” The incomplete conditional statement presented in the first sentence of this passage suggests the provisional nature of all
terrestrial progress; without God’s assent, this passage suggests, nothing can truly be improved. Indeed, this passage posits the structures of material edifice—the metaphorical backbone of Oeconomic Providence—represented in the phrases, “well inned” and “imbarned,” as potential obstacles to the realization of the spiritual power of Providence. The final suggestion that such structures would better be burned than not improved spiritually displays the fleeting nature of faith built on promises of earthly stability.

Herbert’s division of Providence into three separate powers serves a pedagogical purpose for the rural congregation. Herbert argues that while country people tend to think that all things come by natural course, it is the parson’s duty to “reduce them to see Gods hand in all things, and to beleeve, that things are not set in such an inevitable order, but that God often changeth it according as he sees fit, either for reward or punishment.”25 Thus the parson must strive to guide his congregation toward knowledge first of Providence’s sustaining power (it is God and not nature alone that causes the crops grow), then of its governing power (God can at any time make the harvest succeed or fail), and finally, it is assumed, of its spiritual power (the faithful must come to understand material gains as products of divine will). This progress entails a movement away from a systematic view of God’s will as incorporated into the orderly course of nature to the realization that, since God is not bound to such a system, a programmatic understanding of Providence is not possible. One must rely on faith rather than rational understanding in order to gain access to divinity. Thus Herbert argues that the parson must bring his pupil to the point that he or she might “depend, and fear continually.”26 However, this progress is difficult “Man would sit down at this world, [even though] God bids him sell it, and purchase a better.”27 This pedagogical progress through various modes of Providence—in which Oeconomic Providence serves a central, though ultimately incomplete role—provides an interpretive guide to
understanding the ways in which Providence functions in Herbert’s major collection of poetry, *The Temple*. Central to my study is the fact that this dynamic relies on a movement that engages with through ultimately eschews anthropocentric models of Providence in favor of modes of devotion that ultimately decenter the human subject’s privileged interpretive position in relation to the rest of the creation. Herbert’s complex notion of Providence moves uneasily between the systemic—which, by virtue of its regular structure, is comprehensible to the human subject—and the ineffable edicts of God’s governing power, which can never be fully understood. Realizing Providence’s spiritual power necessarily involves giving up mastery of the world and allowing God’s power (often figured in conspicuously worldly terms) to assume control. However, as Herbert’s poems make clear, this progression is not easily achieved.

“*Many Points of Providence and Good Husbandry*”

The oeconomic metaphors central to Herbert’s conceptualization of Providence find their historical grounding within the practices and institutions of seventeenth-century agrarian improvement. In this way, I understand Oeconomic Providence as a discursive practice because it situates itself within the burgeoning historical institutions of enclosure, surveying, estate management, and novel agricultural technique. As Michel Foucault points out, discursive practices gain coherence from their grounding in specific cultural, and indeed often economic, institutions. This ethos of agrarian improvement encouraged the proliferation of theological narratives that emphasized the benevolence of nature rather than the corruption of the postlapsarian world. Identifying this trend, Keith Thomas argues that while sixteenth-century thinkers “emphasized the wretched, decaying state of the natural world and the obstacles God
had put in man’s way … from the mid seventeenth century there was an increasing disposition to
play down the Fall and to stress, not the decay of nature, but its benevolent design.”

Understanding this dynamic from an historical point of view, Anthony Low argues that the
agrarian revolution of the eighteenth century was made possible by a seventeenth-century
“georgic revolution” in which innovations in science, literature, and ethics transformed the way
people thought of and utilized the countryside. Describing this spirit of agrarian optimism, Joan
Thirsk points out that, “Men were imbued with the conviction that everything could and should
be employed and improved. With economy and ingenuity every living thing, where possible, was
pressed into the service of man—wild fruits, wild animals, weeds, wildflowers, insects—all
found a use in agriculture or as medicines to promote the health of men and stock.” The
influence of the emergent ethos of agrarian improvement can be seen in many aspects of
Herbert’s writing. For example, in a section of A Priest to the Temple entitled “The Parsons
Surveys” Herbert argues that his parson should engage in “managing Commons, or Woods,
according as the place suggests.” Likewise, in managing his estate, the parson should engage in
“first, the improvement of his family, by bringing them up in fear and nurture of the Lord; and
secondly, the improvement of his grounds, by drowning, or draining, or stocking, or fencing, and
ordering his land to the best advantage of both himself, and his neighbors.” Herbert’s evocation
of the practices of enclosure, drainage, and surveying displays the extent to which innovations in
the agrarian economy came to be integrated into his notions of spiritual life.

In order to display the extent to which these economic practices situated themselves
within the theological discourse of Providence (in a hybrid discursive practice that I have been
referring to as “Oeconomic Providence”) I will now turn to John Norden’s practical treatise The
Surveiors Dialogue (1607). Like Herbert’s writings, which conflate the discourse of agrarian
improvement with that of theology, Norden’s *The Surveyors Dialogue* uses a blend of religious and economic discourse in order to naturalize, and indeed sanctify, contemporary economic practices that were in historical reality subject to substantial criticism. Norden’s work depicts a series of dialogues between the protagonist, simply called “Surveyor,” an enlightened agent of agrarian progress, and various generic interlocutors: “Farmer” (Books 1), “the Lord of a Mannor” (Book 2), “Bayly” (Books 3-5), and “a Purchaser of Land” (Book 6). Invariably, the Surveyor embodies the optimism associated with a providential perspective of the natural world, in which technological innovation and prudential knowledge are understood as means through which humankind might uncover God’s previously hidden imprint upon the world. The interlocutors, on the other hand, stand for various outdated postlapsarian notions of a cursed and uninhabitable nature. (This dynamic, which casts the Surveyor as an agent of progress and his interlocutors as relics of the past, is visually reinforced by the typeface of the text, which casts the Surveyor’s speeches in a modern font and his interlocutors in outdated gothic.) The following exchange is typical of Norden’s work: the Surveyor, arguing for the utility of all kinds of land, points out that “land is giuen to man, to the end that he should till it, manure it, and dresse it: namely hee should set, sow, and plant upon it, and in due discretion to conuert euery place to his fittest fruit. For I am of opinion, that there is no kinde of soile, be it neuer so wilde, boggy, clay, or sandy, but will yeeld one kinde of beneficiall fruit or other.” To which Bayly responds, “Nay, by your leaue, I think the pibbles or beach stones vpon the sea coast … are good for no use, especially for any profitable fruit.” The Surveyor then, displaying his seemingly limitless knowledge of topography and agrarian technology, points out that many pleasant and nourishing fruits such as apples and pears do in fact grow “of their owne accord” in such environments. Finally, admitting his mistake, Bayly concludes that he, like many others, has been “ignorant of
many points of prouidence and good husbandry.”

This exchange displays the extent to which Norden understands the Surveyor to be an ideal embodiment of the providential perspective, a person who, through extensive travel, education, and first-hand experience, has come to know the benevolent order of nature through which all things naturally tend toward anthropocentric use.

The dynamic embodied in the previous exchange displays the extent to which Oeocnomic Providence stems from the conflation of economic and theological discourses. This connection between theology and the ethos of agrarian improvement can be grasped by juxtaposing Norden’s use of the adjective “prouident” to refer to the productive landowner—as in the phrase “The eye of the prouident Master may be worth two working serurants”—with his use of the nominal “prouidence” to refer to the utilitarian structure of the creation—as in the Surveyor’s insistence that men should use irrigation to enrich their lands “as in prouidence.”

Taken together, these two versions of the term “providence” display the reciprocal relationship between the discourse of agrarian improvement, in which the industrious take for their model the preexisting structures of Providence (they, imitating nature, become “prouident” workers) and the discourse of providential theology, which gains its coherence during this period precisely from the improvement of nature enabled by epistemological and technological innovation. For Norden the perspective of Oeocnomic Providence is that of both the industrious subject committed to the improvement of nature and that of the faithful Christian, who never loses sight of the benevolent designs of the creation. Thus, when Bayly, failing to recognize nature’s divine pedagogy, voices the opinion that “Mountaines, Meddowes, Woods, Marshes, and the Sea-coast, breede by nature all rudes, refactarios & immanes, without the grace of God directing them,” his failing stems from a lack of faith as much as it does from his inability to grasp the possibilities
offered by human industriousness. In this way, the devotional challenge of Oeconomic Providence is that, since the structure of nature is always ultimately benevolent, failure to appreciate the proper function of any aspect of the creation represents a spiritual failure on the part of the observer. This discursive interarticulation provides us with a model through which to grasp Herbert’s understanding of Oeconomic Providence as a means through which the human subject gains access to traces of divinity within the natural world.

The “Curious Art” of Providence

George Herbert’s The Temple uses Oeconomic Providence as a means of structuring humankind’s relationship to God ontologically through observations of the material world. This is most obvious in Herbert’s insistent use of the metaphorics of the household in order to describe the totality of the universe. Herbert’s poem “The World,” for example, produces a moral allegory centered on the “stately house” of the earth (1). And his poem “Redemption” figures Christ’s crucifixion in terms of landlord-tenant relations in which the speaker, represented as “a tenant,” makes suit for “A new small-rented lease,” which is finally granted by Christ’s sacrifice (1, 4). These poems encourage their readers to think about devotion in unmistakably oeconomic terms in order to produce a spiritual paradigm that is accessible and grounded within contemporary historical circumstances. However, Herbert is also interested in the limitations presented by thinking about religious devotion in these terms. In his more fully developed works, Herbert often evokes the homely structures of the natural world in order to display nature’s tendency not only to bring us toward an understanding of God through his creation, but also (paradoxically) to entice us to a problematic state of worldly contentment—in
Herbert’s words, to “rest in Nature, not the God of Nature” (“The Pulley” 14). The poem “Affliction (1)” presents a paradigmatic example of the Christian subject’s bifurcated devotional response to the creation:

When first thou didst entice to thee my heart,
    I thought the service brave:
So many joys I writ down for my part,
    Besides what I might have
Out of my stock of natural delights,
Augmented with thy gracious benefits.

I looked on thy furniture so fine,
    And made it fine to me;
Thy glorious household-stuff did me entwine,
    And ’tice me unto thee.
Such stars I counted mine: both heaven and earth
Paid me my wages in a world of mirth.42

While these lines represent the ontological experience of the “glorious household” of the creation as a means through which the speaker is “entice[d]” to God’s service, they also depict the speaker’s progressive movement away from devotional piety and toward the personal aggrandizement of oeconomic gain. Rather than understanding the extent to which the creation glorifies God, the speaker proceeds to appropriate aspects of the creation. The “world of mirth”
represents the speaker’s “wages” rather than God’s glory. In this context, the speaker’s repeated use of the verb “entice” seems to apply to the seductive powers of the worldly instead of God’s call to divine service. Indeed, the speaker’s subjective experience of the world quickly falls apart—a point aptly illustrated by the speaker’s passionate exclamation, “I reade, and sigh, and wish I were a tree” (59-60). The speaker’s enigmatic wish for arboreal existence represents the appeal of a simpler form of being in which the subject (now the object of God’s grace) is unaffected by the vicissitudes of human subjectivity. The dynamic that unfolds in this poem points to the double bind of Providence. For while it is Providence that gives shape to the material world and therefore enables empirical understanding of God’s role in the creation, this “glorious” shape also risks appealing excessively to the human subject, and in doing so, becoming a distraction from devotional subjectivity.

Herbert’s most rigidly anthropocentric poem, aptly entitled “Man,” presents what is perhaps the fullest and most uncompromising depiction of Providential Oeconomics in Herbert’s *The Temple*. The poem’s hyperbolic rhetoric casts man as the supreme culmination of God’s creation—a position perpetrated by the metaphoric of the household, in which man is figured as an artificial microcosm within which the entirety of the creation is controlled and contained. This point is aptly expressed in the memorable phrase “Man is one world, and hath / Another to attend him.” The poem’s opening two stanzas express the speaker’s wish for God to “dwell” within the “stately habitation” that is the supreme human subject:

My God, I heard this day,
That none doth build a stately habitation,
But he that means to dwell therein.
What house more stately hath there been,
Or can be, then is Man? to whose creation
All things are in decay.

For Man is ev’ry thing,
And more: He is a tree, yet bears more fruit;
A beast, yet is, or should be more:
Reason and speech we only bring.
Parrats may thank us, if they are not mute,
They go upon the score.\(^\text{45}\)

In figuring man as a divinely-created household, Herbert intensifies and transforms the convention of representing the creation in its entirety as God’s grand edifice. The effect of this shift is to transform a dispersed (through still anthropocentric) ontology, in which the earth’s collective phenomena are registered as part of an integrated whole, into a supreme subjective position, containing all other aspects of the creation. In blurring the boundary between the human and non-human worlds, this metaphor both adopts and reverses the logic of modern ecological narratives in which the human subject loses herself within larger networks of mutual interdependence.\(^\text{46}\) The ontological boundaries engendered by the ridged physical structure of the household expand to contain the entirety of the creation, even as they posit the uncompromising integrity of the human subject. As the second stanza makes clear, the poem’s edificial metaphorics produce an account of human subjectivity as a container for various lesser modes of subjective existence. Just as in the classical schema, the human soul contains vegetable, animal,
and rational parts, the architectural man contains the tree and the beast as well as the incomparable features of rationality and speech. The speaker’s evocation of “Parrats”—creatures that simply mimic human subjectivity in vacant, diminished fashion—points to the extent to which this poem stems from the perspective of anthropocentric narcissism rather than of humility—literally being close to the earth. In this way, we can understand the perspective engendered by Oeconomic Providence as curiously distant from a position of devotional piety.

Expanding the metaphor of the household to include creatures that are, at least preliminarily, outside of the speaker, Herbert writes,

> Nothing we see, but means our good,
> As our delight, or as our treasure:
> The whole is, either our cupboard of food,
> Or cabinet of pleasure.\(^{47}\)

In this stanza, the notion of Providential Oeconomics reaches its zenith. All things within this perspective teleologically tend toward human use without the need for any form of human striving. Indeed, there is something troublingly passive about the lines, which emphasize not only physical sustenance but also the more dubious indulgence of pleasure. Rather than striving for spiritual improvement the human subject exists in a state of gluttonous narcissism, bloated with the pleasures of the world, and lacking the humility necessary to attain spiritual salvation. We are reminded of Herbert’s warning in *A Priest to the Temple* that “Man would sit down at this world, [even though] God bids him sell it, and purchase a better.”\(^{48}\) Indeed, we might envision the speaker of “Man” reclining upon the great couch of the world, content to dwell in an epicurean state of pleasure. Just as the ideal household produces a non-coercive, hierarchical social structure in which supposedly lesser beings (plants, animals, servants, children, wives)
dutifully mind their upward obligations, Herbert imagines a world in which “Each thing is full of dutie.” However, man’s duty to God within this conceptual schema is curiously under-defined. It is not until the final lines of this poem that Herbert reveals the speaker’s spiritual trajectory: “That, as the world serves us, we may serve thee, / And both thy servants be.” Because this poem relies too heavily upon the sustaining power of Providence (turned conspicuously toward man’s worldly pleasures) without acknowledging its governing and spiritual powers, the speaker’s devotional task is left incomplete. In such a framework, the human subject can easily recognize himself not as a servant but as the master of the creation.

The perspective of Oeconomic Providence so fully developed in “Man,” reaches both its culmination and its progressive undoing in Herbert’s poem “Providence.” While Oeconomic Providence remains largely a matter of worldly convenience in “Man,” “Providence” displays the extent to which this insistently worldly concept can be turned inward toward spiritual improvement. Herbert dramatizes this trajectory by displaying the speaker’s grasp first of Providence’s sustaining power (grasped as the seemingly limitless anthropocentric usefulness of all creatures), then its governing power (grasped as God’s ability to alter this anthropocentric order, and thereby render the world incomprehensible as a utilitarian system), and finally its spiritual power (grasped as the giving up of the human subject’s unique position within the world). In undergoing this process, the speaker must necessarily abandon anthropocentric narratives of oeconomic gain in acknowledgement of the sublime diversity and infinite changeability of God’s creation. This brings the speaker to a point at which he must rely upon faith rather than reason in order to accept his place within the creation. Diana Benet argues that Herbert’s “Providence” is a self-conscious response to the final lines of the poem “Man.” I would add to this observation that “Providence” dramatizes the temporal undoing of the
perspective elaborated in “Man” in favor of much more complex notions of Providence. In this way, the progression of the poem leads away from notions of Oeconomic Providence toward a faith-based epistemology.

The opening lines of “Providence” dramatize the complexity of coming to terms with a concept as ponderous as divine Providence:

O Sacred Providence, who from end to end
Strongly and sweetly movest! shall I write,
And not of thee, through whom my fingers bend
To hold my quill? shall they not do thee right?

The poet’s separation of “Sacred Providence” from the pronoun “thee” serves to bifurcate rather than unify God’s will by suggesting two distinct modes of divine volition—one in which God controls the actions of the non-human world and another in which God directs the speaker to write. In doing this, the speaker has already found himself on shaky theological ground by fragmenting God’s prerogative—a fact which the speaker registers in the stanza’s final question “shall they not do thee right?” The syntactical complexity of this opening sentence coupled with the enjambment of its lines and its strong mid-line caesuras—all of which work against the seemingly simple form of the stanza—create a sense of cognitive dissonance, in which the human subject’s interpretative capacity fails sufficiently to contain the complexity of the poem’s subject matter. This already complicates the neatly anthropocentric framework developed in “Man” by questioning man’s ability truly to understand God’s power. This epistemological tension is, however, quickly overcome in the following stanza in which the speaker confidently asserts “Of all the creatures both in sea and land / Only to Man thou hast made known thy ways.” These lines conspicuously gloss over the uncertainty established in the previous stanza.
And this perspective is furthered by the speaker’s description of the human subject as “Secretary of [God’s] praise” and “the world’s high Priest”—quotable phrases that posit man’s terrestrial transcendence. The dynamic displayed in these opening stanzas—in which the speaker oscillates between moments of ontological disorientation and moments of seemingly lucid foresight—is central to the poem as a whole.

The speaker’s understanding of the creation is facilitated by her confidence in the anthropocentric utility of all aspects of the natural world, but (as we shall see) this oeconomic framework is not without fissures. Herbert establishes this pattern in the poem by evoking creatures that appear at first glance indifferent (or even antithetical) to human use, only to reveal their ultimate utility. “How harsh are thorns to pears!” the speaker exclaims, “and yet they make / A better hedge, and need less reparation.” These paradoxes display what Herbert identifies as the “curious art” of Providence. The phrase “curious art” embodies the dialectic between understanding and failure to comprehend that is at the heart of this poem. For if we are to understand Providence as always “curious” in that it evokes contemplation on the part of the observer, then any interpretation of the creation must always necessarily remain incomplete. The point is not that God’s “curious art” is fully comprehensible, but rather that it draws the observer to meditate upon the divine.

Herbert’s insistent use of the metaphorics of the household to describe the natural world reinforces the notion that anthropocentric utility lies at the heart of the creation. Because the household connotes images of stability and rational structure, such metaphorics aptly embody the sustaining power of Providence. The speaker describes,

And as thy house is full, so I adore

Thy curious art in marshalling thy goods.
The hills and health abound; the vales with store;
The South with marble; North with furres & woods.\textsuperscript{60}

This metaphor transforms the entirety of the natural world into a carefully managed storehouse of goods organized according to the principles of anthropocentric usefulness. This topos extends to encompass much of the poem. Evoking the household as a space of domestic consumption, the speaker describes the earth in terms of a “cupboard” (49) and a “table” (54) in which all creatures “expresse a feast, / Where all the guests sit close, and nothing wants” (133-4). This sense of domesticity is heightened by the speaker’s interest in cataloguing creatures particularly well integrated into the contemporary rural economy such as “bees” (65), which provide “hony” (68), sheep (69), which provide “wooll” (102), and “herbs” (74), which “cure” disease (78).

Suggesting connections between the natural world and the physical space of the household, the speaker uses the edificial metaphors of the “foundation” (124) and the “hedge” (122), a contemporary emblem of private property, in order to express the teleological uses of creatures. Moreover, Herbert’s description of the world explicitly evokes the institutional structures of commerce and private property by centering on the necessity of paying “rent” (27) to God and by conceptualizing the hydraulic cycles of springs, which “vent their streams, and by expense get store,” in proto-capitalist terms.\textsuperscript{61} Finally, evoking images of familial pedagogy, an activity centered within the space of the household, the speaker figures God’s control over the powers of nature as that of a father guiding a child: “Tempests are calm to thee; they know thy hand, / And hold it fast, as children do their fathers, / Which crie and follow.”\textsuperscript{62} However, the problem with this depiction is that it makes the world appear too hospitable, and therefore distracts from the proper spiritual trajectory of Providence. Why would a person wish to dwell in heaven if the earth offers such rich abundance? We are reminded of Herbert’s warning in \textit{A Priest to the}
Temple that “Man would sit down at this world, [even though] God bids him sell it, and purchase a better.”

It is perhaps for this reason that the metaphorics of Oeconomic Providence are interrupted toward the end of the poem by the appearance of creatures not easily integrated into narratives of anthropocentric use. After an extensive catalogue of useful creatures, Herbert evokes the inassimilable (or at least difficult to assimilate) examples of the crocodile and the elephant:

To show thou art not bound, as if thy lot
Were worse then ours; sometimes thou shiftest hands.
Most things move th’ under-jaw; the Crocodile not.
Most things sleep lying; th’ Elephant leans or stands.

This stanza—in which God “shift[s] hands”—displays the poem’s progression from Providence’s sustaining power to its governing power. This shift produces results that are not only difficult to integrate into an oeconmic perspective (what exactly is the use of an elephant or a crocodile?), but also render impossible a complete understanding of Providence. After all, how is the human subject to come to terms with the divine order of Providence if God is constantly making changes to that order? The disorienting effects of these lines are multiplied by the foreign nature of these creatures, whose geographic remoteness renders them empirically inaccessible to Herbert’s English audience.

Indeed, echoing this epistemological uncertainty, the next stanza posits a series of questions aimed at interrogating the very devotional project of the poem:

But who hath praise enough? nay who hath any?
None can expresse thy works, but he that knows them:
And none can know thy works, which are so many,
And so complete, but onely he that owes them. 65

These lines grant ontological mastery of the world only to he who “owes”—that is, in the early modern sense, “owns”—the works of creation, and, in doing so, undermines the oeconomic structures through which the speaker has constructed much of the poem. For, while the human subject may, through the structures of private property, seem to own the works of the creation, all ownership is in fact “owed” to God, the true owner of the world. And, if we are to believe the logic of this stanza, this means that human understanding of the creation is ultimately not possible. Thus, the entire poem along with its devotional task would seem to be a futile labor. 66

Having progressed from Providence’s sustaining power to its governing power, the poem finally turns toward its spiritual power. Indeed, the final two stanzas of the poem offer a radically new perspective:

All things that are, though they have sev’rall wayes,
Yet in their being joyn with one advise
To honour thee: and so I give thee praise
In all my other hymnes, but in this twice.

Each thing that is, although in use and name
It go for one, hath many wayes in store
To honour thee; and so each hymne thy fame
Extolleth many wayes, yet this one more. 67
These lines emphasize not anthropocentric usefulness but creaturely diversity as the central feature of God’s creation. The speaker acknowledges the rift between man’s tendency to understand the world through the semiotics of human use—“Each thing that is … in use and name / It go for one—and the sublime diversity of the creation—“Each thing that is … hath many ways in store / To honour thee.” In the absence of a systematic, use-based understanding of the world, the speaker instead posits the poem as simply another way of honoring God among many. Indeed, the in face of such diversity it is faith and not knowledge that enables comprehension of the creation. As Diana Benet points out, the fact that these final two stanzas repeat the same sentiment—that the creation is characterized by a diversity of devotional potential unified by a single devotional aim—mirrors the “double praise” enacted by the poem.\(^68\) The poem’s final lines suggest that the poem itself, rather than advancing a privileged interpretive perspective of the world, has become lost in the chorus of creaturely devotion.\(^69\) In a sense, “Providence” enacts a temporal shift that thrusts the speaker back into a prelapsarian world without appropriative naming or hostility between species. Through this movement, the poem’s speaker has finally achieved the long sought after realization of the spiritual power of Providence, but doing so has come at the expense of both epistemological mastery and oeconomic dominion.

“I Reade, and Sigh, and Wish I Were a Tree”

The point of ontological uncertainty fostered at the end of “Providence” correlates with a curious longing that we see elsewhere in Herbert’s canon to exist within a vegetative state of arboreal subjectivity. Perhaps the central devotional problem of “Providence” is the fact that the
speaker must ultimately long to transcend the worldly even though the natural world is so insistently beautiful and accommodating. In this way, the poem fosters within us a wish to “sit down at this world” even though we are aware that, in doing so, we would be violating God’s will and failing to achieve salvation. Given the allure of the natural world in Herbert’s writing, it seems that Herbert was particularly interested in this dilemma. In a limited sense, identification with the subjective position of a tree posits one possible solution to this problem, for such a state allows the speaker to exist unproblematically within the natural world without the need for human striving. The following stanzas from “Employment (I)” illustrate the extent to which the human subject in Herbert’s poetry often fits uneasily within her environment:

All things are busie; onely I
Nor flowres to make that, nor the husbandrie
To water these.

I am no link of thy great chain,
But all my companie is a weed.
Lord place me in thy consort; give one strain
To my poore reed.

In these lines, the speaker, viewing the world functioning without her, feels herself left out the providential economy, here represented by the trope of the great chain of being. “Employment (II)” presents a solution to this environmental alienation in the lines,
Oh that I were an Orenge-tree,

    That busie plant!
Then should I ever laden be,

    And never want
Some fruit for him that dressed me.73

Rather than existing alongside “a weed,” the speaker longs to become the plant, and, in doing so, to participate in the natural economy of grace. This form of identification allows the speaker to dwell comfortably within the world rather than in a state in which she must “depend, and fear continually” (which according to Herbert is the proper end of Providence), existence as a tree allows the speaker a simpler form of divine access.74

Unlike the human subject, who must foster a sense of world-weariness in order to attain salvation, the tree is simply able to exist under God’s control. Describing this dynamic, David Glimp argues that the arboreal metaphor “enables Herbert to conceptualize the experience of affliction as a benefit received from God, as a functional aspect of what comes to be perceived as God’s quasi-agricultural care for his creatures.”75 However, while Glimp is interested in such metaphorics primarily as “the vehicle for an ascetic tenor” through which Herbert figures the vicissitudes of human life as beneficial aspects of God’s art, I suggest that this form of creaturely identification also allows Herbert a means of dwelling within the world unproblematically by becoming part of the providential oeconomy. In “Paradise,” the speaker fully assumes the persona of a tree:

    I Blesse thee, Lord, because I GROW
      Among thy trees, which in a ROW
To thee both fruit and order OW.

What open force, or hidden CHARM
Can blast my fruit, or bring me HARM,
While the inclosure is thine ARM.

Inclose me still for fear I START.
Be to me rather sharp and TART,
Then let me want thy hand and ART.\(^76\)

These lines, with their visual figuration of pruning, suggest a subjective state entirely under the control of God. By evoking images of “inclosure,” Herbert renders a practice, which in the postlapsarian world has obtained dubious associations, as the benevolent actions of a caring God; the “inclosure,” it turns out, is simply the “ARM” of God. The fact that Herbert has chosen a tree as his subject in “Paradise” alludes to a situation in which the speaker is unable to fall from grace. Instead, she must simply dwell within the world as an object (rather than restless subject) of Oeconomic Providence.

“Strip the Creature Naked”

However, in lieu of arboreal identification, Herbert strives to produce accounts of how the human subject should interact with the creation. As the poem “Vanitie (I)” makes clear, for Herbert certain epistemological forms are privileged over others. In this poem, Herbert associates
the emergent sciences of Astronomy and Chemistry with rapacious acquisitiveness and moral corruption. In doing this, he suggests that rather than producing integrated accounts of the cosmos capable of clarifying man’s relationship to God, the natural sciences tend to dissect the creation in a way that strips away all traces of divine understanding. In Herbert’s words, “the subtil Chymick can devest / And strip the creature naked, till he finde / The callow principles within their nest.” These lines display the empiricist as motivated by licentiousness and greed rather than spirituality. Thus, we can understand these sciences as opposed to the providential perspective developed elsewhere. Like the poems “Providence” and “Man,” “Vanity (I)” uses the discourse of oeconomics as a mode of rendering the world both useful and comprehensible in anthropocentric terms. However, divorced from Providence, the oeconomic appears drained of its spiritual power, and consequently given to unbounde appropriated impulses. The poem’s opening stanza conflates the discourse of Astronomy with the poem’s running metaphor of a customer at a brothel:

The fleet Astronomer can bore,
And thred the spheres with his quick-piercing minde:

He views their stations, walks from doore to doore,

Surveys, as if he had design’d

To make a purchase there.78

The actions of the Astronomer appear capable of material violence (“his quick-piercing minde” is able to “bore and thred the spheres” in order to produce a necklace: an act which might allude to the destruction and reconstruction of the old Ptolemaic cosmology) and approximate the licentiousness of a man approaching a brothel. However, Herbert’s use of the word “Surveys” also alludes to another potentially problematic mode of oeconomic appropriation. As we have
seen in *The Surveyors Dialogue*, land surveying, a practice associated with enclosure, was viewed with suspicion in early modern England. This poem displays the extent to which it is the human subject and not the natural world that has fallen from God’s grace.

The poem’s final stanza offers both a summation of the speaker’s view on the fallen humanist perspective and an alternative model for viewing the natural world:

> What hath not man sought out and found,
> But his deare God? who yet his glorious law
> Embosomes in us, mellowing the ground
> With showres and frosts, with love & aw,
> So that we need not say, Where’s this command?
> Poore man, thou searchest round
> To finde out death, but misses life at hand.\(^{79}\)

Those who seek to dissect and exploit God’s creation ultimately find falseness rather than truth, death (in failing to see the spiritual in nature) rather than life (in properly recognizing the creation’s divinity). Herbert suggests that the way ultimately to find God’s “glorious law” is not through scientific inquiry (or less through oeconomic exploitation), but through the affective experience of nature, of recognizing that God has “Embosom[ed]” his law within us and that we should approach the works of nature with a sense of “love & aw.” As Richard Strier points out “emotional experience” serves a privileged role in Herbert’s devotional epistemology.\(^{80}\) Wonder then comes to replace the epistemological imperatives of acquisitive modes of dealing with nature and offers a model through which poetry—that is, aesthetic expression —might serve as a more appropriate medium for interacting with nature than the scientific or oeconomic treatise. Thus, well in advance of the formulation of the oeconomy of nature, Herbert offers a critique of
the oeconomic and empirical principles on which it is founded, offering instead providential models for understanding the natural world.

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1 Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Nature,” in *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Mary Oliver. (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 34.

2 Ibid., 34.


4 Ibid., 281

5 Ibid., 241.

6 As in previous chapters, I have retained the early modern spelling of the word “oeconomy” in order to highlight both the word’s etymological root (the Greek *oikos* for “household”) and differences between modern and early modern uses of the word.

7 In “Nature” Herbert displays the extent to which it is human nature rather than external nature that exists in a state of wild ungovernability. The speaker evokes God:

O tame my heart;

It is thy highest art

To captivate strong holds to thee.

If thou shalt let this venome lurk,

And in suggestions fume and work,

My soul will turn to bubbles straight,
And thence by kinde

Vanish into a winde,

Making thy workmanship deceit.

(4-12)

8 Herbert, A Priest to the Temple, 171-2.


10 Ibid., 171.

11 Christina Malcolmson, Heart Work: George Herbert and the Protestant Ethic (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1999), 200.


13 Harris, Untimely Matter, 39. In noticing this critical bifurcation, Harris reproduces Stanley Fish’s influential account of “criticism’s two Herbersts” in which Fish locates critical tendencies that identify Herbert’s model of devotional subjectively as stable and spiritually confident or alternatively utterly unstable and spiritually tortured (1). See Stanley Fish, The Living Temple: George Herbert and Catechizing (Berkley: Univ. of California Press, 1978) and Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1972).

15 By casting nature as innately improvable, Oeconomic Providence enabled the devout to grasp phenomenologically traces of God’s benevolence within the observable structures of the natural world. Henry More, for example, noting mankind’s seemingly limitless ability to adapt all things within nature to fit the needs of human endeavor, appeals to his audience, “if I can shew that there are designes laid even in the lowest and vilest products of Nature that respect Man the highest of all, you cannot deny but that there is an Eye of Providence that respecteth all things” (54). See Henry More An Antidote Against Atheisme (London, 1653), and John Ray The Wisdom of God Manifested in the Works of the Creation (London, 1691).


17 Hunt 287-8.


19 Ibid., 1:159.

20 Herbert, A Priest to the Temple, 271.

21 Ibid., 271.

22 Ibid., 271.

23 Ibid., 271.

24 Ibid., 271-2.

25 Ibid., 270.

26 Ibid., 271.

27 Ibid., 272.
Such narratives both adopted and sought to revise postlapsarian frameworks for understanding nature, which, drawing upon the biblical edit “cursed [is] the ground for thy sake,” tended to emphasize the irrevocable corruption of the creation following Adam’s and Eve’s disobedience in the Garden of Eden. Genesis 3:17, The King James Bible.


Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England 1500-1800* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996), 20. Of course, this spirit of optimism was not univocal. In *The English Husbandman* (London, 1615), Gervase Markham combines a postlapsarian perspective with notions of oeconomic positivism by arguing that husbandry “is most necessary for keeping the earth in order, which else would grow wilde, and like a wildernesse, brambles and weeds choaking vp better Plants, and nothing remayning but a Chaos of confusednesse” (A3r)


Thirsk, *Chapters from the Agrarian History of England and Wales*, 15. This obsession with finding the proper use of all aspects of the creation is reflected in agrarian writers’ focus on “profit”—understood not merely as monetary gain, but also as the production a greater array of useful things from a given plot of land—and on the improvement of “waste” lands—areas of the kingdom either not turned to productive human use or, in polemic literature, held in common. Gervase Markham, for example, contends that husbandry must be encouraged “for if of all things
it be most profitable, then of all things it must needs be most necessary, sith next unto heauenly things, profit is the whole aime of our liues in this world” (image 6). John Norden expresses a similar sentiment when he argues that “men of whatsoeuer title or place, should haue of the lawfull and iust meanes of the preseruation and increase of their earthly Reuenues” (A3r-v). Markham, concurring with such a sentiment, points out that the creation of a fish pond would allow a husbandman to make use of “a piece of waste ground,” which would otherwise not be turned to productive use (158). Early modern discussions of agrarian profit regularly centered on the historical institution of enclosure as a means of bolstering human progress. Although Marx, citing a number of early critics of enclosure (including most notably Thomas More), famously characterizes enclosure as the transformation of lands belonging to the church, the state, and the commons “into modern private property under circumstances of reckless terrorism,” many contemporary accounts of enclosure suggest a more positive attitude toward the practice (Capital 245). Supporters of enclosure tended to emphasize the superior productive potential of land turned to private property relative to land held in common. Joseph Lee, for example, appealing to the dominant political structures of early modern Europe, argues that “The Monarch of one Acre will make more profit thereof, then he that hath his share in forty in common” (39). Similarly, Anthony Fitzherbert, drawing upon his knowledge of agricultural technique, contends that “if an acre of lande be worthe sixe pens or it be enclosed, it will be worth viii pens whan it is enclosed, by reason of the compostyng and dongyng of the catell, that shall go and lye upon it both day and nighte” (23). Intrinsic to such accounts is the notion that private property, figured as the independent rural estate or “house of husbandry,” represents the ideal technological locus for structuring diverse environments—fields, rivers, lakes, hills, and woods—to productive use.

33Herbert, A Priest to the Temple, 275
In the essay collection *Enclosure Acts: Sexuality, Property, and Culture in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1994) both James Siemon and William Carroll point out that in the early modern period the term enclosure was extremely unstable, attracting both support and harsh criticism. Siemon uses Bakhtin’s term “social-heteroglossia” to embody the poly-vocality of the discourse of enclosure (18).

John Nordin *The Surveyors Dialogue* (London, 1607), 211

In early modern usage provident stood for economy, frugality, and thrift in the management of resources (OED 2).

Herbert, “Affliction (I),” 1-12.

David Glimp considers how using arboreal metaphors “enables Herbert to conceptualize the experience of affliction as a benefit received from God, as a functional aspect of what comes to be perceived as God’s quasi-agricultural care for his creatures.” (187)

George Herbert, “Man,” 47-8.

Ibid., 1-12


49 Herbert, “Man,” 37.

50 Ibid., 53–4.


52 Diana Benet, *Secretary of Praise: The Poetic Vocation of George Herbert* (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1984), 159.

53 In some ways, my reading of “Providence” reproduces Stanley Fish’s notion that in order to realize a proper devotional perspective the human subject must “not only to stop distinguishing ‘this’ from ‘that,’ but to stop distinguishing … [her]self from God, and finally to stop, and cease to be” (157). Fish argues that the divine knowledge sought after in Herbert’s poems can be achieved only through “the gradual narrowing (to nothing) of the distance between the individual consciousness (of both speaker and reader) and God” (158). See Stanley Fish *Self-Consuming Artifacts*. However, I argue that the poem leads not to a point of “self-consuming” but rather to a point at which the speaker must make a leap of faith in order to grasp God’s complex role within the creation.

54 Herbert, “Providence,” 1-4

55 Ibid., 5-6.

56 Ibid., 8, 13.

57 Ibid., 121-2.

58 Ibid., 94.
Critics have long noted the preponderance of economic images that characterize Herbert’s vision of providential order in the poem “Providence.” Helen Wilcox, for example, notes the patterns of “homey” images that produce Herbert’s vision of natural order (110). Bernard Kneiger, “The Purchase-Sale: Patterns of Business Imagery in the Poetry of George Herbert” *Studies in English Literature: 1500-1900* 6.1 (1966): 111-24, likewise, commenting on the pervasive and unexpected use of “business imagery” in Herbert’s poems of religious devotion, places the theological figuration of the crucifixion as “a purchase-sale in which Christ purchased man’s salvation at the cost of His being sold to degradation and agony” at the root of Herbert’s use of such images (124). In such a framework, the “purchase-sale” of the crucifixion establishes a dynamic casting God as creditor and man as debtor whose debt is so great that it can never truly be repaid. While such a framework is useful in delineating the theological metaphorics of poems such as “Faith” and “Affliction (II),” it does not sufficiently account for the diversity of insistently worldly images that provide the structural core of Herbert’s “Providence,” which relies upon images of a divinely-structured household in order to produce its vision of providential order.

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60 Herbert, “Providence,” 93-6.
61 Ibid., 71.
62 Ibid., 45-7.
64 Herbert, “Providence,” 137-40.
65 Ibid., 141-4.
66 Herbert’s poem “Employment (I)” offers a similarly problematic vision of the human’s place within the cosmos:
All things are busie; onely I

Neither bring hony with the bees,

Nor flowres to make that, nor the husbandrie

To water these.

I am no link of thy great chain,

But all my companie is a weed.

Lord place me in thy consort; give one strain

To my poore reed.

(17-24)


68 Benet, Secretary of Praise, 159.

69 Godfrey Goodman’s pamphlet The Creatures Praying God: or The Religion of Dumbe Creatures (London, 1622) provides an elaborate account of the ways in which the theological concept of the creature functioned as a devotional practice in early modern England. Goodman describes that by observing the creature, the human observer achieves a trance-like state of devotion based not on human agency, but on letting go and temporarily occupying the non-volitional devotional state of the creature:

And though they seeme dumbe, yet in verity and truth they speake in their silence: for objecting or presenting themselves to our view, shewing their excellent nature, and their rare and wonderful properties, therein they speake their Maker. Man perceiving and
apprehending this, falls instantly to admiration, which is a kinde of naturall trance, wherein his speech failes him, as if he were for a time stricken dumbe together with the dumbe Creatures, to shew his fellow-feeling and symbolizing affection with them; at length he comes to himselfe, begins to breathe, then is he tied to his utterance, as it were to comment upon their own silence, and to be their interpreter, for God requires no more than the ability of the Creature. (B1v)

Unlike models of providence, which empty the creation of its existence independent of humankind in order to produce teleological narratives of anthropocentric use, Goodman’s account of creaturely devotion requires the human observer to lose his or her own subjective independence by entering “a kinde of naturall trance” and thereby being “for a time stricken dumbe together with the creature.” This experience produces an inter-species community of “fellow-feeling” in order to endow the human observer with knowledge of the natural devotional potential of God’s creation. The reciprocity of this experience, which involves the human subject temporarily entering into the world of the non-human creature, points to the radical potential of creaturely devotion as a non-humanist devotional mode.

70 Herbert, A Priest to the Temple, 272


73 Herbert, “Employment (II),” 21-5.

74 Herbert, A Priest to the Temple, 271.

75 Glimp, Figuring Belief, argues that “life as a tree represents a minimal version of existence, one stripped of aspiration to any kind of autonomy, distinction, or capacity for purposive self-
fashioning. To want to be a tree, to “grow / To fruit or shade,” is a way of giving up and letting go, an ascetic renunciation of one’s will in the face of a radical incapacity either to discern God’s plan or autonomously to assemble a viable life.” (187)

76 Herbert, “Paradise,” 1-9.

77 Herbert, “Vanity (I)” 15-7.

78 Ibid., 1-5.

79 Ibid., 22-28.

80 Strier, Love Known, 175.
CHAPTER V

NATURE’S HOUSE: MARGARET CAVENDISH AND THE OECONOMY OF NATURE

In the preceding chapters I have focused on how Digby’s formulation of the oeconomy of nature in the 1640s had various (direct and indirect) literary antecedents, which paved the way for its development. By expounding the Renaissance motif of the natural household, authors like Jonson and Herbert furnished Digby with the central conceptual metaphors underlying the formation of the conceptual rubric “the oeconomy of nature.” However, there is a sense in which the oeconomy of nature is less monogenetic than this narrative seems to suggest. Indeed, Digby’s contemporary Margaret Cavendish (also a natural philosopher, though excluded from the Royal Society on account of her sex) develops a parallel, though in some ways opposing, version of the oeconomy of nature through the alternative rubric “nature’s house.” Given the correspondence that exists between the two, it seems likely that Cavendish developed her version in dialogue with Digby’s. These two accounts of the oeconomy of nature, which serve as bookends to my study, correspond to a rift in how thinkers in the Renaissance and beyond placed the human within the system of nature. Both Digby’s and Cavendish’s contributions are central to how subsequent thinkers made sense of the natural world. If Digby is the oeconomy of nature’s father, we might understand Cavendish as its mother.

A fundamental ambiguity exists within the oeconomy of nature regarding the relative anthropocentrism of the system underlying the natural world. This ambiguity centers on whether all things within nature find their ultimate fulfillment in one or another form of human use, as the
“dominion” biblical creation account suggests, or whether each individual creature, human or non-human, can be understood as a potential agent of environmental exploitation. In other words, might the oeconomy of nature stand not only for the anthropocentric ends to which nature arranges itself (as thinkers like Digby tend to assume), but also for those interactions between non-human creatures that are indifferent to human needs and desires? Do the material interests of a rabbit or an earthworm have the same status as those of a human in the natural oeconomy? The radical implications of the decentered narrative are that the oeconomy of nature describes a system without a center, a vast network of exchange encompassing all living and nonliving things, not merely humankind and its environment.

This tension is central to the manner in which Linnaeus conceptualizes the relationship between humankind and non-human nature in his 1749 treatise The Oeconomy of Nature. While Linnaeus begins his text with a consideration of the “general ends, and reciprocal uses” to which the natural world tends, suggesting a proliferation of agency within the system of nature, he ultimately reaffirms a providential worldview based on human preeminence: “all these treasures of nature, so artfully contrived, so wonderfully propagated, so providentially supported throughout [Nature’s] three kingdoms, seem intended by the Creator for the sake of man,” Linnaeus concludes toward the close of his treatise, “Every thing may be made subservient to his use; if not immediately, yet mediately, not so to that of other animals.”¹ The play signaled by the conditional, “if not immediately, yet mediately,” suggests a moment of epistemological grasping, an attempt to fit the aggregate of empirical observations transcribed in the preceding pages into a largely inadequate paradigm for understanding nature. Ignoring his observations about an animal’s ability to manipulate its environment for personal advantage, Linnaeus sacrifices verisimilitude for ideological coherence. It would not be until Darwin, who audaciously
contended that humankind dwelled within (and, indeed, was constituted by) the oeconomy of nature, that the radical implications of this paradigm would be fully realized. Seventeenth-century naturalist John Ray can similarly be seen struggling with this tension between narratives of human dominion and observations of the independent agency of plants and animals. He moves back and forth between understanding the human as a domineering presence and conceptualizing him or her as a “Dependent Creature,” wholly reliant on other beings for his or her own survival. Ray concludes his narrative with a view of humankind as simultaneously aggrandized and humbled: since God endowed the human “with the Skill and Ability to use [God’s creatures], and which by their Help is enabled to rule over and subdue all inferior Creatures, but without them had been left necessitous, helpless, and obnoxious to Injuries above any other.” In this description, Ray undercuts the hierarchy implied by the adjective “inferior” by highlighting humankind’s utter dependence upon ostensibly lower creatures. Ray suggests that the human may, in fact, be the least autonomous creature on earth, even as he asserts humankind’s ability to rule over all other creatures. It is precisely this dialectic between non-human nature as constituted by independent agents and non-human nature as bound to human service that structures early considerations of humanity’s relationship to the oeconomy of nature.

This chapter focuses on how the works of Margaret Cavendish both anticipate and seek to resolve the tensions central to the oeconomy of nature, as it is represented in the writings of Linnaeus and Ray. Specifically, I argue that Cavendish uses her position as a woman to criticize the “dominion” version of the oeconomy of nature, which she associates with masculine brutality and excess, and to posit an alternative model, centered on the feminine space of “nature’s house,” to describe the processes of nature. This latter model is decentered in that it takes seriously the contributions of non-human creatures both to nature’s order and also to
humankind’s ability to understand that order. Like other representations of the oeconomy of nature, Cavendish draws upon the conceptual metaphorics of the household to describe the workings of the natural world. However, while the hallmark of Digby’s version of the oeconomy of nature is epistemological clarity—nature’s tendency toward “plaine causes to produce knowne effects”—Cavendish asserts that “Natures Works are so various and wonderful, that no particular Creature is able to trace her ways.” The idea is not that Nature’s ways are untraceable, but rather that any isolated perspective of nature—that of a single person, or even a single species—is necessarily incomplete. Thus, rather than representing natural philosophy as an exclusively human endeavor, Cavendish, in her philosophical utopia The Blazing World (1666), envisions a place in which nature’s complex order is investigated collaboratively by hybrid creatures like Bear-men, Fox-men, Bird-men, Fish-men, and Worm-men. Together these creatures, under the governance of the Empress of the Blazing World (a stand-in for both Nature and Cavendish herself), produce a stylized mosaic of the natural world, based on the suitability of each species to its environment: the Bird-men are particularly well suited for investigating the air, the Fish-men for understanding the sea, and the Worm-men for exploring underground. Turning to “Nature’s House” and other poems in Poems and Fancies (1653) as well as Cavendish’s famous closet drama The Convent of Pleasure (1668), I consider how Nature’s “huswivery,” which orders the world by assigning “garments” to each kind of creature—hair, feathers, scales, etc.—is responsible for nature’s diverse order. The domestic metaphorics that Cavendish uses to describe this process, moreover, enable her as a woman to claim a particular affinity to and knowledge of the natural world, from which male natural philosophers like Digby are alienated.

Scholars focusing on Cavendish’s natural philosophy tend to center on her antagonism toward the Royal Society and the related scientific discourses from which she was excluded.
This antagonism is often understood to underpin her rejection of the mechanical philosophy of thinkers like Hobbes and Descartes. This rejection has both ontological and epistemological consequences. Eve Keller considers how the “organic materialism” that structures Cavendish’s version of nature in both her poetry and her natural philosophy substantiates a critique of the emergent modern scientific subject. “By rejecting mechanical philosophy, Cavendish rejected the validity of the subject-object boundary and the self-construction it implies,” Keller contends, “The alternate vision of nature that she develops in her Observations—organic materialism—is significantly less conductive to the idea of the autonomous individual.”5 If the observer cannot claim a certain degree of separation from what is being observed, Keller points out, the very notion of disinterested empirical science is necessarily fatuous. To this point, Cavendish believed that even thoughts themselves—which she diversely likens to bees, ants, and fairies—are materially constituted, and are therefore contingent upon the same natural processes as are other material bodies. Connecting the organic materialism of Cavendish’s poetry to seventeenth-century vitalism—the belief in “the infusion of all material substance with the power of reason and self-motion”—Diane McColley focuses on how Cavendish and other vitalist writers consciously work to counter narratives of nature’s instrumentality: “Since vitalists recognize the otherness of other beings as well as their kinship with us, their poetry rejects the fallacy that only human perceptions matter, and vitalist ideas were incompatible with a doctrine of nature’s instrumentality that extracts the ‘dominion’ passage from the Genesis creation poem and ignores its vitalism.”6 Thus, for Keller and McColley, the project of Cavendish’s natural philosophy is largely negative: a strategy calculated to debunk the epistemological pretensions and dangerous material consequences of seventeenth-century science.
But aspects of Cavendish’s natural philosophy are more aligned with contemporary scientific models of nature than these critiques would initially seem to suggest. While it is true that Cavendish’s philosophy of nature might be understood as “empathetic, subjective, and fragmentary,” as Sylvia Bowerbank describes, Cavendish also shares her contemporaries’ desire to describe the principles through which natural order is achieved.7 Cavendish does not use the phrase “the oeconomy of nature” to describe this order, but instead directly employs the conceptual metaphorics of household management, particularly the gendered labors of “housewifery,” to describe the functioning of nature. Throughout Cavendish’s works, Nature appears as a feminine deity, ordering the world according to the principles of good household management, namely: efficiency, providence, thrift, and the fulfillment of biological necessity. It is precisely these values that provide ontological stability within a potentially chaotic model of nature. In the poem “Nature’s Wardrobe,” for example, Cavendish describes Nature dressing all of the earth’s creatures in garments fitting to their respective environments:

Most of her Creatures She hath clad in Furre,
Which needs no Fire, if they do but stir.
And some in Wool She clads, as well as Haire,
And some in Scales, others do Feathers weare.8

In this metaphor Nature is figured as a female deity responsible for dressing all of the earth’s creatures according to their respective environmental needs. The clothing she supplies allows ostensibly similar bodies to thrive in different climates and places. This is a version of the oeconomy of nature that takes seriously the needs of non-human creatures insofar as the central conceit, clothing as the primary marker of difference, suggests an internal homogeneity. While the narrator goes on to complement man’s attire for its tactile and aesthetic qualities—“But Man
She made his Skin so smooth, and faire, / It needs no Feathers, Scales, Wool, nor Haire”—she does not definitively elevate the human above the non-human, as do so many early modern narratives flaunting the exceptionality of the human’s capacity for rational thought. In fact, the comparison between the external appearance of the human and the external appearance of other animals draws the reader’s attention to various potential deficiencies in the human’s attire: since he does not have fur, he requires fire to stay warm enough to survive in cold climates; he is unable to fly like birds or to live underwater like fish. In this way, Cavendish’s metaphor of external appearance as the primary marker of difference approaches Ray’s observation that the human, far from being preeminent, is a “Dependent Creature,” beholden to the oeconomy of nature for survival.

Like other iterations of the oeconomy of nature, Cavendish’s natural philosophy draws upon “the ontology of mechanical philosophy—matter in motion”—but splices this model with “a form of vitalistic materialism that posited a universe composed of three kinds of matter—rational, sensitive, and inanimate.” The effect is to create a physics of life—an ontology capable of registering the orderly rhythm and balance of life on earth without transforming the world into a machine. Carolyn Merchant argues that, as a response to the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century, and the attendant intensification of industrial and commercial activities, “[a]n organically oriented mentality in which female principles played an important role was undermined and replaced by a mechanically oriented mentality that either eliminated or used female principles in an exploitative manner.” In the context of Merchant’s paradigm, it might be argued that the oeconomy of nature represents yet another strategy for controlling Nature by yoking her to the patriarchal institution of the household (oikos)—a space in which her actions can be contained, controlled, and sublimated to the demands of commercial activity. But
such an account fails to consider the agency allotted to the nature within this model, which is particularly pronounced in Cavendish’s representations of nature as a managerial presence. I argue that the oeconomy of nature might more accurately be understood as a grey area between Merchant’s poles of the organic and the mechanistic. Indeed, the root metaphor of the early modern household points to both technological features (architecture, tools, clothing, ledgers, etc.) and organic features (livestock, crops, wood, human bodies, etc.). We might conceptualize the household as a technology of survival, responsible for meeting biological necessities—what Henry David Thoreau calls “the essential facts of life”—as well as a social institution, tasked with substantiating the societal divisions of family and political class. The household is, after all, what Henri Lefebvre refers to as a “lived space,” characterized by the dynamic interplay between physical interactions and mental conceptions.

In her writings Cavendish exploits the flexibility enabled by the metaphor of the household as a conceptual rubric for nature’s loose order. “Nature hath but One Law … to keep Infinite matter in order,” Cavendish writes in Philosophical Letters (1664). However, for Cavendish, this order is flexible enough to accommodate diverse forms of agency. Alongside the “serious actions” of “Production, Generation, and Transformation,” Cavendish includes “the Playing motions of nature [which] are the actions of Art.” Cavendish’s version of nature, far from being restrained by patriarchal fetters, enjoys a full range of human agency. And, while she is very wise, she is not impervious to making mistakes. Philosopher of science Evelyn Fox Keller might as well be referring to Cavendish’s philosophy when she describes a feminine version of science based on order rather than law: “the conception of nature as orderly, and not merely law bound, allows nature itself to be generative and resourceful—more complex and abundant than we can either describe or prescribe.” What is useful about Keller’s paradigm is
that it strikes the very balance between natural law and chaos that is the focus of much of Cavendish’s writing.

Sex and Dominion

Feminist theorists have long argued for a particular affinity between women and the natural world. This perception is largely based on the idea that, across a number of cultures and ages, the subjugation of women has been closely linked to the subjugation of nature. Donna Haraway traces this connection to the fact that “certain dualisms have been persistent in Western traditions; they have all been systematic to the logics and practices of dominion of women, people of color, nature, workers, animals—in short, domination of all constituted as others, whose task is to mirror the self.” The particular connection between feminism and environmentalism also has an historical basis. Carolyn Merchant points out that the “simultaneity of two recent social movements—women’s liberation … and the ecology movement” has led to a powerful and pervasive connection between the two, both of which frequently evoke images of Mother Earth under attack. Such widely influential ideas have spawned the formal critical movement of ecofeminism, which applies critical concepts from feminism and environmentalism to the study of literature. Focusing particularly on the early modern period, Sylvia Bowerbank reflects upon how ambivalence within the word “man,” which was used to refer both to humanity in general and to men in particular, registers women’s liminal position in early modern culture:

In theory, woman remained the subordinate mediatrix between man and nature, and yet, even this degraded placement afforded her compensatory powers. Insofar as woman was ‘man,’ on the one hand, she could potentially lay claim to agency in the modern project to
civilize nature. Insofar as he was ‘nature,’ she could lay claim to a special capacity to speak for nature—especially as men began to pride themselves on their increasing detachment from nature. Furthermore, insofar as woman was both ‘nature’ and ‘man,’ she could critique the modern project of mastery, even as she reached toward a distinctive knowledge of nature, based on a radicalized concept of compassion that might be termed the beginnings of an ecological sensibility.\(^{19}\)

Bowerbank argues that a woman’s liminal position in early modern culture afforded her certain rhetorical and ontological positions unavailable to her male counterparts. Even as her exclusion from the hierarchically dominant position of “man” relegated her to a subordinate role, it also enabled her “to speak for nature” in a way that a man could not. This special knowledge, in turn, registers forms of “ecological sensibility” unavailable early modern men: a point extensively developed in Bowerbank’s book-length study of the ecological thought of early modern women writers like Mary Wroth, Mary Rich, Catherine Talbot, Anna Steward, and Margaret Cavendish. In the context of Bowerbank’s analysis, we can see how a female perspective may be particularly amenable to understanding the oeconomy of nature as decentered. Because a woman, by virtue of her liminal position, may be less invested in the dominion narrative that structures anthropocentric accounts of the oeconomy of nature, she may be more receptive to an alternative model, based on how all creatures, human and non-human, interact within a given environment.

As Bowerbank notes, Cavendish was particularly attuned to the complex gender dynamics of the early modern rubric “man,” and how this category related to the often feminized realm of “nature.” For Cavendish, the ambiguity of the term “man,” which enabled her as a woman to stand outside of this category when it was desirable to do so, furnished her with a unique opportunity to criticize the often overtly masculine ideology of seventeenth-century
science. This masculine ideology coalesced around narratives of man’s dominion over nature, which provided the structural basis for the anthropocentric account of the oeconomy of nature. Mixing epistemological positivism with the biblical injunction to “have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth,” philosophers like Francis Bacon and Rene Descartes conceived of the scientific project as one of both material and mental mastery; to understand nature’s order was to possess the ability to control it.

Positioning the dominion narrative in reference to the English Royal Society, Thomas Spratt refers to “the knowledge of nature [as] an Instrument whereby Mankind may obtain Dominion over Things and not onely over one anothers Judgements.” This conjunction of knowledge and physical control is aptly summarized in the famous motto of Bacon’s utopian academy, Solomon’s House: “The End of our Foundation is the knowledge of Causes, and secret motions of things; and the enlarging of the bounds of Human Empire, to the effecting of all things possible” (480). To be fair, Bacon’s use of the gender-neutral “Human” does potentially bring women into the fray of scientific inquiry in a way that the masculine “man” does not. But his use of rhetoric of empire to express the relationship between “knowledge” and the “effecting of things” has the effect of positing the human and nature as two divergent realms, bound together by political and economic conflict. Since Cavendish rejected such narratives of scientific dominion, there is reason to believe that she wrote her philosophical utopia, The Blazing World, in direct response to Bacon’s New Atlantis. While Bacon’s New Atlantis represents an island in which all aspects of nature have been brought under the control of human technology, Cavendish’s The Blazing World envisions a cooperative realm, ruled by an unnamed empress, in which various hybrid human-animal species investigate nature collectively.
As an alternative to the dominion model of nature, Cavendish creates representations of the natural world that take seriously the epistemological and material interventions of non-human creatures. This empathetic take on the non-human structures much of her poetry and natural philosophy. As a strategy for undermining human pretensions of absolute dominion, Cavendish writes a series of poems, such as “A Dialogue Between an Oake, and a Man Cutting Him Down,” depicting dialogues between human and non-human interlocutors, in which man is forced to justify his actions. These justifications invariably prove that human pretensions of dominion are ill-founded, and represent attempts to usurp the natural order, rather than fulfillments of some divine edict. In producing this narrative, Cavendish draws upon gender politics to indict human behaviors that she finds unfavorable by exploiting the gender specific meaning of the word “man.” This affords her a privileged position as a female writer and natural philosopher as one who can criticize man’s material and scientific interventions even as she is able to participate in the discourse that constitutes these activities.

Cavendish’s poem “The Hunting of the Hare” is a case in point. By evoking the traditionally male activity of hunting as a brutal affront to the natural order of things, Cavendish displays masculine forms of environmental interaction, subsumed under the general rubric of “dominion,” as brutal and unnatural. All of the characters in “The Hunting of the Hare” are male: Wat (the hunted hare), the hunters, and the dogs used in the hunt. There is a sense in which this activity falls entirely outside of the feminine realm of nature. While it may be argued that hunting is a quintessentially natural activity, a basic strategy for human survival, Cavendish takes pains to depict this form of hunting as an affront to the natural order. To develop this idea, the poem’s narrator contrasts man with other predators in order to show how man’s hunting lacks the natural limits of biological necessity obeyed by other animals:
When they do *Lions, Wolves, Beares, Tigers* see,

To kill poore *Sheep*, strait say, they cruell be.

But for themselves all *Creatures* think too few,

For *Luxury*, wish God would make them new.

While other animals kill only for survival, man’s appetite for blood stems from sinful and immoderate desires, which are conspicuously figured as forms of “Luxury.” There is a sense in which man would hunt rabbits and other game animals to extinction if given the chance, thereby throwing the oeconomy of nature out of balance. Likewise, man’s ability to conscript dogs as hunters is represented as “like to Witchery,” and the “whooping” sounds made by the men after having killed the hare are compared to those made by the Devil’s prisoners. Here Cavendish transforms charges traditionally leveled at women (conspicuous consumption and witchcraft) into a strategy for rendering the most celebrated of aristocratic pastimes base and deplorable. Far from being natural, hunting is imagined as a bizarre and sadistic affront to the natural order.

Indeed, it is the unnatural waste produced by hunting, the fact that many of animals are killed not for food but “for sport,” that constitutes Cavendish’s most sustained critique of the activity. Rather than being satisfied with what God has provided, man thinks most highly of that hunter, “which makes most spoile,” and laments that nature does not hold enough creatures to satisfy his bloodlust. Here and elsewhere, Cavendish plays on the multiple meanings of the word “spoile,” which can refer both to “plunder taken from an enemy in war,” and also to “decay” (OED). The latter definition points to the fact that, while most animals kill only as much as they can consume, man’s excessive hunting inevitably produces spoil in the form of decaying bodies. Since the oeconomy of nature is generally described in terms of its efficiency, its ability
to account for all of nature diverse forms in terms of use, such wastefulness signals man’s
disconnection from and threat to nature’s order.

This specific critique of hunting culminates in a more general attack on man’s pretentions
of exerting dominion over the world. While early modern literature often celebrates man’s
divinely sanctioned mastery of the creation, as in George Herbert’s description, “Man is one
world, and hath / Another to attend him,” Cavendish represents man’s dominion of nature as a
form of tyranny, an abuse of the creation rather than the fulfillment of a divine edict. In the
final lines of The Hunting of the Hare,” Cavendish transforms the “dominion” narrative of
Genesis into a delusion, a convenient fiction though which man disguises his own brutality:

Yet Man doth think himself so gentle, mild,
When he of Creatures is most cruell wild.
And is so Proud, thinks onely he shall live,
That God a God-like Nature did him give.
And that all Creatures for his sake alone,
Was made for him, to Tyrannize upon.

Notably, this version of man is gendered. The exclusion of women from this category enables
Cavendish to cast the domination of the natural world as a form of human hypocrisy without
implicating herself in the category. In this poem, Cavendish transforms a masculine version of
the dominion narrative into the Lucifer-like pride of comparing one’s self to God. Taking away
man’s privileged position in the creation, Cavendish points out that “Destroy[s] those Lifes that
God saw good to make.” If the natural philosophers tended to emphasize the efficacy of human
domination, Cavendish was interested in debunking the notion that man’s interventions in the
natural world would produce universally favorable results. Rather, Cavendish points to instances in which man’s attempts to control nature compromise nature’s oeconomy.

In her prose dialogue “A Dialogue Between a Man and a Spider,” included in the collection *Philosophical Fancies* (1653), Cavendish infuses her critique of man’s pretensions of dominion with contemporary political discourse. Describing a conversation between a man and a spider in the process of devouring a fly, Cavendish emphasizes man’s destructive nature. Defending itself against charges of cruelty, the spider asks,

> What Creature is there that will spare the Life of another, if it be to maintain his own? since Self-preservation is the chief of Nature's Works; and of all her Works, Man seeks it most: and not only so, but he delights in Spoil, which is against Nature: for, Doth not Man take delight, and account it as one of his Recreations, to kill those Creatures that he refuses to eat? Nay, Man will destroy his own Kind: for, What Warrs and Slaughter do they make, out of a covetous Ambition for Power and Authority? But, if you be so just as you pretend, then first cast out all Intemperate Desires. Make Peace among your selves, then may you be fit Judges to decide the Quarrels of other Creatures, and to punish Offenders, when you are innocent; otherwise you will but shew your self an Usurper, wresting that Power that belongs not to you; and a Tyrant, to execute with the Sword of Cruelty, destroying Truth and Right.\(^{25}\)

Evoking a proto-Darwinian version of nature, Cavendish envisions “Self-preservation” as “the chief of Nature’s Works,” and then suggests that man’s methods for dealing with nature exceed this necessity-based ontology. Man indulges in “Intemperate Desires” and “delights in Spoil, which is against Nature.” What is perhaps most striking about the spider’s account is its evocation of the discourse of tyranny, usurpation, and warfare. The metaphors of tyranny
suggest that man is a usurper of Nature’s wise governance, whose transgressions have produced disastrous results in the natural world, similar to those produced in the political realm with the execution of Charles I.

Nature’s appearance in this dialogue as a creative feminine presence, responsible for various “Works,” provides a contrast to the destructiveness of masculine endeavors. The fact that Cavendish speaks these words through the mouthpiece of a spider is particularly fitting. Sylvia Bowerbank argues that the spider’s spinning is among the guiding metaphors of Cavendish’s literary career.26 Traditionally associated with female labor, the spider also stands for the ability of non-human creatures to transform their environments for personal advantage. In her poem “Of the Spider,” for example, Cavendish writes of the “Spiders Housewifry,” pointing to the curious productivity and orderliness of this ostensibly abject creature.27 Such conceits, which elevate both femininity and non-humanness above man, have the effect of disrupting hierarchies common to the early modern understanding of nature’s order. The figure of the spider’s web, moreover, signals the fact that man does not have a monopoly on environmental exploitation and creative endeavor. “But if we observe well, we shall find that the Elemental Creatures are as excellent as Man,” Cavendish writes in one of her Philosophical Letters, “I cannot perceive more abilities in Man then in the rest of natural Creatures; for though he can build a stately House, yet he cannot make a Honey-comb; and though he can plant a Ship, yet he cannot make a Tree; though he can make a Sword, or Knife, yet he cannot make the Mettal.”28 This consideration of non-human agency informs Cavendish’s radically decentered version of the oeconomy of nature.

*The Oeconomy of Pleasure*
The oeconomy of nature provides Cavendish with a model for her natural philosophy, particularly in reference to the processes of life, but it also furnishes her with a strategy for conceptualizing her own writing. Cavendish envisions the activities of writing and natural creation as analogous: “the mind takes as much pleasure in creating of Fancies, as Nature to create and dissolve, and create Creatures anew,” Cavendish writes, “For Fancy is the Minds creature.” However, in both writing and life processes, the pleasurable activity of creation must be governed, made to fit a specific form. In reference to her writing, Cavendish conceptualizes this government in terms of proper household management.

This analogy is most apparent in the opening epistle to *Poems and Fancies*, Cavendish’s first work to appear in print. As an apology directed at possible criticisms she may receive as a woman writer, Cavendish describes her collection as an extended exercise in household management: “IF any do read this Book of mine, pray be not too severe in your Censures. For first, I have no Children to imploy my Care, and Attendance on; And my Lords Estate being taken away, had nothing for Huswifery, or thristy Industry to imploy my selfe in; having no Stock to work on.” Cavendish explains that, in lieu of children and an estate, she must focus her energies on the oeconomy of writing in order to avoid idleness. Defining her work in terms of efficient household management, Cavendish goes on to draw a distinction between “housewifery” and “thriftiness,” the former of which provides a model for the kind of fanciful poetry she wishes to create, and the latter for writing characterized by little fancy:

For *Housewifery* is a discreet Management, and ordering all in Private, and Household Affaires, seeing nothing spoil’d, or Prosusely spent, that every thing has its proper Place, and every Servant his proper Work, and every Work to be done in its proper Time; to be Neat, and Cleanly, to have their House quiet from all disturbing Noise. But *Thriftiness* is
something stricter; for good *Housewifery* may be used in great *Expenses*; but *Thriftiness* signifies a *Saving*, or a getting; as to increase their *Stock*, or *Estate*. For *Thrift* weighs, and measures out all *Expence*. It is just as in *Poetry*: for good *Husbandry* in *Poetry*, is, when there is great store of *Fancy* well order'd, not onely in fine *Language*, but proper *Phrases*, and significant *Words*. And *Thrift* in *Poetry*, is, when there is but little *Fancy*, which is not onely spun to the last *Thread*, but the *Thread* is drawne so thin, as it is scarce perceived. But I have nothing to spin, or order, so as I become *Idle*; I cannot say, in mine owne *House*, because I have none, but what my *Mind* is lodg'd in.\textsuperscript{31}

Evoking this dichotomy, Bowerbank points out that Cavendish “associates the writings of the learned with sterile artificiality and labored imitation.”\textsuperscript{32} Cavendish’s ideal poetry, thus, involves striking a balance between stinginess and excess, between the strict order of formal verse and the “great store of Fancy” that constitutes the imaginative abundance of poetic creation. Like a well-managed household, the poem should neither waste nor hold back the materials of fancy from which it is composed.

The distinction Cavendish draws between “housewifery” and “thrift” is a subtle, and one that many writers do not make. Because of this, we might understand this distinction as having particular significance in her works. Her use of the discourse of household management to describe literary composition draws upon the early modern use of the word “oeconomy” to refer to “arrangement of material by an author” (OED). “Oeconomy,” therefore, stands for an author’s ability to order diverse materials and generic conventions into a cohesive whole, often (in the context of drama) in accordance with Aristotle’s unities of time, place, and action. As Henry Turner points out, the conceptual metaphors of the “practical spatial arts,” such as estate surveying, form the discursive core of early modern notions of dramatic “plot.”\textsuperscript{33} Thus,
“oeconomy” comes to be used interchangeably with “plot” in the middle and later decades in the seventeenth century. John Milton uses oeconomy in this sense when, in an essay appended to the 1671 edition of Samson Agonistes, he writes that “Plot” is “nothing indeed but such oeconomy, or disposition of the fable as may stand best with verisimilitude and decorum.” Used in this way, the term implies a certain structural rigidity, a close adherence to formal convention. But Cavendish’s use of “housewifery,” distinguishable from “thrift,” is considerably more flexible; it is a life metaphor rather than an architectural one. This is fitting given the playful nature of much of Cavendish’s writing: she brazenly flouts decorum by expressing philosophical ideas as poems and poetic ideas as philosophical dialogues.

Cavendish’s notion of the loose order of housewifery finds its fullest aesthetic expression in her closet drama The Convent of Pleasure. This comedy centers on Lady Happy, a wealthy dowager who chooses to become a votaress of Nature, and establishes a kind of nunnery that exists to the exclusion of world of men. For a time, the play’s women live happily without men, devoting their lives to nature’s many pleasures. However, the play eventually veers back toward the conventions of Restoration comedy when Lady Happy marries a Prince, who has gained access to the convent by disguising himself as a woman. The order of Lady Happy’s house, the eponymous “convent of pleasure,” is based on a give and take between indulgence and moderation. Initially forming her plan, Lady Happy describes the house as a place where “we [may] freely please our selves in that which is best for us: and that is best, what is most temperately used, and longest may be enjoyed, for excess doth wast it self, and all it feeds upon.” She later evokes this notion of moderate pleasure in her suggestion that they shall live “with all the delights and pleasures that are allowable and lawful.” Lady Happy, therefore, strives to strike the very same balance between sustainable order and pleasure that Cavendish
wishes to attain in her poetry. This sustained order is achieved by the ladies’ management of the estate in accordance with the rhythms of the natural world: “I have change of Furniture, for my house; according to the four Seasons of the year.” The furniture that she describes is both aesthetically beautiful and functional, and enables the women to utilize the benefits of each season, while managing the attendant risks. It is this appreciation of the oeconomy of nature that enables the women to “enjoy the variety of Pleasures, which are in Nature”—pleasures usually obstructed by men.

In contrast to the sustainable order achieved by the play’s women, the men in the play are given to unsustainable fits of overindulgence. For example, the play’s principle villains, Monsieur Take-Pleasure and his lackey, Dick, are profligate spend-thrifts, who attempt to gain access to the convent with fancy clothes and expensive gifts, such as “Feathers, Ribbons, Gold, and Silver.” Similarly, in the play’s opening lines, two gentlemen discuss the unsustainable expenditure involved in courtship: “If she be so rich, it will make us all Young Men, spend all our Wealth in fine Clothes, Coaches, and Lackies, to out our Wooing hopes.” The suggestion is that the very parameters of Restoration comedy, based on heterosexual courtship, are economically unsustainable. Even if the play ultimately reaffirms the central dynamics of the genre, pairing the main characters in marriage, Cavendish gives us a glimpse of an alternative order, based on explicitly female sovereignty and sociality, understood to be in sync with nature’s oeconomy. In doing this, the play conflates the subversion of patriarchy with the formation of more sustainable models for interacting with the non-human world.

*Who Knows, But Beasts?*
Like *The Convent of Pleasure*, Cavendish’s *The Blazing World* takes the form of a utopian thought experiment, centered on imagining a place governed in accordance with the principles of the oeconomy of nature. However, in *The Blazing World* Cavendish shifts focus from questions of ontology to those of epistemology. How can we, as humans, come to understand nature’s complex order given the inherent limitations of our senses? How do we account for those things like air pressure and microbes that are difficult for us to perceive? Are their limits to what empirical observation can teach us? These questions were, of course, central to seventeenth-century natural philosophy, and spawned a number of novel solutions, including technological innovations aimed at improving humankind’s ability to observe the natural world such as Boyle’s air pump, Galileo’s telescope, and Hooke’s microscope. For many of the scientists associated with the Royal Society, such inventions were evidence of humankind’s increasing ability to exert both perceptual and material mastery over the world. For example, Robert Hooke begins his *Micrographia* (1665) with the programmatic statement, “The first thing to be undertaken in this weighty work, is a watchfulness over the failings and an enlargement of the dominion of the senses.”\(^{41}\) The new science of the Royal Society, thus, centered on positivist assumptions about what humanity would be able to achieve through empirical observation and technological interventions in the world.

Cavendish, however, was not so confident in humankind’s ability to exert perceptual mastery over the world. Instead, Cavendish again and again insists upon the inability of any single creature (man included) fully to comprehend nature’s order. She describes that the Empress of *The Blazing World*, in her vast wisdom, “knew that Nature's Works are so various and wonderful, that no particular Creature is able to trace her ways.”\(^{42}\) Mirroring this sentiment, one of the Bird-men in service of the Empress, asserts that “Nature is so full of variety, that our
weak Senses cannot perceive all the various sorts of her Creatures; neither is there any one object perceptible by all our Senses.” As we have seen in Chapter 2, plentitude can actually serve as an obstacle to material and perceptual mastery. Like Spenser, Cavendish recognizes the extent to which “variety” limits humankind’s ability to master the world by perpetually complicating and subverting encyclopedias and taxonomies. Her suggestion is not that nature is without order, but rather that this order is so complex that it is unavailable to any single perspective.

Engaging in polemic with Hooke, Cavendish even points to the inefficacy of perceptual technologies such as the microscope, which she puts in the hands of the Bear-men, who serve as parodies as the natural philosophers of the Royal Society. Rather than illuminating nature’s order, the microscope has the effect of deluding the senses, and causing discord in opinion: the Empress, having been told that the “Glasses were true Informers, [which] would rectifie their irregular Sense and Reason,” concludes that “Nature has made your Sense and Reason more regular then Art has your Glasses; for they are meer deluders, and will never lead you to the knowldg of Truth.” She then commands that all of the microscopes in the Blazing World be destroyed, so as not to sow discord among her subjects. Indeed, as well as expanding the dominion of the senses, Hooke’s microscope also had the effect of showing people just how complex the natural world really is. To this point, it is difficult to look at Hooke’s enlarged drawing of a drone fly’s eyes in Micrographia and not imagine that the fly can perceive things that we cannot.

As an alternative to narratives of human perceptual dominion, Cavendish envisions natural philosophy as a collaborative activity, in which human and non-human creatures must work together in order to gain a fuller understanding of nature’s diverse order. The Blazing World is a place in which various hybrid creatures work together, under the collective guidance
of the Empress, to investigate the world. Describing the diversity of the kingdom’s human-animal inhabitants, Cavendish writes:

The rest of the Inhabitants of that World, were men of several different sorts, shapes, figures, dispositions, and humors, as I have already made mention, heretofore; some were Bear-men, some Worm-men, some Fish-or Mear-men, otherwise called Syrens; some Bird-men, some Fly-men, some Ant-men, some Geese-men, some Spider-men, some Lice-men, some Fox-men, some Ape-men, some Jack-daw-men, some Magpie-men, some Parrot-men, some Satyrs, some Gyants, and many more, which I cannot all remember; and of these several sorts of men, each followed such a profession as was most proper for the nature of their Species. Rather than representing the human as the only observer of nature, the lone creature endowed with the capacity for rational thought and speech, Cavendish focuses on how different creatures have different perceptual skills: the Worm-men are best at understanding what happens in the soil, the Fish-men what goes on underwater, and the several species of Bird-men the disposition of the sky. Indeed, Cavendish’s focus on those skills “most proper for the nature of their Species” points to her understanding of environmental specialization. The oeconomy of nature is revealed not to those who attempt to exert dominion over the world, but rather to those who take the time to listen to the earth’s creatures.

In writing *The Blazing World* Cavendish focuses on the connection between empathy and epistemology—between listening to the earth’s creatures and gaining a fuller understanding of the natural world. Indeed, a prominent feature of Cavendish’s poetry and natural philosophy (and one that has gained much attention from ecocritics) is her persistently empathetic representation of non-human creatures. “Who knows, but beasts, as they do lie, / In meadows low, or else on
mountains high,” Cavendish writes in a famous poem, “But that they do contemplate on the sun.”46 This attention to the possibility of non-human rationality is central to Cavendish’s critique of Descartes, who transforms animals into automata in his Discourse of Method. Addressing Descartes in one of her Philosophical Letters, Cavendish writes: “That all other animals, besides man, want reason, your author endeavours to prove in his Discourse of Method, where his chief argument is, that other animals cannot express their mind, thoughts or conceptions, either by speech or any other signs, as man can do … although they cannot talk or give intelligence to each other by speech, nevertheless each hath its own peculiar and particular knowledge, just as each particular man has his own particular knowledge.”47 Mirroring her assertions in The Blazing World, Cavendish argues that “yet may their perceptions and observations be as wise as men’s, and they may have as much intelligence and commerce betwixt each other, after their own manner and way, as men have after theirs.”48 It is precisely this openness to the possibility of other ways of observing the world that enables Cavendish to produce an alternative version of the oeconomy of nature. While many of her contemporaries were unable to envision humankind anywhere but at the center of nature’s order, Cavendish focused on a decentered oeconomy of nature, of which each and every creature is a legitimate agent of environmental manipulation.

This decentered oeconomy of nature enables us to see the radical implications of Cavendish’s paradigm for understanding the physical world. For Digby, humankind’s status as the cornerstone of the oeconomy of nature bolsters the dominant scientific and theological narratives espoused by the Royal Society, even as it radically expands the sphere of analysis. For Cavendish, the marginalization of “man” in the system of nature leads to a rethinking of human ethics from an ecocentric rather than anthropocentric perspective. If Digby is a forerunner to
important ecological thinkers like Linnaeus and Darwin, we might understand Cavendish as a formative figure in ethical side of ecology—those features of the science that led directly to modern environmentalist thought. To a certain extent, it is difficult to disentangle these two perspectives—thinkers like Aldo Leopold and Rachel Carson made important contributions to both the ethical and the scientific—but it is also important to remember that the science of ecology does not always equate with kind to the natural world. This is where the literary status of Cavendish’s scientific works becomes significant, for, as Philip Sidney makes clear, literature has always played a central role in espousing and innovating ethics. By inviting her readers to inhabit the words of non-human creatures, Cavendish encourages us to think about what it might be like to occupy other positions within the oeconomy of nature.


3 Ibid., 1Mr.


10 Lisa Sarasohn, *The Natural Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish: Reason and Fancy During the Scientific Revolution* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2010), 2.


20 Discussing political dominion, Bacon refers to God’s gift of dominion over the earth to Adam and Eve as the “Original Donation of Government” (42).


24 Cavendish, “The Hunting of the Hare,” 258.


26 See Bowerbank, “The Spider’s Delight.”


30 Ibid., 7

31 Ibid., 7


36 Ibid., 101.

37 Ibid., 105.
38 Ibid., 104.

39 Ibid., 102.

40 Ibid. 97.


43 Ibid., 167.

44 Ibid., 170.

45 Ibid., 163.


47 Margaret Cavendish, *Philosophical Letters* (London, 1664), 899

48 Ibid., 900.
If aspects of the seventeenth-century oeconomy of nature are recognizably modern—its insistence on a complex though comprehensible system of nature based on networks of physical exchange—it also has a number of distinctly pre-modern features; it certainly has strands of Foucault’s sixteenth-century episteme of similitude and resemblance, with the household standing as the microcosmic unit next to which larger, more complex forms are rendered comprehensible. It is fitting, then, that the genesis the oeconomy of nature lies in the seventeenth century, at the threshold between the pre-modern and the modern, when what Bruno Latour calls “the Modern Constitution” was in the process of being written. Latour argues that modernity is predicated on the divergent practices of “purification”—which “creates two entirely distinct ontological zones: that of human beings on one hand; that of non-humans on the other”—and that of “translation”—which “creates mixtures between entirely new types of beings, hybrids of nature and culture.” While Latour suggests that the breakdown of the nature-culture divide from which modernity stems is a relatively recent phenomenon, the hybrid status of oeconomy of nature suggests that such fissures may run deeper than originally thought. Indeed, as we have seen throughout this study, the oeconomy of nature straddles the boundary between the cultural and the natural, suggesting that the system of nature is also the system of culture and vice-versa. If culture is arranged according to the principles of good oeconomy, as it nearly is at Penshurst, it is difficult to separate the cultural from the natural with any degree of
certainty. Questions regarding the boundary between the two proliferate: Is it natural to build structures to shelter us from the elements? Are there natural and unnatural houses? Is it natural to eat some foods and not others? It is fitting, then, that Digby and Cavendish are an exact contemporaries of Boyle and Hobbes, who serve as Latour’s representative figures of natural science and social science, which became discrete disciplines in the seventeenth century.

Given the oeconomy of nature’s liminal status, John Milton, an author whose works appear at once both archaic and modern, provides a fitting endpoint for my study. Milton frequently marks the terminus of courses and anthologies in Renaissance literature, which are chronologically stretched to 1671 to include *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*. Moreover, although Milton’s works were published in the middle and later decades of the seventeenth century, they often have more in common with those of Elizabethan authors like Spenser and Shakespeare than they do with those of his contemporaries. The status of Milton’s relationship with the new science is a particularly good case in point. Following Kester Svendson’s *Milton and Science*, scholars long assumed that Milton’s poetry was relatively unaffected by contemporary scientific developments, with the exception of an isolated reference to Galileo’s telescope. More recently, however, scholars like Karen Edwards have considered how Milton’s engagement with both old and new science was more informed by contemporary scientific developments, and more critical of archaic epistemological systems, than previously assumed. Since the oeconomy of nature is a contemporary seventeenth-century development with roots reaching back to the Bible and Ancient Greece, it is particularly amenable to Milton’s famously eclectic cosmology. My argument is that Milton’s *Paradise Lost* represents the oeconomy of nature as the divinely structured natural order that was lost in the Fall and replaced by a more hostile, punitive system of nature. Like Spenser in *The Cantos of Mutabilite* (which I
have focused on in Chapter 2), Milton envisions the oeconomy of nature competing with another, less hospitable models for apprehending the natural world.

In *Paradise Lost* Milton represents the prelapsarian world as a place where the distinction between nature and culture does not yet apply. The very word “culture” (from the Latin *cultura*, agriculture) implies an economic mode initiated as a retributive measure at the time of the Fall. God’s role in the prelapsarian world is both that of “sov’ran Architect” and “sovran Planter,” implying a mixture and cultural and natural roles characteristic of the oeconomy of nature. Milton’s prelapsarian oeconomy of nature is best represented in the “Silvan Lodge” in which Adam and Eve dwell. Milton’s initial description of this natural household blurs the boundaries between edifice and natural growth:

it was a place

Chos’n by the sovran Planter, where he fram’d

All things to man’s delightful use; the roofe

Of thickest shade was interwoven shade

Laurel and Mirtle, and what higher grew

Of firm and fragrant leaf; on either side

*Acanthus*, and each odorous bushie shrub

Fenc’d up the verdant wall; each beauteous flour,

*Iris* all hues, Roses, and Gessamin

Rear’d high thir flourisht heads between, and wrought

Mosaic; underfoot the Violet,

Crocus, and Hyacinth with rich inlay

Broiderd the ground, more colour’d then with stone
Of costliest Emblem: other creature here
Beast, Bird, Insect, or Worm durst enter none;
Such was thir awe of Man.⁹

Each and every descriptive phrase in this passage interweaves the natural and the cultural: on one hand, the household is “fram’d” by God, suggesting technological intervention; on the other, it comprises a series of plants, autochthonously growing together into a habitable human space. If Jonson’s “To Penshurst” famously conflates the cultural with the natural, as I have shown in Chapter 3, this passage (likely beholden to the Jonsonian country house poem) transcends any previous example of the genre in its realization of a natural household. This description also points to forms of traditionally feminine household labor, which Cavendish figures as central to the nature’s order: the roof is “interwoven,” some flowers “wrought Mosaic” on the wall, and others “with rich inlay / Broiderd the ground.” These verbs connote the feminine labors of weaving, patchwork, and embroidery, all of which are parts of the concept of oeconomy. While God is ostensibly the agent of all of these actions, the plants themselves are the subjects of the verbs, suggesting a cosmos in which diffuse actions are marshaled into a single edict; this is clearly the cosmology of the oeconomy of nature.

Moreover, Milton attempts to supersede all previous examples of the literary natural household in his representation of the Edenic bower by resolving tensions embodied in the works of his predecessors. As a place where God “fram’d / All things to man’s delightful use,” the bower embodies the conflation of aesthetic beauty with material usefulness—virtues often understood as antithetical to each other in the seventeenth-century country house poem. As I have argued in Chapter 2, Spenser stages and rejects the Elizabethan obsession with the instrumental in the opening canto of *The Faerie Queene*, favoring instead a poetics of
unrestrained fecundity. Richard Helgerson and Lorna Hutson both point to how Elizabethan authors negotiated aesthetic beauty with the larger cultural focus on the “profitable,” but Milton implies in the phrase “man’s delightful use” that this distinction does not apply in the prelapsarian world. Likewise, despite the bower’s ostensible openness, it manages to exclude all parasitical guests: “other creature here / Beast, Bird, Insect, or Worm durst enter none; / Such was thir awe of Man.” As we have seen in Chapter 3, for Jonson the exclusion of the parasite from the household oeconomy is neither possible nor necessarily desirable, but in Milton’s Eden the sense of “awe” humankind evokes in non-human creatures enables a perfect oeonomic system.

The manifest perfection of the Edenic oeconomy makes the Fall all the more striking. Milton depicts the earth wounded twice by humankind’s original transgression: once when Eve eats the forbidden fruit, and again, 221 lines later, when Adam follows suit. When Eve eats, the earth’s reaction is instantaneous: “Earth felt the wound, and Nature from her seat / Sighing through all her Works gave signs of woe, / That all was lost.” This reaction is repeated immediately after Adam’s transgression, though the wound has now worsened to death pangs: “Earth trembl’d from her entrails, as again / In pangs, and Nature gave a second groan.” Together these passages represent the loss of a responsive, personified natural order, and the coming of a more hostile, largely indifferent version of nature. The fatal transgression removes Nature “from her seat,” suggesting both a dethroning, and also, in older usage, the loss of a governing household (OED). The preposition “from” most obviously places nature in her accustomed governing position, but it also figures her expulsion from this station.

After the Fall, the changes to Eden’s environment are quick and irrevocable: Sin, Death, and Chaos remake nature in a grotesque parody of God’s initial creation of the world. With the
loss of the oeconomy of nature comes the need for new technologies of survival, aimed at making life bearable in a new hostile environment; the first of these is primitive clothing, fashioned from the very leaves that once provided natural protection. Beyond remedying the shame that has suddenly overwhelmed the primordial couple, this clothing augments frail bodies for intemperate conditions; in the postlapsarian world the sun will “affect the Earth with cold and heat / Scarce tolerable.” Recognizing this estrangement from the natural oeconomy, Adam entreats his environment: “Cover me ye Pines, / Ye Cedars, with innumerable boughs / Hide me, where I may never see them more.” This emphatic cry for basic clothing also serves to highlight the loss of his arboreal bower, the oeconomy of nature from which he is now estranged. Finally faced with the prospect of eviction, Adam again laments, “all places else / In hospitable appeer and desolate, / Nor knowing us nor known.” It is this reciprocity of knowledge—knowing your environment and also having your environment know you—that is central to the oeconomy of nature. Once this epistemological reciprocity is lost, humankind is left with a radically indifferent version of the natural world, where life is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” to quote Milton’s contemporary Thomas Hobbes.

As the aforementioned passage suggests, in this new version of the world, nature’s order is not only hostile, but also opaque. Observing the course of human history beside the archangel Michael, Adam sees an ostensibly thriving human settlement, and comments, “[h]ere Nature seems fulfilled in all her ends.” However, as Michael is quick to point out, the settlement is in fact a collection of the wicked, certainly not to be admired. We can glean from this episode that the oeconomy of nature in a postlapsarian world is elusive and given to false manifestations. Rather than an oeconomy of nature, we are left with the more dubious realm of human oeconomy, where people struggle for food, shelter, and moral guidance, and are given to
misrecognition of nature’s order. Milton’s account of the Fall is thus the story of how the natural and cultural became distinct realms, often existing in antagonistic relation to each other. If Bruno Latour is right to situate the nature-culture divide that structures modernity in the seventeenth century, than we might understand Milton as constructing an etiological myth aimed at explaining just this conundrum. For Milton, the oeconomy of nature must be destroyed so that human culture can emerge as a discrete and autonomous entity.

Throughout this study I have emphasized the extent to which literary authors like Jonson, Herbert, and Cavendish were operative in the formation of the scientific/philosophical concept of the oeconomy of nature. If the Royal Society promulgated new forms of knowledge by subjecting nature to observation and experimentation, these literary authors conducted elaborate thought experiments aimed at rendering comprehensible nature’s complex order. By conflating the discourse of household management, so influential in seventeenth-century English culture, with the emergent epistemological practices of natural philosophy, these authors made possible a new model for understanding the natural world based on the systematic order of the household. However, no model of nature can be comprehensive. While many of the authors I have analyzed have focused on how the oeconomy of nature might be subverted to make room for other ways of inhabiting the world, Milton produces a theological account both of how nature’s oeconomy was engendered and how it was rent asunder, making room for the disparate realms of nature and culture.

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