

5-24-2018

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Recommended Citation

Kailey Giordano (2018) "A Cooke-ham of One's Own: Constructing Poetic Persona at Nature's Expense in Aemilia Lanyer's "The Description of Cooke-ham" and Ben Jonson's "To Penhurst"," *Early Modern Culture*: Vol. 13 , Article 1.
Available at: <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/emc/vol13/iss1/1>

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A Cooke-ham of One's Own: Constructing Poetic Persona at Nature's Expense in Aemilia Lanyer's "The Description of Cooke-ham" and Ben Jonson's "To Penshurst"

KAILEY GIORDANO

When *As You Like It's* Duke Senior asks the Lord if Jaques, found weeping over a wounded deer in the forest, "moralize[d] the spectacle," the Lord quips: "O, yes, into a thousand similes" (2.1.43-5).¹ In an ecocritical study on the use of simile in this play, Robert Watson asks, "which has done more insidious violence to pristine nature as a collectivity during its long siege by humanity: shooting it with a single arrow, or shattering it into a thousand similes?"² Watson forces us to consider whether the dangers of killing the deer, which Duke Senior and his companions are about to do, are any more violent than Jaques's poetic lament over the wounded deer. While Watson goes on to argue that the Late Renaissance nostalgia for nature was rooted in a profound epistemological anxiety that the phenomenal world could never be truly accessed, I find his argument useful as a framework for understanding the making of poetic persona at the expense of the environment in Aemilia Lanyer's "The Description of Cooke-ham" and Ben Jonson's "To Penshurst."³ In sum, Lanyer's poetic farewell to Cooke-ham is no less aggressive or destructive than Jonson's poetic hunt for power in Penshurst.⁴

My reading of "Cooke-ham" is indebted to much of the feminist critical focus on Lanyer's work, which examines the ways in which she challenges patriarchy in general and the male-dominated English patronage system in particular throughout *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, and especially in "Cooke-ham."⁵ These scholars almost unfailingly set "Cooke-ham" beside "To Penshurst" as the leading examples, respectively, of a feminine and a masculine approach to the country house poem. While a number of critics have even combined gender theory and ecocriticism to interpret these poems, they have only treated each individually. None, however, have examined "Cooke-ham" and "To Penshurst" together under an ecocritical lens as a way of investigating the creation of each poet's voice. In doing so, I move beyond the poems' clear differences—the one masculine, active, and invasive, and the other feminine, seemingly passive, and non-invasive—to suggest that Lanyer's destruction of the symbiosis between the landscape and

A Cooke-ham of One's Own

women of Cooke-ham to assert herself as a poet resembles Jonson's adjectival control over the natural world.

While much of "Cooke-ham" appears to chronicle a reciprocal and even symbiotic relationship between the ladies of Cooke-ham and the landscape, to say that Lanyer provides a non-invasive, harmless, or "proper" mode of interacting with the environment through her lament of its deterioration would force us to ignore the generation of her poetic persona over the course of the poem. In fact, the fulcrum on which the poem pivots—when Lanyer steals Margaret Clifford's kiss from the oak tree, which she "feare[s] to give backe" (line 170)—marks the destruction of this symbiosis and, in turn, her persona's birth. The poetic voice that gradually emerges over the course of the poem ossifies at this critical juncture when Lanyer steals from nature and thereby causes the loss she elegizes in the poem.

And yet by overpowering nature in a way that obliquely imitates Jonson's adjectival control over the Penshurst landscape, Lanyer does not merely subscribe to a masculine model of interacting with nature. While both Jonson and Lanyer fashion their poetic personae at the expense of the landscapes they praise, Lanyer's theft from the oak tree effectively rewrites the reason for the women's exile from Cooke-ham—a dispute over patrilineal inheritance⁶—and makes it her own; in other words, she reformulates the loss of a female community at the hands of men into a lost symbiosis with the environment at the hands of the female poet. She takes on the loss as her own, leaving behind the female and environmental kinship she once possessed for the solitary world of the poet, alone able to memorialize the place as both a poet and a woman.

While this singular power of the poet to memorialize the natural world is common to both poems, Lanyer and Jonson must employ different poetic devices that suit their individual experiences with territorial power. Just as the dramatic personae of *As You Like It* are only able to reach out to the natural world through simile, Lanyer's poem constantly reminds us of our mediated and distant relationship to the natural world, whether through her use of the simile, personification, or an array of self-conscious reminders that her representation of Cooke-ham is just that: a representation constructed by her own mind. Lanyer continually likens nature to something else, describes it in the human terms with which she's familiar, and repeatedly tells us that it "seemes" (line 24) and "lookes" (line 192) a certain way. On the other hand, Jonson appropriates and fully inhabits the world surrounding the Penshurst estate in his poem through the use of adjectives, a sort of grammatical coercion that tames the natural world into obedience, in a way that Lanyer cannot with regard to Cooke-ham for three reasons: as a woman, she lacks the legal power to own land; she has been permanently separated from Cooke-ham; and the landscape itself has changed irrevocably in the wake of her departure.

While Lanyer and Jonson create two unique grammars of power to express their individual relationships to the land, both endow the flora and fauna of the natural world surrounding the estates with a considerable degree of volition and "obsequiousness": Lanyer through personification and Jonson, again, through adjectives. In this way, Lanyer attempts to empower the natural world,

while Jonson seeks to display his and the lord of Penshurst Robert Sidney's dominance over it. Most often, Jonson's adjectival modification of the creatures of the natural world gives the impression that they would gladly--and, in fact, do—leap at the chance to improve the lives of the people of Penshurst for little to no reward, while simultaneously disguising the poetic and territorial control of nature at work in these adjectives and Sidney's rule over the land. Lanyer's use of personification, however, alongside the simile and repetition of "seeming," makes room for a much more nurturing relationship in which the female community and nature mutually provide for each other and, more radically, in which the former refrains from intervening in the latter as much as possible in a physically destructive way. In short, Jonson grammatically claims the land, while Lanyer endeavors to keep it at a distance. In this light, the technique that Jonson uses to construct his poetic voice may surely seem more aggressive and injurious to the environment. Yet Lanyer's poetic method is no less destructive. She dashes the symbiosis between the women and landscape of Cooke-ham by harnessing the loss of the environment and her female companions to assert her poetic voice. In the same way that Watson compares the violence of the hunt with Jaques's moralizing over the wounded deer, I find that Jonson's adjectival claiming of the natural world and Lanyer's "shattering it into a thousand similes"⁸ are equally violent.

It should not be surprising, then, that Lanyer's and Jonson's misleading praise of the Cooke-ham and Penshurst landscapes coincides with and is in large part overshadowed by the praise of the poets themselves, a poetic move typical of the country house genre and the *locus amoenus* to which both "Cooke-ham" and "To Penshurst" belong. The country house genre is a subset of the topographical poem whose purpose was to praise a patron or friend through the praise of his estate, while the tradition of the *locus amoenus* praises an idealized place of comfort, protection, and peace. While "Cooke-ham" and "To Penshurst" are the first models of the country house poem in the English language, the former was published in 1611 as the final poem in Lanyer's volume of verse entitled *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, the first volume of English verse published by a woman,⁹ and the latter was published five years later in 1616 in Jonson's *The Forest*, although some scholars have suggested that it may have been written as early as 1612 or even before the composition of "Cooke-ham."¹⁰ Lanyer's poem functions mostly as an elegy, praising the virtue of her patroness Margaret Clifford, Countess of Cumberland, who commissioned the poem; her daughter Anne Clifford; and the Cooke-ham landscape itself by lamenting the loss of each. Although Jonson, too, praises the Penshurst estate and its lord, Robert Sidney, a prominent patron of the arts and friend of Jonson, his poem takes the form of pure encomium because, unlike Cooke-ham, Penshurst continues to thrive. Yet the praise for which the country house poem aims reaches beyond the estate and its lord. In praising Cooke-ham and Penshurst, both poets effectively praise their own poetic prowess and, in so doing, assert their unique poetic voices.

A Cooke-ham of One's Own

Nature Disempowered; Lanyer Empowered

But we must not ignore, as I have suggested, that Lanyer accomplishes this assertion in a distinctly feminine way by replacing the forces of patrilineal inheritance that drove Margaret, Anne, and her from Cooke-ham¹¹ with her own “scorn[e],”¹² “feare,”¹³ and envy of Margaret’s relationship with the oak tree. In fact, Lanyer prepares us for this moment through the construction of a female genealogy, as Marie Loughlin perceptively observes:

Lanyer begins her praise of Anne [Clifford] and her subsequent complaint at being separated from her by addressing her patron in terms of the names through which Anne Clifford consistently defined herself: “And that sweet Lady sprung from Cliffords race, / Of noble Bedfords blood, faire steame of Grace” (93-94) [. . .] Lanyer's complaint in other words may be as much aimed at enacting her acceptance of the legitimacy of class distinctions, as at suggesting her radical opposition to them.¹⁴

While Loughlin emphasizes the ways in which Lanyer separates herself from “Cliffords race” and “noble Bedfords blood” as an outsider, “differen[t] [. . .] in degree” (Lanyer, line 106), I would argue that Lanyer first establishes this genealogy in order to inherit it, and, as its heir, to then separate herself from Margaret and Anne Clifford as the sole poetic voice capable of telling the tale of Cooke-ham’s loss. In doing so, her experience in and exile from Cooke-ham has been a distinctly feminine one, entirely without male influence, and whose loss, in turn, only she can memorialize as a specifically female poet.

Louise Noble’s ecofeminist reading of “Cooke-ham” teases out this very idea. Perhaps most relevant is her observation of the “close affinity”¹⁵ between the poet and the natural world as victims of male domination. She goes on to say that this “relationship between social disenfranchisement and environmental degradation”¹⁶ enables the female poet, both in need of patronage and of a poetic voice distinct from that of men, to understand the loss experienced by the natural world and therefore speak in its stead. In other words, the shared loss at the hands of men enables women alone to write accurately about the experiences of the natural world. However remarkable these observations may be, Noble’s argument does not account for the fact that many critics view this poem as the most prominent and loudest assertion of Lanyer’s unique, poetic voice. What I intend to answer, then, is this: how does Lanyer assert herself as a poet—not only empowering but also immortalizing herself and Cooke-ham—in a poem that laments both the deterioration of the natural world and an autonomous female community?

Kari Boyd McBride engages a similar question by juxtaposing this poem and the Orpheus myth to argue that Lanyer devalues the virtue of her female companions in order to construct her own poetic virtue.¹⁷ McBride makes a series

Giordano

of stunning claims about the empowerment of a female poet at the expense of other women and even the environment; for instance, Lanyer insists quite frequently on the loss of Anne Clifford's virtue through marriage,¹⁸ invokes the myth of Philomela as an ancient meeting point of "fragmentation and poetic voice,"¹⁹ "exiles Echo" and invokes "Memory, the mother of the muses," and in so doing "claim[s] the sole ability to re-member the place" since the Countess "can only, echo-like, 'repeat the pleasures which had past' (line 163)."²⁰ While McBride's dependence on the myth of the male poet to make this argument might seem to weaken its overall force, McBride acknowledges that Lanyer, to some degree, could not avoid entering into a masculine poetic tradition if she wanted to assert herself as a poet and prove her worth. While Lanyer takes on this tradition by writing about religion and patronage in *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, McBride centers on her engagement with the pastoral genre and the "two principle kinds of poetry that commonly mark initiatory pastoral poems—epithalamium and elegy—" latent in the Orpheus myth.²¹ McBride goes on to explain what these genres share and why the undertaking of these genres by a female poet might be problematic:

Thus both epithalamium, the celebration of love, and elegy, the lament for the dead, destroy the object of love. In both genres, identity is constructed at the expense of affection. This confluence of genres is perhaps felicitous for a poet like Spenser, but problematizes the question of vocation for Lanyer, who must contrive to silence the beloved without silencing herself, to construct a self in a tradition that fragments the woman [. . .] Lanyer, like other poet-initiates, was faced with the problem of creating a requisite corpse upon which to construct the poetic self, celebrating the death of one's (supposedly greater) predecessor in order to create a space for one's own voice.²²

For McBride, Lanyer certainly accomplishes this task, but she does so at the expense of the companions and landscape she dearly loves: "Thus the loss of place, the loss of community, the figurative deaths of Clifford and Cumberland, and the 'death' that marriage brings all function as the fragmented corpse upon which Lanyer can construct her vocation."²³ In this way, the creation of Lanyer's poetic voice comes at the same cost as that of Jonson in "To Penshurst."

A Cooke-ham of One's Own

The Adjective: The Grammar of Power in "To Penshurst"

It is important, nonetheless, to differentiate the conditions of the environment for which these poets must account in the construction of their poetic personae. On the one hand, Jonson's Penshurst seems to be an eternal, unchanging paradise—a true picture of Eden given its natural bounty and the social harmony and religious devotion of the people who dwell there. Lanyer's Cooke-ham, on the other hand, was once like Penshurst but is no longer, an Eden that has withered away with the disappearance of the women it held so dear. Reciting from a place of exile rather than stasis, Lanyer must produce a poem that is much more expressly elegiac: remarkably aware of the passing of time, her changing relationship to the landscape, the physical markings of the change it has undergone, and her indebtedness to it. Jonson's Penshurst, therefore, is one over which he can exert power, while Lanyer can only lament Cooke-ham's loss from the place of exile and of womanhood. While the logical outcome of this observation would seem to be that Lanyer offers a more "environmentally-friendly" way of relating to the natural world, both poets ultimately fashion themselves at the expense of the environment to assert their poetic voices.

In order to understand how these poets do so through the different formal devices that drive their poems—the adjective and the simile—we must first examine how they mold the pastoral genre itself to their individual capacities and needs. While these poems are rooted in the country house genre's encomiastic praise of an idealized place, Ken Hiltner argues that nature's disappearance gives birth to the pastoral and casts a shadow over this idealism.²⁴ Don Wayne and Raymond Williams go so far as to eclipse the pastoral's claims to idyllic fantasy, to a nature that is almost "magical" in its plenty, by suggesting that these claims often disguise the underlying labor structure required to produce this "magic."²⁵ Wayne compounds Williams's economic concerns with those of class when he suggests that "To Penshurst" clings as much to the feudal tradition as it paves the way for a more egalitarian, bourgeois world.²⁶ As a whole, these scholars argue that the pastoral merely masquerades as fantasy, a guise which belies a range of material, economic, social, political, and environmental anxieties about our relationship to the natural world that clout its seeming purity and call into question its supposed bounty.

While these anxieties do not readily offer themselves to the reader in "To Penshurst," the generation of Jonson's poetic persona depends on this very technique. After all, he rarely goes a line without using at least one adjective, with the notable exception of a passage of about eight lines that I will discuss later, which poetically ornament the natural world in a way that hides any anxiety we might have about political authority, class tension, or environmental destruction. In fact, every adjective in the poem underlines one of the four following themes: Sidney's hospitality; Penshurst's natural fecundity; the envy and ambition of Penshurst's rivals and the complete lack thereof at Penshurst; and the nobility, in both senses of the word, of the estate's ruling family. In each case, Jonson figures Penshurst as a political, agricultural, and social utopia. We must not forget, however, that Jonson must impose his poetic will on the Penshurst landscape to

Giordano

produce such an image, and in doing so he demonstrates his power over the land and over poetry itself. In this way, we are reminded that “To Penshurst” is just one representation of Penshurst in the service of the poet’s self-promoting desires, and that, in turn, the anxieties that Jonson veils to achieve this might very well still be at work on the Penshurst estate.

Of course, this self-promotion is the poetic trick of the encomium: to praise the poet himself for the skill he displays in praising some other object or person. By praising Penshurst and its lord, then, Jonson praises himself through the social worth of his patron and his own poetic prowess, each of which is immortalized by the poem’s end. In this way Jonson acts as both “chronicler” and “creator,” a descriptor of the present and a narrator who hands that present down to “posteritie,” and who, in turn, “is effaced by what the poem contains and [. . .] is all that the poem finally contains.”²⁷ Wayne contends that this speech act of the poet gives him power that “is perhaps greater even than that of a king”²⁸ because:

Every time the king utters the royal “We” he speaks for all that is present in the realm. But the poet speaks for “posteritie” as well as for the present; he is a witness to all that is present in the king’s realm and his “I” is the sign of a power to represent that “present” for all time to come.²⁹

And so a poet comes to rival a king. And in fact, this is precisely what Jonson admits that he desires as he dedicates so much of the poem to the leveling of the social hierarchy that makes him inferior to Sidney and King James, the latter of whom appears towards the end of the poem. The turning point of the poem, after all, is when Jonson proclaims the hospitality of Penshurst to be so great that the experience makes Jonson feel “as if [Penshurst], then, wert mine, and I raign’d here” (line 74).

And yet, Jonson’s claim to power is betrayed by the dreadful “as if.” Two similes appear in the entire poem: the one at this moment of supposed power and the other to praise the lady of Penshurst’s excellent “huswifery” (line 85). I will later return to this praise as a way of illuminating Lanyer’s poetic voice. The section surrounding the former simile, which in many senses marks the poem’s climax, relies on the egalitarianism that Penshurst and its lord foster to create the opportunity for Jonson to rise to the level of lord himself. But so much of this section actually reveals the social hierarchy that Jonson and the aristocratic society of Penshurst will never be able to overcome. The section comes moments after Jonson attaches the adjective “same” twice in one line to food and drink, in a striking allusion to the Last Supper, to illustrate Sidney’s hospitality and the social equality it engenders: the “same beere, and bread, and self-same wine / That is his Lordships” (lines 63-4) are shared by all. As Jonson expands on this image of the feast, the hierarchy that Sidney’s hospitality levels begins to reemerge:

Here no man tells my cups; nor, standing by,

A Cooke-ham of One's Own

A waiter, doth my gluttony envy:
But gives me what I call, and lets me eate,
 He knowes, below, he shall finde plentie of meate,
Thy tables hoord not up for the next day,
 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.

(Lines 67-75)

The feast, here, is the embodiment of “gluttony.” The food and drink are such that there is no need to “tell” or count Jonson’s “cups,” and the waiters have no need for envy because there is “plentie of meate” for all. Moreover, Penshurst is so agriculturally fruitful that there is no need to “hoord” food for the next day because more can be found tomorrow. Jonson gives us an utopia where truly “all is there,” where each and all enjoy the fruits of the land in harmony, which makes Jonson feel as if Penshurst “wert [his] or [he] raign’d” there.

On closer reading, however, a domestic hierarchy begins to appear.³⁰ While Jonson’s repetition of the adjective “same” captures the substance of the line in its poetic form—that Sidney’s beer, bread, and wine become Jonson’s—those adjectives largely disappear in the passage reproduced above. In fact, this is the only passage in the entire poem with such a glaring absence of adjectives. While one might read this absence as a poetic enhancement of the utopian plenty of Penshurst, whose bounty needs no modification because “all is there,” I find that this absence reveals the loose threads threatening to unravel Jonson’s claim to power within the passage. Consider the image of the waiter. Jonson wants to suggest that the waiter is not envious because the kitchen is more than well provisioned. But the waiter crucially is not involved in the feast itself; he “stand[s] by” and must go “below” to find such provisions. However much Jonson resists, the picture of the feast is always already exclusive; there is equality for some, but not for all.

As Wayne points out, the qualities that mark Sidney as a good ruler are those “vested in an institution that threatens to transcend the distinction between lord and commoner.”³¹ It is Sidney’s near erasure of social class that is so crucial for Jonson because it enables him to lay claim to Penshurst and in so doing elevate himself to the position of lord—“as if thou, then, wert mine, or I raign’d here.” As lord of both the physical place and its poetic inscription, Jonson asserts his poetic voice once again by exacting control over the land both in the present and for all “posteritie”³² in the poem. And yet Jonson’s “raign” (line 74) is short-lived, if ever born, because of the simile that introduces his claim to power. Just as the image of the waiter reinstates the social hierarchy that Jonson works so hard to topple, the “as if” which qualifies Jonson’s “raign” over Penshurst reminds us that the power he imagines he has does not actually exist. His imagined reign will always be just that: mere representation, never certain or secure, always at a distance. The absence of adjectives merely amplifies this fact, since he cannot finally appropriate the land as his own. In this sense, the inescapable social hierarchy of Penshurst

betrays Jonson's efforts to tame it with his poetic prowess at every turn. The equality he so desperately needs to legitimize his poetic "raign" over Penshurst, and thereby Sidney himself, breaks down in this passage, and the social hierarchy that disempowers Jonson breaks free of his attempts to harness it. The adjectives through which he asserts his poetic dominance of the land both in the present and for all of time fail here, and in their place comes a simile that reinstates the social hierarchy that counters Jonson's claim to territorial and poetic power.

The Simile: The Grammar of Power in "Cooke-Ham"

The simile that leads to Jonson's poetic fall, I argue, is the same formal device that Lanyer takes up to assert her own poetic voice. In doing so, however, I want to avoid making a historical claim that Lanyer wrote this poem after and in direct response to Jonson.³³ Instead, I want to demonstrate that the simile simultaneously marks the failure of the male poetic persona in "To Penshurst" and the success of the female one in "Cooke-ham." Such an idea comes to light when we consider Jonson's second simile, which praises Lady Sidney for her "high huswifery," or keeping the house so pristine as if she was expecting King James himself: "To have her linnen, plate, and all things nigh, / When shee was farre: and not a roome, but drest, / As if it had expected such a guest!" (lines 85-88). Whereas Jonson uses the simile in this instance to endorse and glorify traditional female roles, Lanyer will use it, as we will see in a moment, to instead subvert them.

Instead of adjectives, Lanyer opts for the language of "as if" in her use not just of the simile, but also of personification—the description of an object *as if* it were human—and of certain phrases like "me thought" (line 17) and "seeme" (line 18) that remind us of the separation between the picture produced by the poet's mind and the actual unfolding of events in the natural world. In this way, Lanyer endeavors to leave the landscape of Cooke-ham as untouched by human thought or hands as possible and even to endow it with a sort of agency that Jonson utterly denies the natural world in Penshurst. While this reading seems to suggest that Lanyer offers a more environmentally-responsible way of interacting with nature in a specifically feminine way, a closer analysis of these formal elements actually reveals that Lanyer, just like Jonson, exploits her once symbiotic relationship with the natural world of Cooke-ham to assert her poetic voice. The communities of both poems masquerade as idealized and egalitarian, yet both poetic voices come to life in the inequality that their formal elements betray. For their power to be "even greater than that of a king,"³⁴ both poets need to dispense with the harmony, hospitality, and equality evident in Penshurst and Cooke-ham to assert themselves as the sole voices capable of reporting these events and immortalizing them for posterity.

In this sense, the adjectival "arrow" that Jonson "shoots" at the Penshurst landscape and the symbiosis Lanyer "shatter[s] into a thousand similes"³⁵ to fashion her poetic voice might be equally destructive. But we should take the time,

A Cooke-ham of One's Own

here, to note that the mode by which she does so must be different from that of Jonson because their possible relationships to the land depend on their genders. Occupying a traditionally disenfranchised position as a woman, Lanyer cannot own or control land, so to use adjectives that appropriate and assert that dominance over the land as Jonson does would merely be to subscribe to a masculine model of poetic form that wouldn't differentiate Lanyer as a female poet. To establish herself as a female poet through a topographical poem, then, she must shape the land to her individual experience and needs. Since her power over the land will always be at one remove from actual power—through her husband or father—she can only ever describe what that control might be like, how it may seem, but never fully know what it is; it will always be at a distance, expressed in the terms with which she is familiar, an idea in her mind but never that which she can concretely experience and thus depict.

We can break down these poems into a series of oppositions that undergird this gap in power between Jonson and Lanyer, or the man and the woman. On the one hand, the narrative of "To Penshurst" is a tale of communion on an estate entirely devoid of envy, that is the embodiment of stability, fecundity, and harmony. Man's interaction with the Penshurst landscape is a highly involved, direct, and specifically masculine one in both a physical and linguistic sense; Sidney is lord of the estate and surrounding land, King James hunts on it (Jonson, lines 76-77), and Jonson exercises his poetic rule over it through the adjectives that saturate the poem. On the land, nature jumps at the opportunity to be consumed; in the hall, people feast on its fruits. Penshurst is a true picture of "home"³⁶ where the "lord dwells" (Jonson, line 102), and this life *now* is celebrated. On the other hand, the narrative of "Cooke-ham" is a tale of exile, separation, and loss on an estate that is the embodiment of lost stability, deterioration, and destroyed harmony. The envy for which, Jonson insists, the architecture and people of Penshurst have no need, Lanyer possesses. Her interaction with the Cooke-ham landscape is voyeuristic and articulated through the simile since she can only observe, never dominate, the land; her interaction is also less invasive than that of Jonson, where meditation and religious devotion reign. While Penshurst is rooted in this life, Cooke-ham is forced to look to the afterlife, to immortality in Lanyer's poem. Both Penshurst and Cooke-ham are true pictures of Eden, but the loss of the latter must be lamented from outside by an Eve cast out of her Eden.³⁷

Lanyer repeatedly brings this exile to bear on her representation of Cooke-ham. Throughout the poem, she reminds us that her access to nature is always mediated by her thoughts. Three times she qualifies her descriptions with "me thought" (lines 17, 33, 132); four times she uses extended similes, which range from line 61 to line 140; eight times she states that nature "appeare[s]" (lines 184, 203), "seems" (lines 18, 24, 60, 164, and 180), or "lookes" (line 192) a certain way; she even goes so far as to explicitly admit that her wit is "too weake" (line 112); and in, perhaps, the most self-conscious moment of the poem she writes that the trees "hold like similes" (line 22), entwining their branches and enfolding their leaves as if to shield Margaret Clifford from the sun's rays in an expression of selfless love and protection: "The Trees with leaves, with fruits, with flowers clad,
/ Embrac'd each other, seeming to be glad / Turning themselves to beauteous

Giordano

canopies, / To shade the bright Sunne from her brighter eies” (lines 23-26).

In a moment of beautifully staggering reversal, Lanyer illustrates the simultaneous strength and fragility of the simile through the transformation of this image of the embrace. As their leaves change color and their flowers and fruits fall away, the trees cling to each other more tightly for a time. But as summer turns to fall and fall turns to winter, the trees eventually surrender, letting their leaves fall away, leaving behind nothing but their bare and deadened branches:

The trees that were so glorious in our view,
Forsooke both flowers and fruit, when once they knew
Of your depart, their very leaves did wither,
Changing their colours as they grewe together.
But then they saw this had no power to stay you,
They often wept, though speechlesse, could not pray you;
Letting their tears in your faire bosoms fall,
As if they said, Why will ye leave us all?
This being vaine, they cast their leaves away,
Hoping that pitie would have made you stay.

(Lines 133-42)

The picture Lanyer paints here is that of the pathetic fallacy. Yet the personification that drives the passage hinges on the emergence of nature’s own voice. The trees’ single speech act in the passage comes by way of simile, reminding us that Lanyer cannot ultimately speak for nature or purport to represent the truth of things; she pulls us into the poem with this brilliant image of symbiosis between woman and the environment, giving us the sense of a raw, unmediated, and vulnerable experience with nature, and then she shocks us back into reality with “as if.” This is not a picture of nature untouched; this is nature mediated and animated by the thoughts of Lanyer’s mind.

After not only Margaret and Anne but Lanyer herself have left Cookeham, winter firmly takes hold and the trees’ embrace withers with its arrival; the “stately trees” that once barred Margaret from the harmful rays of the sun have become mere “briers” and “brambles” and the sun’s “beames” are no longer harmful, but “weake”:

Each arbour, banke, each seate, each stately tree,
Lookes bare and desolate now for want of thee;
Turning green tresses into frostie gray,
While in colde grieffe they wither all away
The Sunne grew weake, his beames no comfort gave,
While all greene things did make the earth their grave:
Each brier, each bramble, when you went away,
Caught fast your clothes, thinking to make you stay.

(Lines 191-98)

A Cooke-ham of One's Own

McBride cites these lines as an example of Lanyer's "mirroring structure," which in fact "does more than simply reduplicate an image."³⁸ In the wake of Margaret's departure, summer has passed through autumn to winter, and Cooke-ham has shriveled under its icy power. Moreover, the transformation of this image over the course of the poem allows us a glimpse into the more frequent "dismemberment" of the landscape throughout that McBride astutely suggests replaces the traditional blazon of the female body in the sonnet tradition.³⁹ Lanyer then, as McBride writes, cannot engage "mere repetition" because "the function of poetry in the face of death and loss is remembering that which has been dismembered."⁴⁰ In other words, Lanyer's poetic voice depends on the capacity to re-member the dismembered landscape.

In this sense, Lanyer must first create then dismantle the female community wherein "virtue" itself is "housed" (line 96) in order to construct her poetic persona. If we apply this line of thought to the Cooke-ham landscape, its dismemberment is a precondition for Lanyer's act of re-membering, which "fragment[s]" the place only to "construct her poetic vocation" upon its "corpse."⁴¹ Lanyer must follow the changing landscape to its death, then, for two reasons. On the one hand, it has been altered irrevocably by the women's departure. On the other hand, her profession demands that she assert her voice as the only one capable of representing the truth and, in so doing, affirm her singular power over Cooke-ham, rather than merely "repeat[ing] the pleasures which had past" (line 163) as only "Eccho" (line 199) and Margaret Clifford could do. After all, the "mere repetition" that each represents threatens to "[usurp] the poetic voice."⁴² In sum, McBride suggests that Lanyer must pronounce the death of "Eccho" (line 199) and, with it, Margaret Clifford's ability to "repeat the pleasures which had past" (line 163) because Lanyer's poetic voice must subjugate those who threaten its power.

This subjugation reaches its climax at the moment when Lanyer steals Margaret Clifford's kiss from the oak tree. Four times leading up to this moment, Lanyer uses some variation of the word "vouchsafe"⁴³ to describe Margaret's virtue, grace, and kinship with nature. The word first appears as a plea from Lanyer for Margaret to deign to think about the past, and its next appearance expresses Lanyer's desire for the eternal love of God's grace. Lanyer uses the word a third time to recount Margaret's promise to visit the oak tree before she departs and a fourth time, just after she has stolen Margaret's kiss, as Margaret's promise of love to the tree, which she sealed with that kiss.⁴⁴ The transformation of this word over the course of the poem accomplishes two things: it likens Margaret's grace to God's grace⁴⁵ and becomes increasingly tactile, moving from thought, to sight, and finally to touch. In this way, Lanyer assigns Cooke-ham the role of an earthly Eden and herself the role of Eve, whose sin violates Margaret's grace—and the harmony with nature it engenders—just as Eve's sin violates that of God. This striking allusion to Eve's forbidden theft from the Tree of Knowledge frames the narrative of original sin as one that cautions against and even forbids physical intervention in the natural world. That the kiss Lanyer steals was "vouchsaft" (line 172) to the tree only further suggests that her theft is directly responsible for the destruction of the harmony with nature that Margaret fostered. In short, Lanyer steals from

nature and gives it nothing in return.

As McBride notes, “rather than being a victim of pastoral dissolution,” Lanyer “controls” it.⁴⁶ In this way, Lanyer constructs her poetic voice. She rewrites the narrative of the women’s forced departure by usurping it from the hands of men and making it her own; she names herself as heir to a specifically female genealogy only to tarnish the virtue of her predecessors; she even blames “Unconstant Fortune,” a traditionally female figure, for tearing them apart;⁴⁷ and in an act of envy steals from the tree, destroys the once symbiotic relationship between woman and nature in Cooke-ham, and effectively casts herself out of the garden. In order to “re-member” this loss and thereby assert her poetic voice, however, she must first “dismember”⁴⁸ the companionship with women and nature that she herself poetically constructed.

As I have said, Lanyer’s lament of Cooke-ham is no less detrimental to nature than Jonson’s adjectival hunt across the landscape of Penshurst as they construct their respective poetic personae, however much the ecocritic Lanyer may seem to be. Although Lanyer appears, in this way, to merely subscribe to a masculine poetic tradition, she actually carves out a space of her own in the pastoral genre and the world of poets more broadly, especially considering her role as the first woman to publish a volume of verse in the English language. While a number of social forces that favored men conspired to silence Shakespeare’s sister, as Virginia Woolf writes, and to bar her from attaining that “genius” which freedom nurtures,⁴⁹ his Dark Lady would have none of it.⁵⁰ In other words, Lanyer flatly dispenses with the forces of patrilineal inheritance that drove the Clifford women from Cooke-ham and reshapes the narrative of their departure into a fundamentally female one; from the traditionally feminized figure of Fortune to Lanyer’s theft from the oak tree, from the simile and the grammar of power it expresses to the female genealogy she inherits, Lanyer usurps Cooke-ham from the hands of men in every way.

Yet she does not stop there. After constructing a female community that is the embodiment of virtue, grace, and intellect, Lanyer asserts her superiority over the women and the landscape whom she “held so deare” (line 204) to make a Cooke-ham of her own, fictionalized and immortalized in her poem, which serves as both her parting gift to the place and the birth of her poetic voice: “This last farewell to *Cooke-ham* here I give / When I am dead thy name in this may live” (lines 205-6). While Elaine Beilin suggests that Lanyer’s Cooke-ham allegorically stands for a redeemed Eden and Lanyer for a “redeemed Eve,”⁵¹ redemption was never really the question for Lanyer. Her Cooke-ham is a postlapsarian world; her voice is that of an Eve cast out from her Eden. We might therefore speak of Lanyer as a “redeemed Eve,” but we can only do so in the sense that she has thunderously asserted a unique poetic voice. We must also remember that this self-fashioning comes at the expense of the harmony she once found in nature and female companionship.

The pastoral can only grace the pastoralist. Watson, too, confirms this dictum when he writes that the simile is a “symptom” and the pastoral a “genre” of “solipsism,”⁵² despite their seeming efforts to give nature a voice of its own.

A Cooke-ham of One's Own

Jaques's moralizing, then, as Watson goes on to warn, merely instantiates an "unconquerable narcissism [that] makes our effort to embrace nature into dangerous folly."⁵³ Just as Jaques's "shattering" of the image of the wounded deer "into a thousand similes" (*As You Like It* 2.1.45) is no less dangerous than Duke Senior's "shooting it with a single arrow,"⁵⁴ so, too, Lanyer's own moralizing of the deadened landscape of Cooke-ham performs an "insidious"⁵⁵ act of violence that implicates her in its degradation. In the construction of her poetic voice, alone able to memorialize Cooke-ham, she becomes responsible for its death.

How, then, as Watson asks, do we "reconcile that claim to love nature with our compulsion to consume it,"⁵⁶ either literally through Duke Senior's and King James's hunts in *As You Like It* and "To Penshurst," or poetically in the form of Jaques's and Lanyer's similes? It seems to me that a responsible ecocritical reading of English Renaissance poetry, or any text for that matter, cannot elide the problematic role that humankind has played in shaping and speaking for the natural world. Recent trends in the field of ecocriticism, however—from the rise of animal studies, plant studies, and food studies to object-oriented ontology and posthumanism—suggest that the project of ecocriticism must be to elevate the non-human over the human in some ways to resist the anthropocentrism responsible for so much destruction in the natural world. What a study of Lanyer's and Jonson's poems reveals, though, is that we must still give importance to the "I" in our ecocritical engagement with texts because the non-human that more recent offshoots of ecocriticism aim to let speak has been materially changed by humankind. To do so is also to recognize the unavoidable contradictions in our own work as ecocritics, who must ultimately speak for the non-human—who will moralize like Jaques and who will lament like Lanyer—even as we acknowledge the problems in and try to resist doing so. In this sense, then, Lanyer's "Cooke-ham" represents the project of ecocriticism, flaws and all. Like Lanyer, as ecocritics we are implicated in the very mindset and actions we aim to resist, but this does not invalidate our efforts so much as justify our continued work in exposing the material impact of humankind's footprint on the earth and in seeking ways to rebuild humankind's relationship to it.

Notes

1. William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*. All future references to this play are from this edition and will be cited parenthetically by act, scene, and line.

2. Robert Watson, "As You Liken It: Simile in the Wilderness," in *Back to Nature: The Green and the Real in the Late Renaissance*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 82.

3. See Ben Jonson, "To Penshurst," and Aemilia Lanyer, "The Description of Cooke-ham," in *The Penguin Book of Renaissance Verse 1509-1659*, ed. H. R. Woudhuysen (London: Penguin, 1992). All future references to these poems are from this edition and will be cited parenthetically by line number. All future references to Lanyer's poem will be shortened to "Cooke-ham."

4. A figurative hunt mirrored by King James's actual hunt with his "brave son" in the poem (Jonson, "To Penshurst," 76-77).

Giordano

5. For more information on the patronage system in Lanyer's work see the following: Marshall Grossman, *Aemilia Lanyer: Gender, Genre, and the Canon* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1998), esp. chapters 2, 4, and 7; and Barbara Lewalski, "Re-Writing Patriarchy and Patronage: Margaret Clifford, Anne Clifford, and Aemilia Lanyer," *The Yearbook of English Studies* 21 (1991): 87-106.
6. Lewalski notes that Margaret Clifford's brother, William Russel of Thornhaugh, had the lease on the Cooke-ham property. Margaret came to temporarily reside there after the death of her husband and a series of trying efforts to claim her Westmoreland inheritance, bequeathed to her brothers and his male heirs, for her and her daughter, Anne. See *Writing Women in Jacobean England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 216.
7. Barbara Lewalski, "Rewriting Patriarchy and Patronage," 105.
8. Watson, "As You Liken It," 82.
9. Nicole Pohl, "Lanyer's 'The Description of Cookham' and Jonson's 'To Penshurst,'" in *A Companion to English Renaissance Literature and Culture*, ed. Michael Hattaway (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 225.
10. Pohl, "Lanyer's 'The Description of Cookham' and Jonson's 'To Penshurst,'" 228.
11. Marie Loughlin, "'Fast t' d unto Them in a Golden Chaîne': Typology, Apocalypse, and Woman's Genealogy in Aemilia Lanyer's *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*," *Renaissance Quarterly* 53.1 (2000): 169.
12. Loughlin, "'Fast t' d unto Them in a Golden Chaîne,'" 167.
13. Loughlin, "'Fast t' d unto Them in a Golden Chaîne,'" 170.
14. Loughlin, "'Fast t' d unto Them in a Golden Chaîne,'" 174.
15. Louise Noble, "'Bare and Desolate Now': Cultural Ecology and 'The Description of Cookham,'" in *Ecological Approaches to Early Modern Texts: A Field Guide to Reading and Teaching*, ed. Jennifer Munroe, Edward J. Geisweidt, and Lynne Bruckner (Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2015), 101.
16. Louise Noble, "'Bare and Desolate Now': Cultural Ecology and 'The Description of Cookham,'" 108.
17. McBride, "Remembering Orpheus in the Poems of Aemilia Lanyer," *SEL 1500-1900* 38.1 (2000): 93.
18. McBride continues: "Lanyer says that 'virtue then was hous'd' in Clifford's 'faire breast' before her marriage (line 96), that she was 'then a virgin faire' (line 160). The repetition of 'then' in these two references to Anne Clifford [. . .] calls into question the current state of [her] virtue. Further, among the 'pleasures past, which will not turne again' is the memory of Clifford's 'former sports, / So farre from beeing toucht by ill reports' (lines 118-20). Here the mention of the absence of ill reports in the past suggests their existence in the present" ("Remembering Orpheus," 101).
19. McBride, "Remembering Orpheus in the Poems of Aemilia Lanyer," 100.
20. McBride, "Remembering Orpheus in the Poems of Aemilia Lanyer," 103.
21. McBride, "Remembering Orpheus in the Poems of Aemilia Lanyer," 88-89.
22. McBride, "Remembering Orpheus in the Poems of Aemilia Lanyer," 90.
23. McBride, "Remembering Orpheus in the Poems of Aemilia Lanyer," 99.
24. See Hiltner, *What Else is Pastoral?: Renaissance Literature and the Environment* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), especially Part One.
25. Don E. Wayne, *Penshurst: The Semiotics of Place and the Poetics of History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), 127.
26. Wayne, *Penshurst: The Semiotics of Place and the Poetics of History*, 19.
27. Wayne, *Penshurst: The Semiotics of Place*, 79-80.
28. Wayne, *Penshurst: The Semiotics of Place*, 79.
29. Wayne, *Penshurst: The Semiotics of Place*, 79.
30. Amy Tigner perceives this hierarchy beneath the poem's celebratory communion and goes on to reread nature's willing sacrifice to the Penshurst dining table as a response to a much more aggressive coercion and domination of nature by human hands that Jonson's poem actively disguises, revealing what she calls "the practical underpinnings of the supposed pastoral fantasy" ("The Ecology of Eating in Jonson's 'To Penshurst,'" in *Ecological Approaches to Early Modern Texts*, 112).

A Cooke-ham of One's Own

31. Wayne also writes that “Jonson’s concern in this poem was to build a doctrine as to what constitutes the nature and the responsibilities of rank” (*Penshurst: The Semiotics of Place*, 26). While this observation is undoubtedly true, I am suggesting that Jonson must do away with rank temporarily in the poem to provide himself the opportunity to rise above his station and achieve power “perhaps even greater than that of a king” (79) in order to assert the “I” of his poetic voice.

32. Wayne, *Penshurst: The Semiotics of Place*, 79.

33. We have already shown that the case is likely the reverse (Pohl, “Lanyer’s ‘The Description of Cookham’ and Jonson’s ‘To Penshurst,’” 225-28).

34. Wayne, *Penshurst: The Semiotics of Place*, 79.

35. Watson, “As You Liken It,” 82.

36. Wayne, *Penshurst: The Semiotics of Place*, 16.

37. Lanyer draws out these oppositions through the changing meaning of “prospect” in the poem, which appears first at line 54 and again at line 72. In the first case, the “goodly Prospects” of the “stately tree” (“Cooke-ham,” 53-54) so enjoyed by Margaret are those which one might associate with the *locus amoenus*: a source of poetic inspiration, a refuge that provides comfort, and a space for meditation and religious devotion. In the second case, Lanyer describes the “thirteene shires” which “appear’d all in [Margaret Clifford’s] sight,” “all interlac’d with brookes and christall springs” as “a prospect fit to please the eyes of Kings” (71-3). Here, Lanyer depicts Cooke-ham as a site on which men can focus their territorial gaze and satisfy their desire to control and own the land. But the real force of these lines lies in their juxtaposition with the previous use of “prospect” as a much less invasive way of interacting with nature. In other words, Lanyer replaces Jonson’s adjectival control over the Penshurst landscape with a much more passive and peaceful kinship with Cooke-ham. Of course, when we consider that the goal of Lanyer’s poem is to assert her poetic voice, we must ask: which “prospect” is worse for the environment, the one that does not hide its intentions or the one that dissembles and masks them?

38. McBride, “Remembering Orpheus,” 103.

39. McBride, “Remembering Orpheus,” 99-100.

40. McBride, “Remembering Orpheus,” 103.

41. McBride, “Remembering Orpheus,” 99.

42. McBride, “Remembering Orpheus,” 103.

43. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “vouchsafe” as to “give, grant, or bestow in a gracious or condescending manner.” See *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s. v. “vouchsafe, v,” March 2016, Oxford University Press (Accessed May 15, 2016).

44. Each of the four appearances of “vouchsafe” in “Cooke-ham” may be found here: “Vouchsafe to think upon those pleasures past” (13); “And loving heaven that is so farre above, / May in the end vouchsafe us entire love” (115-16); “But specially the love of that faire tree, / That first and last you did vouchsafe to see (157-58); “So I ingratefull Creature did deceive it, / Of that which you vouchsaft in love to leave it” (171-72).

45. By making this comparison, Lanyer elevates Margaret as alone capable of perceiving God’s plan, and in so doing she asserts her own poetic ability to compare Margaret with God. After all, that Lanyer emphasizes Margaret’s ability to perceive “in all his Creatures held a perfit Law; / And in their beauties [. . .] His beauty” (78-80) functions to reveal her own competing powers of perception.

46. McBride, “Remembering Orpheus,” 102-3.

47. McBride, “Remembering Orpheus,” 103-5.

48. McBride, “Remembering Orpheus,” 103.

49. Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 1929, Reprint (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2001), 59.

50. Of course, Lanyer is just one of several contenders for Shakespeare’s Dark Lady.

51. Elaine Beilin, “The Feminization of Praise: Aemilia Lanyer,” in *Redeeming Eve: Women Writers of the English Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 202.

52. Watson, “As You Liken It,” 106.

53. Watson, “As You Liken It,” 107.

54. Watson, “As You Liken It,” 82.

55. Watson, “As You Liken It,” 82.

56. Watson, “As You Liken It,” 79.

Giordano

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