

relief. The pandemic is humbling, an irrefutable demonstration of nature's claims on us. Curiously, the virus that causes COVID-19 thrives on quintessentially human traits. Specifically, the need to socialize and the nearly constant use of our hands—to gesture, to show respect or affection, or to pick up and hold objects—propel contagion. Recognizing this, ecocriticism must now be prepared to grapple with distinctively human needs and behaviors without abandoning the important work of illuminating what we share with all other organisms. Overtly or unconsciously, any work of criticism binds itself to the moment of its construction. The time-stamping of critical work need not be viewed as a liability, given that particulars must always be addressed before anything approaching universal or generally applicable claims can be established. Focalizing attention on the relationship between humans and the natural world, the pandemic might bring a new vitality to criticism. This fits perfectly with the longstanding ecocritical attunement to praxis, as this approach originated in the awareness of global environmental crises and the necessity of acting. At times, this orientation to lived experience produces an odd malaise, a fear that critical practice is not only inconsequential but possibly detrimental, environmentally speaking.²³ A different set of concerns informs the introduction to *Back to Nature: The Green and the Real in the Late Renaissance* (2006), in which Robert N. Watson worries that ecocriticism might be “the last resort of identity politics in the academy” (4). These and other like-minded ecocritics raise legitimate concerns, but they ignore or discount the intrinsic value of reading and studying literature, activities that distinguish our species. Additionally, if the pandemic reminds us of life's fleetingness and fragility by foregrounding our fundamentally biological identities, it also provides abiding evidence of art's necessity in human life, a concern that awakens affinities with early moderns.

In *A Future for Criticism* (2010), which assesses major trends in critical practice, Catherine Belsey suggests, “Fiction not only shows what is thinkable at a specific time,” it also “affect[s] what is thought” (107). The formalized study of literature, therefore, illuminates and alters the knowledge that lends shape and meaning to life in a particular era. Belsey urges critics to pay attention to the pleasures made available through reading literature. She also offers particular methodological advice, suggesting that “we should

23 Jonathan Bate makes this point at length in *Song of the Earth*, which develops his thesis that “culture” exists in unavoidably violent symbiosis with “nature.” Also see Buell's introduction to *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* for a discussion of the putative limits or liabilities of ecocriticism.

work outwards from the inside, allowing the fictional texts to construct for criticism a knowledge of its own" (103). Here, Belsey implies that criticism is all too easily hijacked by sociological or ideological aims. The solution? Embracing the uniqueness of literary texts or other cultural artifacts deserving of aesthetic analysis. In other words, methodological grace, if not purity, should define critical practice.

Heeding Belsey's advice does not require defaulting to an archaic formalism but, rather, demonstrating literature's deep engagement with the themes, issues, or cruxes relevant to the approach one favors. Ecocriticism consistently meets this standard, and it especially suits the present moment given the renewed emphasis on humans' embedment in natural processes.

Obviously, mortality stalks us all, though this does not mean we are accustomed to dealing with death. In the world of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, of course, death was omnipresent, not an unpleasantness that could (however temporarily) be sealed off from daily life. Notably, Shakespeare's own life was bookended by contagion. In 1564, when Shakespeare was several months old, a virulent plague, reminiscent of the Black Death that swept through the Middle Ages in the middle fourteenth century, menaced Stratford. In a way, a whiff of the miraculous accompanies the infant Shakespeare's survival.²⁴ Biographer Park Honan reminds us that Shakespeare seems to have died of a mysterious fever, lending an eerie symmetry to the conditions surrounding his arrival to and exit from the world. In an article published in *The New Yorker* shortly after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Stephen Greenblatt observes that Shakespeare's works have remarkably little to say about the plague, though he sometimes uses images of pestilence to rhetorical effect. Perhaps Shakespeare remained comparatively silent on the issue of disease *because* it pervaded life. Then as now, those things that weave into the fabric of daily existence tend to go unremarked. In this light, literary criticism performs important epistemological work, bringing to light the taken-for-granted or exposing the newly contested.

Historian Norman F. Cantor considers the impact of the Black Death on the Middle Ages and traces the ongoing effects of "chaotic morbidity."²⁵ Viewed in these terms, the early modern period takes on the appearance of

24 Greenblatt's *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* and Jonathan Bate's *Soul of the Age: A Biography of the Mind of William Shakespeare* offer enlightening accounts of the crucial social, cultural, and political contexts in which to place Shakespeare's writing.

25 For Cantor's influential analysis, see *In the Wake of the Plague: The Black Death and the World It Made*.



a post-apocalyptic landscape, albeit one in which bleakness and deprivation cede to artistic innovation and intellectual ingenuity. As scholars from various disciplines attest, diverse artistic mediums of the early modern period celebrate the human body, infusing it with a beauty and realism lacking in medieval art; representations of the natural world undergo a similar transformation.²⁶ This newfound appreciation for the material world, including the bodies inhabiting it, is by now a commonplace in our understanding of the period's robust aesthetic output. Nevertheless, the transition from rampaging anguish to the exaltation of bodies (human or otherwise) should give us pause, as there is nothing predictable or logical in this perceptual and artistic shift. Stated another way, a more expected response to the cruelties of late medieval life would be a surge of artworks confirming humans' proneness to death and decay. With this in mind, early modern cultural innovations take on a rebellious character, marking an explicit counterpoint to lived experience.²⁷

The early modern celebration of corporeality, abetted by the self-conscious revitalization of classical writers, artists, and thinkers, did incite psychological crisis. The period's evolving aesthetic required a new confrontation with mortality. In a way, death—conceptualizations or apprehensions of mortality—became feral, as the chapter on the Sonnets suggests, because traditional beliefs were in a state of flux. For instance, as Philippe Ariès suggests, the longstanding metaphor of death-as-sleep was moribund. Death, therefore, took on a new or renewed ferocity. Across the cycle, Shakespeare invokes art as a reliable means of combating time, decay, and death. On the other hand, a strain of bitter acceptance, a reluctant ecology, infuses early modern tragedy. Shakespeare draws attention to this attitude in *Hamlet* when Gertrude offers the pseudo-solacing point that Hamlet should cease grieving for his father because such losses are so very commonplace. She advises her son, "Thou know'st 'tis common, all that lives must die, / Passing through nature to eternity" (1.2.72–73). Even if Gertrude intends the advice as balm for grief, her words miss the mark. But they are instructive for ecocritics: in effect, Gertrude offers a mini-lesson in ecology, an assertion of the cycling rhythms of nature and humans' ineluctable place therein. As

26 Edward William Tayler's *Nature and Art in Renaissance Literature* outlines key aspects of the shifting attitudes toward and depictions of the natural world in this period; for an updated perspective on art and nature, see Randy Thornhill's essay "Darwinian Aesthetics Informs Traditional Aesthetics."

27 See art historian Mary D. Garrard's *Brunelleschi's Egg: Nature, Art, and Gender in Renaissance Italy* for an engrossing study of the way in which the Black Death catalyzed Renaissance humanism and stimulated artistic production.



I want to demonstrate, early modern tragedy takes up this theme, showing how the genre concedes humans' embedment in nature *and* mourns this reality.²⁸

At its core, ecocriticism reveals the complex, multiform relationships between humans and the rest of the natural world. Research supports the claims that humans have a built-in love of nature *and* that we are wired to fear or loathe it.²⁹ Rather than establishing which position is correct, the goal here is exploring diverse permutations of humans and (or in) nature. Now more than ever, the central concepts in ecocriticism, along with the vocabulary that constitutes its architecture, must be called upon to make sense of the world. For example, numerous ecocritics have taken up the analytical challenge of differentiating between *zoe* and *bios*; these terms, bequeathed to us from the ancient Greeks, both denote "life." Whereas "*zoe*" refers to the instinctive, primal, and physiological, "*bios*" conjures the human-built world, including ideas, institutions, and artifacts of culture.³⁰ Generally speaking, ecocritics have subordinated "*bios*" to "*zoe*," principally to highlight our enmeshment in nature. This stance deliberately rejects the Enlightenment version of the self as an isolate subject governed by reason, a faculty presumptively belonging exclusively to humans. In any case, *The Eco-Self in Early Modern English Literature* offers a different perspective on tensions between *zoe* and *bios*, showing how critics' preferences for one term over the other hew to assumptions of permanence. That is, ecocritics who celebrate *zoe* embrace the continuity it brings, as in the periodic regeneration of the botanical world. On the other hand, champions of *bios* assign posterity, longevity, and even permanence to cultural or aesthetic forms, as if in agreement with the speaker of Shakespeare's Sonnets, who repeatedly and self-servingly touts the immortalizing effects of poeticizing. Crucially, these diverse positions link up in their shared (albeit usually ignored) confirmation that we chase permanence.

28 For a compelling analysis of ecological awareness in the early modern period, see Randall Martin, *Shakespeare & Ecology*. As I aim to show, this awareness often triggers anxiety in early modern text.

29 Edward O. Wilson makes the case for humans' innate love of nature in *Biophilia*; for an account of humans' antipathy toward and estrangement from the natural world, see Simon C. Estok, *The Ecophobia Hypothesis*. Scientific research confirms both positions, indicating the importance of culture, context, and experience in assessing humans' attitudes toward the natural world.

30 Cary Wolfe argues in favor of *zoe* over *bios* throughout *Before the Law: Humans and Others in a Biopolitical Frame*. Lewis Hyde's discussion of the oppositional (or complementary) relationship between *zoe* and *bios* is likewise helpful; see *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World*.



We now have empirical and qualitative evidence that selves are at once culturally constructed and biologically determined so that segregating *zoe* from *bios* proves increasingly difficult. Freed from the necessity of choosing one over the other, we release the fullest potentialities of both, which is my goal in posing the eco-self as the best means of understanding humanness. This version of the human materializes in the early modern era and likewise speaks to contemporary experiences. With this in mind, I cannot help but wonder if our post-pandemic world will host a revved-up period of creative output, as happened in the wake of the Black Death. In this respect, we appropriate to ourselves the rejuvenating properties of the Renaissance, including the lushness of sensuous experience.

Reasserting the Self in an Age of Hypermaterialism

Updated theories of embodiment offer bracing insights into the ebb and flow of existence, so they highlight the ways in which humans (like everything else) continually interact with other entities. As previously mentioned, just such a relational awareness, which Watson terms the “ecology of the self,” was already available to early moderns, though this apprehension of personhood was giving way, as evidenced by the changing meaning of “individual.” Originally denoting the embedment of person in world (including the physical environment and the social order), “individual” morphed into its own antonym, coming to denote the isolate, autonomous subject typically associated with Enlightenment thought. The current materialist hegemony, discernible across diverse academic and lexical fields, directly challenges the hierarchies established by Cartesian thought. Simply put, the pivot to materialism centers corporeal or biological concerns, and it invokes evolutionary theory to explain most phenomena, including behavioral patterns among humans. This shift was necessary, as it remedied the false notion of humans’ separation from the rest of nature. I am particularly interested in how the ascendance of materialism affects the self and in the related concepts of autonomy and free will.

Political scientist Jane Bennett takes up this issue in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010), which advocates for a theory that “acknowledges an indeterminate vitality in the world without slipping back into a vitalism of nonmaterial agents” (92). This stance downplays or even repudiates the individual, instead prioritizing process and flux, the oscillating patterns that define existence. Influential theorists such as



Stacy Alaimo and Karen Barad similarly emphasize boundarylessness.³¹ An ethical imperative to generate sounder ecological and environmental policies and modes of being powers much of this current scholarship. Even so, the widespread insistence on systems rather than individual subjects mutes moral agency. Bennett herself intimates this. To give a mundane example, she writes of consuming potato chips, speculating that doing so is not really a choice once the chip is in hand. She proposes to “treat food as conative bodies vying alongside and within another complex body” (39). The “dominant chip” requires or compels the act of consuming it (40). I suspect this example is meant rather playfully as a means for Bennett to bring to life her theoretical suppositions. Still, it encapsulates the lack-of-agency assumption so often endemic to current theories of materialism. Pursued to its inevitable conclusions, the example suggests that rampant consumption simply cannot be reined in. If true, this would hamstring the environmentalist movement, particularly its conservationist efforts.

If, as I take it, we now live in an era of hypermaterialism, this has been a somewhat recent development. For instance, in their introduction to *Material Feminisms* (2008), Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman write of feminism’s general “retreat from materiality” (3). They object to the tendency on the part of social-constructionist feminists to conceive of “material reality” as something wholly distinct from “language, discourse, and culture” (3). In an essay appearing in the same volume, Elizabeth Grosz offers a similar argument, writing, “There has traditionally been a strong resistance on the part of feminists to any recourse to the questions of nature” (23). Now, roughly thirteen years since the publication of *Material Feminisms*, the social-constructivist position has been soundly defeated in most academic enclaves, with spiraling cultural implications. In the specific context of early modern studies, materialism clearly dominates academic inquiry, so this tendency receives sustained attention across various chapters.³² On the positive side, this indicates a broad acceptance of scientific research. But the original critique of “essentialism,” to use an older term for the materialist camp, has been discarded, though the issues it raised remain important. Specifically, as Grosz cautions, we need “a complex and subtle account of [...] biology,” which would render it suitable to conveying “the rich

31 Alaimo’s “Trans-corporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature” presents her theory of interconnectivity, whereby bodies are imagined in continual dynamism with the surrounding world; for Barad’s similar perspective on the unbounded self, see “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter.”

32 In “Materialism and Reification in Renaissance Studies,” David Hawkes offers a useful overview of materialism as the leitmotif in early modern scholarship.

variability of social, cultural, and political life" (24). Of course, the problem is that describing (i.e., generating accounts of a thing) too easily slips into prescribing, with the relevant narratives accruing a delimiting power. To give one example, Galenic science governed apprehensions of gender for centuries. Furthermore, the one-sex model, as Thomas Laqueur observes, retained some of its heuristic force even after early modern scientists had regular access to human corpses and were able to dissect and study them.³³ Simply put, early modern anatomists "discovered" in the body what they expected to find. In sum, the tools of "language, discourse, and culture" will always enable our examinations of material reality. With all these points in mind, *The Eco-Self in Early Modern English Literature* seeks to give the pendulum a slight nudge in the other direction as a means of countering the hypermaterialism of our era. Doing so does not entail rejecting evolutionary theory or the insights generated by the natural sciences; nor does it mean reverting to social constructionism. Rather, the goal is to establish the limits of materialism, which itself cannot adequately define or explain humanness.

To make the case for an updated self, one attuned to material as well as tangible concerns, *The Eco-Self in Early Modern English Literature* draws upon current psychological research, including cognitive behavioral theory. Especially useful for defining the eco-self is the work of cognitive psychologist Jonathan Haidt. Deeply influenced by evolutionary psychology, Haidt concedes that a preponderance of human behavior derives from "automatic processing."³⁴ On the other hand, he presents a lucid and workable theory of human agency and accompanying ethical obligations. Simply put, Haidt reminds us that "all societies must resolve a small set of questions about how to order society, the most important being how to balance the needs of individuals and groups" (16–17). This delicate negotiation takes on acute significance in the early modern period, as the self was under reconstruction and the ensuing changes rewired the circuitries of moral thought. My aim is to bring out this tension, an emerging set of ethical dilemmas, that manifests in various early modern texts.

From an ecological point of view, a dread of the Individual, that hubristic creature enshrined in the Enlightenment, makes perfect sense. On the other

33 Laqueur's *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* traces the persisting influence of the one-sex model, adroitly showing how "sex" was conceptualized as the more fluid term, with gender therefore activated in support of maintaining distinct socio-political roles between men and women.

34 See *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom*, for Haidt's account of "automatic processing" versus deliberative decision-making (13). He believes the former dominates, though we do have some capacity for moral agency.



hand, romanticizing groups carries its own risks or blind spots. Consider the following entities: community, collective, mob. Each connotes a specific type of group dynamic with radically varying outcomes. Groups can provide cover for unjust or brutal actions, a phenomenon especially acute during times of stress or crisis, whether caused by social unrest, natural disasters, or an admixture of the two.³⁵ Potentially troubling aspects of collective identity materialize in “groupthink,” which Ravven defines as “the social pressures exerted by the leaders of a group and its overall dynamics toward loyal consensus of opinion and the elimination of doubting and dissonant voices” (127). Moreover, groups often coalesce around their antipathy toward perceived outsiders or Others. Pascal Boyer illuminates this tendency in *Minds Make Societies: How Cognition Explains the World Humans Create*, writing, “A great part of coalitional psychology consists in mobilizing support against others” (45). This dynamic, we might think of it as “rage bonding,” is especially pronounced in times of heightened suffering or deprivation—as we see in our own tumultuous world.³⁶ When groups morph into lethal mobs, they show us the dark side of “hive” experiences. The appeal of hive experiences is the *temporary* jettisoning of selfhood or self-consciousness, as one enters a collective realm of experience. In such contexts, a group of people moves as if with a single body and singular purpose. This very quality also holds the key to the potentially menacing aspects of the hive experience. As Haidt explains in *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (2012), “Fascism is hive psychology scaled up to grotesque heights. It’s the doctrine of the nation as a superorganism, within which the individual loses all importance” (280). Subordinating the individual to the group does not always or necessarily yield desirable results. Finally, the necessity of the self (self-concept, if one prefers) snaps into focus when this elusive entity is imperiled, *in extremis*, threatened with complete erasure, such as when the fragile individual proves no match for groupthink and the actions ensuing from it.³⁷

35 In *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*, Haidt shows how societies oscillate between xenophilia and xenophobia, noting that the latter quality often ensues from the association of “plagues,” “epidemics,” and “new disease” with “foreigners” (173). In sum, deprivation or suffering triggers antipathy toward outsiders.

36 Boyer’s research extends Freud’s argument about the scapegoat function, which he makes at some length in *Civilization and Its Discontents*. All this work unsettles the belief that collective actions are necessarily salutary.

37 For an unapologetic defense of individual rights and an accompanying critique of groupthink, consider Ayaan Hirsi Ali’s *Prey: Immigration, Islam, and the Erosion of Women’s Rights*. Hirsi Ali argues that “intersectionality” and “globalism” are detrimental to women, as various types of female-directed oppression end up being ignored or justified out of a desire to honor cultural

While Descartes got a lot wrong, which we have no trouble pointing out from our distanced perspective, he might yet have something to teach us about humanness, as neuroscientist António Damásio suggests. His influential book, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (1994), joins the chorus of voices raised against the Cartesian notion of selfhood, particularly what he terms “the abyssal separation between body and mind” (250). Crucially, however, Damásio, retains—in fact, insists upon—the importance of the self, which he defines as “a perpetually re-created neurobiological state,” and he rejects the notion of a “selfless cognition” (100). In short, we crave or even require acknowledgement of our inner lives, the intangibles that cannot be measured but nonetheless prove deeply meaningful.³⁸ Damásio’s perspective on the self nourishes my understanding of the eco-self, so it marks an important through-line linking various chapters.

Assessing the Anthropocene

Ecocriticism constitutes a vital tool for understanding the complex, varied relationships between humans and the rest of the natural world. Of course, literary criticism and other academic endeavors housed within the humanities do not generate new empirical knowledge of the natural world; likewise, critical practice is not the place for testing scientific theories. Still, while tensions between “the two cultures,” the sciences and the humanities, have proven tenacious, this does not negate the value of humanities disciplines. For instance, although literary critics are not authorities on how evolution works, we are equipped to evaluate the circulation of narratives about it and the meanings and values attached to it. This might mean bringing to light latent contradictions in the currently vogueish materialism. Specifically, consider that, even as various disciplines emphasize what humans share with all other organisms and note our ongoing indebtedness to evolutionary processes, some researchers advance a new form of essentialism that posits intractable differences—*neurological* differences— between men and

differences. This is, obviously, a detonative point, which is all the more reason we should engage with it.

38 Psychologist Paul Bloom provides an exceptionally useful model for understanding the complexities of humanness in *How Pleasure Works: The New Science of Why We Like What We Like*. He cites abundant research demonstrating how expectations and assumptions shape sensorial experiences and produce measurably different activity in the brain, including the enjoyment of food (25–53).



women, ostensibly owing to the intrauterine influence of testosterone on a developing fetus.³⁹ The tension between these arguments, both testaments to the sway of materialism, fascinates, precisely because it reminds us that research is never value-free. With this in mind, it is worth considering who wins or loses from the argument that men's and women's brains are simply different and that these distinctions shape our lives. Such questions of value, meaning, or purpose lend a distinctive shape to the humanities.

Earlier eras might have axiomatically accepted the notion that literature creates the opportunity for social transformation or, indeed, that it propels bracing engagements with the fundamental questions of human experience. We probably cannot assert either possibility with assurance right now, given the general downturn, the shrinking role and vanishing prestige, of the humanities.⁴⁰ Cognitive neuroscientist Maryanne Wolf speculates on the waning emphasis on literary studies, suggesting that because so much of our reading lives happens on screens, we have less and less immersive contact with actual books. This should concern us, Wolf argues, because reading primarily on screens diminishes one's ability and, equally crucially, willingness to tackle complex texts.⁴¹ Perhaps, then, we are undoing the effects of the intellectual/cultural/social revolution that distinguished the early modern era. In any case, according to Wolf, our era's flagging interest in reading books erodes certain cognitive abilities. But this decline can be corrected, provided we rededicate to reading; in this sense, English departments (and critical practice) have a potentially crucial role to play given their ability to generate conversations about literature.

In addition to restoring a love for and facility with reading, critical practice can also demonstrate its value by providing a vocabulary and conceptual framework for assessing the assemblage of stories that define any era,

39 Cordelia Fine documents the tendency in current scholarship to insist that testosterone shapes fetal brain development in *Testosterone Rex: Myths of Sex, Science, and Society*; she shows how the evidence for this claim is rather scant. Fine's *Delusions of Gender: How Our Minds, Society, and Neurosexism Create Difference* is also important, as it shows how an essentialist perspective on gender roles skews contemporary research.

40 Kurt Spellmeyer analyzes the downturn in the humanities in *Arts of Living: Reinventing the Humanities for the Twenty-First Century*. Although I accept his analysis of the problem (depleted funding for the humanities and dwindling programs and opportunities across the landscapes of higher education), his solutions focus strictly on vocational concerns, so they do not address the intrinsic value of reading, writing, or critically engaging ideas.

41 Wolf documents the cognitive liabilities sparked by reading mainly on screens in *Reader, Come Home: The Reading Brain in a Digital World*. Wolf does not advance a simplistic luddite position, whereby readers are urged to shun computers and technology. Rather, she calls for a judicious readjustment of our reading habits.



including our own. With this in mind, I want to consider the *genre* of the Anthropocene, our current age. In literary contexts, knowledge of generic conventions primes us to identify the techniques employed to deliberate effect and to appreciate and evaluate the content of what we are reading. Genre encompasses writers' obligations and readers' expectations, so in this sense it is transactional. All of this is to say: if we can identify the genre of our current age, we will have a clearer sense of where we are headed.

Now in common usage across multiple disciplines and cultural contexts, "Anthropocene" insists upon the novelty of our current age, the way it presents unique challenges vis-à-vis the human/nature relationship. In their trenchant overview of the Anthropocene, Tobias Boes and Kate Marshall suggest that this era requires us to accept that "human agency," which must be "decoupled from individual subjectivity," is "radically open to nonhuman influences" (62). The first point, the repudiation of the individual, is a commonplace in ecological discourse, and it receives sustained attention throughout each of these chapters. Obviously, no single individual can transform environmental policies or stave off disaster. Yet one person can pollute an entire watershed. Beyond this, lacking a sense of personal accountability frees people to overlook the daily behaviors that do have discernible impacts on the world, though this does not exempt large corporations from responsibility for their actions. Rather than abandoning the concept of the individual, we need an updated version of the personalized dimensions of human agency. That said, Boes and Marshall's point about humans being profoundly susceptible to "nonhuman influences" is inarguable.

Theorists of the Anthropocene repeatedly call attention to the theme of reciprocity. This is the defining narrative of our time with respect to humans and (or in) nature. As Boes and Marshall see it, "Nature has of course always acted in turn upon human societies"; But only in recent times have we had to confront the possibility that nature might also fundamentally alter our existence as a species and that, what is more, it might do so as the ultimate outcome of processes that we ourselves set in motion" (61). When we think of the Anthropocene as a genre, an overstory defined by specific conventions, the implications of this symbiotic arrangement snap into focus. Specifically, the Anthropocene takes on sinister aspects, as we appear to be living inside a revenge tragedy, an arrangement in which harmful actions inevitably produce a boomerang effect. I suspect the problem is evident: as this popular early modern subgenre demonstrates, once underway, cycles of vengeance predicate doom. Likewise, left unchecked, the environmental crises instigated and exacerbated by humans will engulf us.



This might sound like hyperbolic doom-mongering, so I want to offer a provocative example of the Anthropocene as a revenge tragedy, intimated in Bill Schutt's engaging *Cannibalism: A Perfectly Natural History* (2017). As the title implies, Schutt aims to show how, among certain species, cannibalism is an expected, even beneficial, practice. In his words, "Cannibalism makes perfect evolutionary sense" (287). As he concedes, this is a much tougher sell when considering human examples of cannibalism because "we've evolved along a path where cultural or societal rules influence our behavior to an extent unseen in nature" (288). Even in survival contexts, overcoming the taboo against cannibalism exacts a hefty psychological price.⁴² Near the end of his book, Schutt almost casually identifies a scenario in which humans will be forced to engage in cannibalism. Specifically, he suggests that global environmental crises will worsen deprivation and suffering and asks, "Since cannibalism is a completely normal response to severe stress, especially during times of famine and warfare, how much of a surprise would it be if the butchery of humans for food becomes commonplace in drought-ridden and overpopulated regions of the near-future Earth?" (294). Here's the worst part: cannibalism among various human populations will, Schutt argues, set off a global pandemic. Admittedly, at this point the scenario is purely speculative. Perhaps this is the point: we yet have the chance to stave off or minimize environmental disasters. As ever, the question is how best to accomplish this work. As a partial solution, *The Eco-Self in Early Modern English Literature* advocates embracing rather than denying human uniqueness, while keeping in mind Joseph W. Meeker's observation that "uniqueness does not in itself confer superiority" (4).

Defaulting to a thoroughgoing materialism will not work, though this seems the clear trend. In an essay published two decades ago, Jonathan Franzen remarks on our "current cultural susceptibility to the charms of materialism—our increasing willingness to see psychology as chemical, identity as genetic, and behavior as the product of bygone exigencies of human evolution" (33). As he observes earlier in the same piece, an obsessive or hyper-materialism will "reduce our beloved personalities to finite sets of neurochemical coordinates" (19). He asks, "Who wants a story of life like that?" (19). Centuries before Franzen, early modern writers affirmed the necessity of cultivating a different understanding. *The Eco-Self in Early*

42 There are, of course, examples of humans deliberately engaging in cannibalism, which Schutt addresses. Additionally, Bloom's *How Pleasure Works: The New Science of Why We Like What We Like* identifies several ways in which cultural practices, such as certain religious rituals or more isolated actions, entail cannibalism (36–39).

Modern English Literature attends to this alternate story, endeavoring to show how the negotiated self, arising through continual interaction with the world, also encompasses a robust inner life. In short, the eco-self dominates early literature and provides *us* with an updated self-concept.

Chapter Overviews

The first chapter, focusing on Shakespeare's Sonnets, tracks the emergence and evolution of a new psychological orientation in early modern England. This burgeoning mindset amplified morbid psychologizing and sparked the desire for an elusive permanence. The problem shifts into focus in several poems that mournfully acknowledge the inevitability of becoming worm food, a chthonian destination that locates humans firmly within nature's turning cycles. This ecological awareness proceeds in tandem with a revved-up focus on the posterity-ensuring potential of artistic expression so that organic and symbolic processes knit together. In keeping with ancient conventions, Shakespeare relies on botanical tropes and images to evoke perpetual renewal. But he departs from tradition by appropriating to the lyric mode the eternizing properties conventionally ascribed to the botanical world. Given their close attention to biological exigencies and the counter-magic of poeticizing, the Sonnets prove especially useful for tracking the eco-self with its similar admixture of the biological and the psychological.

The Sonnets oscillate between continuity and removal: humans are ensconced in nature and ever-subject to its demands yet likewise desirous of claiming a space apart from it. This recurrent emphasis lays the groundwork for considering several early modern tragedies, texts that mutually concede humans' embedment in nature, yet they likewise resist, resent, or mourn this fundamentally ecological condition. Tragedy has always, if paradoxically, been a potent vehicle for tracking selfhood. The goal here is to rethink the ecological implications of the genre's obsessive psychologizing.

Each of the three tragedies offers a different perspective on the eco-self. For instance, Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* depicts an intermediary creature, essentially a self trapped between competing views of personhood. Presenting Faustus as a creature of multiform appetites, Marlowe demonstrates that need mediates the relationship between self and world. Accordingly, Abraham Maslow's well-known Hierarchy of Needs grounds my reading of *Doctor Faustus*. I do, however, propose a new geometry for Maslow's needs: substituting a loop for the traditional pyramid acknowledges



how we cycle perpetually among diverse needs, dispelling any illusion that we ever “transcend” the physiological demands that connect us to all other life-forms. Ultimately, Marlowe’s *Faustus* abnegates the proprietarily human need—periodic replenishment of the imagination—that prompted his illicit conjurations. To illuminate Faustian psychology, this chapter also engages with current research on phenomenology, as this scholarship provides crucial insights into the theme of identity-in-crisis that structures *Doctor Faustus*.

Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra* also contributes a vital chapter to the unfolding story of the early modern eco-self, as it takes up a crucial thread from Marlowe’s play. Additionally, *Antony and Cleopatra* extends the annelid theme so important in the *Sonnets*; in both contexts, worms prove essential to defining humanness. In the play, the Clown twice mentions “the joy of the worm,” thereby intimating the impending and curiously enacted suicide of Cleopatra. The version of Cleopatra’s death popularized by Shakespeare has proven tenacious, and I believe it encapsulates the play’s unique significance for ecocriticism, especially on the issue of humans’ continuity with or indistinction from the natural world. Likewise, images of dissolution, of one entity melding into another, pervade *Antony and Cleopatra*, a theme visually conveyed in multiple references to the Tiber, a river capable of sweeping everything into its surging currents. Drawing attention to such moments, *Antony and Cleopatra* exemplifies the anxious ecology that so often defines early modern tragedy. Shakespeare’s play points to the necessity of the self, of an abstracting inner life capable of exerting influence on the world. In so doing, *Antony and Cleopatra* offers a viable model of the eco-self.

John Webster’s *Duchess of Malfi* proves disruptive vis-à-vis the story of the self. This play extends the reluctant ecology of early modern tragedy, dwelling on the prospect of humans’ eventual, inevitable entrée into nature’s cycling rhythms. More specifically, the Malcontent, Bosola, laments the reality that “we are eaten up of lice, and worms” (2.1.57). In the same rant, Bosola complains that humans are doomed to inhabit “a rotten and dead body” (2.1.59). This obsession with intransigent flesh—judged so because of its proneness to debilitation and decay—powers *The Duchess of Malfi*, occasioning productive engagement with current theories of selfhood, particularly as these tend to emphasize or even celebrate embodiment. In sum, *The Duchess of Malfi* demonstrates that ecological concerns brim with psychological significance. In brief, Webster’s howl of protest against corporeal frailty outlines a deep need, a manifestly human yearning, generated by the inexorabilities of organismic life. Yet, perversely, *The Duchess of Malfi* concludes in a spirit of nihilism, with the self imagined as fragile and imperiled—as ephemeral as bodies’ outlines cast in snow. Curiously,



therefore, Webster offers a prescient critique of our own hypermaterialist age, with its similarly dismissive treatment of the self. By negative example, *The Duchess of Malfi* endorses the necessity of harmonizing biological and psychological needs.

The bleakness of the Websterian universe, or its self-annihilative properties, recedes when read against the struggle to define selfhood in a utopian prose text by Margaret Cavendish. To conclude this biography of the early modern eco-self, the final chapter focuses on Cavendish's engagement with emerging science and technological innovation in *The Description of a New World, Called The Blazing World* (1666). Writing as the Enlightenment was powering up, Cavendish both celebrates rationality and expands its range to include the world proper. In this way, Cavendish anticipates current trends (twenty-first-century moves) in ecological theory. If *The Blazing World* spotlights pivotal developments in Cavendish's era, it also stimulates fresh consideration of how well the guiding principles and structuring tropes of ecological discourse serve our current needs. Writing in an era of acute devastations, Cavendish expresses reverence for the self-powering grandeur and infinite beauty of the natural world, in whose ambit humans are located. Yet her eco-awareness never effaces the individual. Striking a balance between communitarianism and individualism, *The Blazing World* advances an alternate version of the eco-self, one that melds the possibility of autonomy with an awareness of humans' rootedness in the natural world. In sum, tracking the story of the self as it unfolds across diverse early modern texts brings out a key aspect of the period's insights into humanness and has the potential to yield refinements to contemporary ecological discourse.

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