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Rough Beginnings: Imagining the Origins of Agriculture in Late Medieval and Early Modern Britain

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Abstract
Rough Beginnings: Imagining the Origins of Agriculture in Late Medieval and Early
Modern Britain
Clio Doyle
2021

The Renaissance had both apocalyptic and hopeful visions of the future, but both were tied into the idea of the Golden Age, a past age that could be described as perfectly fertile or hopelessly barren, as a time of plenty or of hunger. The idea of a time before agriculture was approached with ambivalence: it was at once the innocent, ideal beginning and the feared end. I argue in my dissertation, “Rough Beginnings: Imagining the Origins of Agriculture in Late Medieval and Early Modern Britain,” that stories about the invention of agriculture allowed writers of poetry, history, and husbandry manuals to think through the question of what humans owed to the Earth and its peoples.

Rough Beginnings: Imagining the Origins of Agriculture in Late Medieval and Early
Modern Britain

A Dissertation
Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of
Yale University
in Candidacy for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

By
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Mixed Leaves: History, Salad, and The Material Record

The inhabitants of medieval and early modern England understood eating not simply as a biological necessity but as an act with social, cultural, and even political consequences. For example, for the anonymous author of *The boke of keruyng*, an English cookbook printed in 1513 by Wynkyn de Worde, the consumption of produce such as "grene salletes & rawe fruytes" is rife with both medical and political peril.¹ These foods "wyll make your sourayne seke," the book warns, and are "suche metes as wyll set your tethe on edge."² The warning that uncooked fruits and vegetables will set one's teeth on edge would seem to be a matter of taste, literally and figuratively, but the declaration that such foods make a sovereign sick trespasses into the matter of state. The *Boke of keruyng* is full of swerves between what we would now think of as the disparate discourses of nutrition, gastronomy, social commentary, and political counsel, guiding readers through the logistical challenges of feeding and eating at the court while dispensing general advice on health, cooking, and good digestion, and recipes for particular occasions. Thus the caution against uncooked fruits and vegetables is modified by a recommendation to give the sovereign a raw apple if he is suffering from a hangover (or the "fumositytes" of carelessly mixing drinks). Early modern cookbooks typically conflate the medicinal and the culinary, jumbling recipes for poultices and elixirs of youth with recipes for chicken stew. But the *Boke of keruyng* makes it clear that the

¹ Anonymous, *The boke of keruyng*, the British Library edition accessed on EEBO <http://eebo.chadwyck.com/>, 05/29/20, A3.

² *The boke of keruyng*, A3.

question of what humans can and should eat is at the very foundation of not only personal health but also social and political order. This dissertation examines the late medieval and early modern drive to understand the history of taste and the history of the human diet, histories that intersect without overlapping. So, the acorn, the food of early humans, while a humble and wholesome food, disgusts those who try to eat it now, while meat, a food made possible by the widespread oppression of the weaker animals, while delicious, requires callousness to the suffering of other beings. The consequences of eating the wrong food - or feeding one's sovereign the wrong food - can be fatal, and disastrous to the human body and body politic. Such dietary-political statements present themselves as scientific fact: the human body reacts badly to raw fruits and vegetables. But challenges to such dietary orthodoxy are not only scientific but historical; statements about what humans should eat are statements about human nature, human history, and the relationship between humans and the natural world.

Nearly two centuries after *The booke of keruyng* appeared in print, the abiding English prejudice against raw fruits and vegetables prompted John Evelyn, diarist, scientist, and vegetarian, to write an entire treatise in defense of plant-based diets. In the dedication to *Acetaria: A Discourse of Sallets*, Evelyn anticipates skepticism about the interest and relevance of his chosen topic, arguing that the work is neither a "Trifle" nor "an Handful of Pot-Herbs" but an erudite compendium of "Natural History," ranging in reference from modern botany to classical historiography.³

³ John Evelyn, *Acetaria*, printed for B. Tooke, London: 1699, viii [I have assigned lower case Latin numerals to the pages of the Dedication for clarity]. I cite the Huntington

While allowing that the work "is indeed but a Sallet of Crude Herbs," he immediately states that "there is among them that which was a Prize at the Isthmian Games."⁴ The allusion deftly confirms Evelyn's erudition, reminding the learned reader that the wreaths bestowed on victors at this ancient Greek festival were made not of the olive branch that garnished the head of the winner of the Olympics, nor the much more famous laurel, but of wild celery. This recasts the crunchy and crude nature of salad, including as it does the Isthmian celery, as having a kind of prestigious antiquity, a rawness that is also a form of originality and of closeness to an ancient source.

But crudeness, understood both as refreshing originality and as rawness prior to and requiring refinement, is an ambivalent state for Evelyn. Evelyn claims that his book is not a trifle (at the time, as now, meaning both a light dessert and a thing of no importance) but rather a sallet, a pile of mixed leaves that can be seen either as a heap of undigested knowledge or an appetizingly heterogeneous assemblage of learning. Such metaphorical ambivalence is characteristic of many of the texts in this dissertation: in the late medieval and early modern periods in England, the subject of the ideal diet brings with it a heightened attention to the cultural networks and material modalities for the assimilation of knowledge. Thinking about food and where it comes from triggers a deeper and often fraught awareness of learning and where it comes from, a consciousness of the many substances one consumes, from plants to books.

Library edition accessed on ProQuest. Evelyn's abundant italics have been normalized but the spelling and capitalization is original.

⁴ Evelyn, *Acetaria*, xv.

As Evelyn's reference to the Isthmian games also suggests, the subject of eating frequently inspires, or corresponds with, an urge to look backwards, to some historical or imagined point of origin, either as a golden period to which one longs to return, or a time of pointless suffering gladly escaped, or, most often, a combination of the two: a time with significant advantages and disadvantages that might be used as the template for a better future. Of the ancient Greeks, Evelyn writes that "were it in my Power, I would recall the World, if not altogether to their Pristine Diet, yet to a much more wholesome and temperate than is now in Fashion."⁵ A central element of his challenge to meat-eating is the argument that human carnivorousness is a late and decadent innovation, not present in man's original, innocent state or in the earliest cultures. But Evelyn knows that an uncomplicated appeal to pristine primitivity risks the charge of barbarism or bestiality: as Evelyn recognizes, eating animals is a fundamental way that humans assert their difference from them. "This Subject, as low and despicable as it appears, challenges a Part of Natural History," he writes in his Dedication, addressing the question of the unhealthfulness of raw vegetables.⁶ The vegetable diet that he propounds symbolizes and is symbolized by the proper understanding of history: a proper engagement with the historical sources, the crude herbs, of the past, will result in a happier and healthier present.

That a book on salads should require a wholesale rethinking of the history, nature, and future of the human race is both striking and symptomatic of the early

⁵ Evelyn, xvi.

⁶ Evelyn, viii.

modern English obsession with eating as an index of human identity and difference. Food doesn't simply keep human beings alive, it either threatens or confirms their status as human, and humane. According to Evelyn, the growing, picking, and dressing of salads fosters essential human virtues and endowments, including logical reasoning, experience (i.e. scientific experimentation), sympathy for the suffering of animals, and mercy towards the weak. Whereas animals blindly eat leaves, led by natural instinct, humans cultivate both their gardens and themselves, using their capacities for reason and taste to determine the food best suited to them. But instinct can be a surer guide than reason or taste. In a characteristically digressive and allusive passage, Evelyn paraphrases Plutarch (himself citing Ovid and Homer) to amplify this point:

Grillus, who according to the Doctrine of Transmigration (as Plutarch. tells us) had, in his turn, been a Beast; discourses how much better he fed, and liv'd, than when he was turn'd to Man again, as knowing then, what Plants were best and most proper for him [...] And 'tis indeed very evident, that [...] Animals which feed on Plants, are directed by their Smell [...] But Men [...] have, or should have, Reason, Experience, and the Aids of Natural Philosophy to be their Guides in this matter.⁷

As his rueful “or should have” suggests, Evelyn is aware that learning sometimes only leads to degeneracy, drawing men from creaturely intuition to perversity. Ironically, humans' reliance on natural philosophy rather than smell leads them to make worse choices than mindless and uneducated beasts. Evelyn's great adjustment to natural philosophy, therefore, is not only to amend the common assumptions about the diets of early men but to return natural philosophy to its rightful place as the tool for deciding what to eat.

⁷ Evelyn 86 - 87.

For, Evelyn willingly concedes, salad does not naturally appeal to most palates. On the contrary, it is an "eminent Principle of near the whole Tribe of Sallet Vegetables" that these

inclin[e] rather to Acid and Sowre than to any other quality, especially, Salt, Sweet, or Luscious. There is therefore Skill and Judgment requir'd, how to suit and mingle our Sallet-Ingredients, so as may best agree with the Constitution of the [...] Humors [...] and by so adjusting them, that as nothing should be suffer'd to domineer, so should none of them lose their genuine Gust, Savour, or Vertue.⁸

Precisely because they are an acquired or mature taste, raw vegetables are of all foods most in need of human logic and human art, from their initial sprouting to their final dressing. Indeed, it is the very definition of "sallets" that they "consist of certain Esculent Plants and Herbs, improv'd by Culture, Industry, and Art of the Gard'ner."⁹ Salads *require* improvement, their tendency towards the acidic, sour, and bitter needing human art and industry to make them palatable. The salad is the perfect primitive food, at once original and calling out for refinement. It is the food of Eden and of the future both. Contrasted with "the Shambles [i.e. slaughterhouse's] Filth and Nidor [i.e. stink]" and the "Blood and Cruelty" of butchers, Evelyn declaims, "let none reproach our Sallet-Dresser, or disdain so clean, innocent, sweet, and Natural a Quality" because "all the World were Eaters, and Composers of Sallets in its best and brightest Age."¹⁰ The salad-eating age was best because it preceded the bloody inhumanity of meat-eating and because of the disposition that salad-making encourages. (Notable, too, is the salad's anti-tyrannical bent; it suffers when one element domineers, wishing instead to put all its elements into agreement.

⁸ Evelyn 88.

⁹ Evelyn 1.

¹⁰ Evelyn 120.

As I discuss in Chapter 2, meat-eating is often talked about as a form of, or at least a figure for, tyranny.) If humans improve salads, salads also improve humans, rewarding their better qualities of cleanliness, innocence, and reason rather than their worst instincts towards cruelty, inequality, and filth.

To support this seemingly fanciful claim, Evelyn delves extensively into contemporary botany, anthropology, and ancient history. Alongside references to Plutarch and Pliny, he cites "John Beuerouicius, a Learn'd Physician" on "the extream Age, which those of America usually arrive to [due to their diet of] Crude and Natural Herbs."¹¹ But he concentrates his attention on two key episodes from the distant past. The first is the Great Flood in Genesis, which—contrary to conventional theological interpretations, which understand it as a purifying event, establishing a new covenant between God and man—Evelyn sees as a literal watershed in the degradation of the natural environment and human existence. The drowning of most of earth's animal inhabitants portends a widespread shift to meat-eating, fatal to animals and humans alike: for "two thousand Years," he writes, "the Universal Food was Herbs and Plants; which abundantly recompens'd the Want of Flesh and other luxurious Meats, which shortened their Lives so many hundred Years."¹² Evelyn suggests that, before the flood, "the Air and Earth might then be less humid and clammy, and consequently Plants, and Herbs better fermented, concocted, and less Rheumatick" and he suggests a reason for this change in the climate: "the infinite Numbers of putrid Carcasses of

¹¹ Evelyn 137. As I argue in Chapter 1, this reference to the indigenous inhabitants of the Americas also functions as a historicizing gesture; the diets of indigenous peoples are often described in European sources in such a way as to imply that they are stuck in a pre-agricultural past that will therefore cede to agriculture.

¹² Evelyn 149.

Dead Animals, perishing in the flood (of which I find few, if any, have taken notice) which needs must have corrupted the Air."¹³ This divinely inflicted cataclysm marks the beginning, too, of man-made climate change, as the earth is "fouly vitiated now, thro' the Intemperance, Luxury, and softer Education and Effeminacy of the Ages since [the flood]."¹⁴

But Evelyn brings his treatise to an optimistic conclusion, arguing that human industry can restore the original nutritious virtues of plants. Although, as he notes, "it has often been objected, that Fruit, and Plants, and all other things, may since the Beginning, and as the World grows older, have universally become Effaete, impair'd and divested of those Nutritious and transcendent Vertues they were at first endow'd withal [...] all are not agreed that there is any, the least Decay in Nature, where equal Industry and Skill's apply'd."¹⁵ Even if earth has decayed, industry and skill are there to make it whole again. Ingenuity and effort can counteract intemperance and luxury. Importantly, his optimism on this point is not spiritual or theological—he makes no promise of a return to the antediluvian time of clean air and healthy eating—but social and political, anchored in a second prelapsarian age: the Roman Republic. The early days of Rome offer a secular analog to biblical antiquity, as early Romans, dining exclusively on salad, felt the effects in their minds and bodies: "Time was before Men in those golden Days: Their Spirits were brisk and lively [...] And Men had their Wits about them."¹⁶ Evelyn calls the human race's salad days "the Hortulan

¹³ Evelyn 124-5.

¹⁴Evelyn 125.

¹⁵Evelyn 174.

¹⁶ Evelyn 187.

[i.e. related to gardens] Provision of the Golden Age" and claims that "when Man is restor'd to that State again, it will be as it was in the Beginning."¹⁷ Despite his earlier disclaimer, that he does *not* want to set the human race back to its original state, Evelyn clearly understands vegetarianism as a bridge between an ideal past and future. The question of which past is harder to settle.¹⁸

Over the course of his book, Evelyn shuttles between many beginnings: Eden, the antediluvian earth, the reemergence of humans and animals after the flood, ancient Greece, the Roman republic, the beginning of meat-eating. And he never fully sheds his defensiveness about the backward-seeming orientation of his project. At the close of *Acetaria*, Evelyn returns to the imagined charge that he is trying to reverse the course of human history, turning civilized men into mere beasts:

Let none yet imagine, that whilst we justifie our present subject through all the *Topics of Panegyric*, we would in Favour of the *Sallet*, drest with all its Pomp and Advantage turn Mankind to *Grass* again; which were ungratefully to neglect the Bounty of Heaven, as well as his Health and Comfort: But by these Noble Instances and Examples, to reproach the *Luxury* of the present Age; and by shewing the infinite Blessing and Effects of Temperance, and the vertues accompanying it; with how little Nature, and Civil Appetite may be happy, contented with moderate things, and within a little Compass, reserving the rest, to the nobler parts of Life.¹⁹

And in fact, his treatise on salads does not call the human race to return to a single golden age, but presents a salad diet as a means of regaining certain lost attributes of

¹⁷ Evelyn 190.

¹⁸ As Giambattista Vico has it, "the nature of things is no other than their coming to being in certain times and in certain ways." Giambattista Vico, *Principi di scienza nuova*, ed. F. Nicolini (Milan 1953; repr. Turin 1976) 1.76; cf. 1.124, quoted in Walter Stephens, "De historia gigantum: theological anthropology before Rabelais," *Traditio* 40, 1984, 51. My translation. Thus the truth about things lies in their origins, which makes any claim about an original human diet or an original agricultural system also potentially a claim about the true human diet or true agriculture.

¹⁹ Evelyn 191.

multiple and varied pasts—so multiple and so varied that only an incredibly learned and sophisticated author could possibly assemble them in one book. Eating salad is thus an exemplary display of erudition: unlike eating grass, it does not represent a return to a bestial state, but a supreme exercise of logic, reason, and judgement in the balancing and dressing of well cultivated and carefully selected ingredients. Salad helped to make history—it was the first human food in Eden, and it contributed to the glory of Greece and Rome—and making salad requires knowing history. It is a food with "Pomp and Advantage," a food with provenance—and the power to change human nature, culture, and the world itself.

Even so, it is all too easy to conflate the well-balanced salad with the pile of raw grass gnawed by cattle (and perhaps by prehistoric men). This lapse from the ideal state to the state of nature makes Evelyn palpably nervous. Even in his panegyric on the miracle food that will improve humanity, he worries that he will be misunderstood as arguing for the undoing of human civilization. Evelyn longs for, not a return to the beginning, but the possibility of renewal: a state that is not the Golden Age but like it in almost every way, a restoration that is also an instauration. Not grass, but mixed leaves: a salad, and a book.

For all its self-conscious idiosyncrasy, Evelyn's *Acetaria* represents a pervasive trend in early modern English writing: a willingness to see culture and agriculture, writing and eating, as twin enterprises for the improvement or degradation of life on earth, human and non-human alike. Writing the history of agriculture in the early modern period means not only imagining a history, but also a historiography, of the environment: Evelyn is concerned not only with what the relationship between

humans and the natural world has been, but by what methods he and his contemporaries can access historical truth, and where in the material record to begin looking for the beginning of agriculture. Evelyn's conflation between the leaves of salads and of the leaves of ancient books is an attempt to argue that a healthy diet can only be developed out of a healthy respect for the material record. The pollution of the environment and the degradation of plants and animals after the flood is a result but also a metaphor for the ways in which the historical record has been muddled and misused. In Evelyn's *Acetaria*, as in many of the other sources I discuss in this dissertation, there is a sense that good research will necessarily lead to political and social change. The past, if correctly pieced together, will lead the way to a better future. So in the three chapters of this dissertation, I argue that stories about the origins of agricultural practices are doing the work of what we call history, as well as politics, theology, and science. Even - or perhaps especially - when such stories do not present themselves as literally true, they are attempts to get at the truth of particular relationships, specifically relationships between humans, the earth, and its creatures.

Chapter One, "Enough of the Oak," takes on the myth that acorns were the first human food. Like salads, acorns connote both an innocent original state and a feared state of deprivation and near-starvation. Although fabled to have been a staple of the mythical Golden Age, acorns were also, in medieval and early modern Europe, the food of the starving and poverty-stricken, the only source of calories when agriculture failed. The idea of the acorn-fed Golden Age was informed by classical sources from Ovid, who describes "men, content with food which came with no one's

seeking" gathering fallen acorns, to Boethius, who describes this as a time in which "hunger was easily sated / at need by the acorn."²⁰ But, while in some ways idyllic, the Golden Age also required men to be satisfied with very little. Erasmus, while commending the simplicity of an acorn diet as a metaphor for "fine old-fashioned virtues" abandoned in the course of civilization, derides the diet itself as equivalent to using urine as toothpaste.²¹ Petrarch calls the acorn, in its tendency to elicit disgust at the same time as admiration, "that acorn that the whole world honors and runs from."²²

The acorn was not just a mythic food in the renaissance; as the observer of continental famine and war William Gouge explains, "When people know not whither to go, or can not go from the place where they are (as in a city besieged) it bringeth men to feed on the coarsest things that they can get. As [...] on acorns, on horses and asses, on mice, rats, and all kind of vermin, on doves dung, on leather, and any other thing that can be chewed, and swallowed."²³ The acorn does not keep good company here; it is the basest substrate, just enough to keep people alive but unable to make their lives worth living. And many writers, ancient and modern, consequently describe the so-called Golden Age as almost unbearable, a state of such suffering and drudgery that humans invented the cultivation of plants just to get a little leisure and

²⁰ Ovid, *Metamorphoses, Volume I: Books 1-8*, translated by Frank Justus Miller, revised by G. P. Goold, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1916, 1.99. Boethius, H. F. Stewart, E.K. Rand, S. J. Tester. Loeb Classical Library 74. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973, 2.m5).

²¹ Desiderius Erasmus, *Collected Works of Erasmus: Adages*, trans. Margaret T. Phillips, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982, 320.

²² Petrarch *Canzoniere*, 50.23-24, my translation.

²³ *Gods three arrowves plague, famine, svvord, in three treatises*. EEBO, <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/A48734.0001.001>, accessed 07/23/18.

happiness in their lives. For example, Lucretius describes the lives of early humans as essentially beastlike: made stronger and more resilient to heat and cold by their rough diet, they roamed the earth in "the wide-wandering fashion of wild beasts" until they eventually died of starvation.²⁴

The acorn's rough simplicity, its overpowering harshness, its inability to pretend to be anything but what it is, and its unwillingness to make life easy, makes it a symbol of certain kinds of unvarnished literature. The satirist Joseph Hall ends his *Virgidemarium* with a series of puns on the "gall" of his works, by which his enemies' hides will be "galled" when he writes, in future, "in crabbed oak tree rind."²⁵ Hall compares the aftertaste of his writing to bitter oak gall, the base material for ink and therefore a symbol of both the acorn's and book's satirical potential. The book-as-acorn or as-oak points to its own materiality in an almost-contrast with humans' deprivations of each other and the material world, which they strip for parts. As Hall puts it, "O Nature: was the world ordain'd for nought, / But fill mans maw, and feede mans idle thought?"²⁶ Hall ties together the drive to exploit the natural world, in the shape of the the "fearfull beast," "ayr," and "Ocean," with the drive to explore and conquer remote territories such as "vtmost Inde," and the need for content to fill "idle thought[s]."²⁷ The reader, colonialist plunderer, and farmer are all accused of indiscriminate exploitation destined to destroy, all at once, the original innocence of the human mind and the untouched beauty of the earth. The book-as-oak-product

²⁴ Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, translated by W. H. D. Rouse. Revised by Martin F. Smith, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1924 (6.935).

²⁵ Joseph Hall, *Virgidemarium*, Conclusion, 1-6

²⁶ Hall 3.1

²⁷ Hall 3.1

would seem to stand against such rapaciousness - were it not, itself, a product of human exploitation of natural materials.

The complex relationship between acorns and colonialism is not singular to Hall's satiric vision. In fact, the image of the acorn comes back over and over in evocations of the lives of indigenous Americans and the first experiences of European settlers in North America. In accounts of the colonization of the new world such as that by Ferdinando Gorges, Native Americans are imagined to live off a rough diet of acorns, a diet that both points both to the fertility and promise of American soil and to its undeveloped state, stuck in the pre-agricultural past. The acorn thus becomes a symbol for a pained assumption of responsibility on the colonizers' side, a sense that the ravages they carry out in the name of progress are also leading to a loss of innocence. In Gorges's account, the settlers comfort themselves in their hunger by imagining future agriculture, "feeding their fancies with new discoveries at the Springs approach" and discussing "the great progress they would make."²⁸ This vision of a future agriculture fueled by a rough diet of acorns is the central image of this chapter, an image that captures both the immense ecological destruction and human suffering that are about to be caused in the pursuit of "great progress" and the real difficulties of trying to sustain life without agriculture in a hostile wilderness.

Chapter Two, "Dwellers in Innocency," returns to Britain to examine the Enclosure controversy in light of the literary genres of pastoral and beast fable that negotiate between beasts and humans as central characters in the history of the

²⁸ Untitled, printed by E. Brudenell, for Nathaniel Brook, EEBO, <http://name.umd.umich.edu/A48734.0001.001>, accessed 07/23/18.

environment. Beast fables and pastoral poetry tend to morph into metaphors of inter-human class conflict, and discussion of what is owed to the weak of any species cannot help but reflect, in ways both hidden and open, on what is owed to the human lower classes (and what they can or should do to get what is owed to them).

The medieval poet John Lydgate, in *The horse the ghooos & the sheep*, imagines these three animals debating which of them is most useful to human society. These three animals map, in fluctuating ways, on to the three orders of human society, although when it comes to the sheep, this metaphor breaks down when it comes to the sheep. The sheep's real value is in the literal use of its parts. So, the ram claims: "There is also made of the sheeps skynne / Pylches & gloues to dryue away the colde / Therof also is made good parchemyne / To wryte of bookes & quayers manyfolde."²⁹ Whereas the other animals defend themselves, the sheep refuses to speak, a move that the ram praises as meekness but can also be read as the final objectification of that animal, a refusal to let it speak directly for fear of what it might say, of what protests it might make. The sheep's muteness makes it more legible as already being an object, already being the gloves one wears or the book where one reads these words. This chapter follows the silent sheep as it becomes the material world, its body transmuting into everyday objects. So, Leonard Mascall writes in his husbandry manual a poem in "praise of the sheep" full of statements such "His skinne doth pleasure diuers waies, To write, to weare at all assaies."³⁰ The asyndetic "to

²⁹ Cambridge University Library copy from 1476, *The hors. the shep and the ghooos*. Inc.5.J.1.1.[3489].

³⁰ *The first booke of cattell wherein is shewed the gouernment of oxen, kine, calues, and how to vse bulles and other cattell to the yoake, and fell. With diuers approued remedies, to helpe most diseases among cattell: most necessarie for all, especially for husband*

write, to weare" is at once a connection, a contrast, and a correction from writing to wearing - as though it is writing that allows for wearing. The sheep makes possible - and pleasurable - the writing of the very husbandry manual that explains how to exploit sheep,

The world is made of sheep, and sheep, in their silent fulfilling of human demands, make possible/pleasurable a world made for human comfort. Writers from Thomas More to Philip Sidney draw attention to humans' reliance on animals by imagining ovine silence and obedience turned to loud rebellion. For example, Sidney's Ister Bank eclogue dramatizes the beginning of human rule over animals. Animals once roamed freely, but, wishing for a king, they exchanged their voices for man, who began to rule over them. Encouraged by their mute obedience, man began to till and therefore harm the earth as well in order to force it to bear corn; "But yet the common dam none did bemoan, / Because (though hurt) they never heard her groan."³¹ The silence that extends over this beginning is complicit with man's violent actions. The animals, mute themselves, engage in human logic to reject their common lot with the earth and, because they cannot hear it groan, to assume that it can feel no pain. Thus animals, by remaining silent, enable their own oppression, their muteness reassuring humans that only human emotions are real, that pain is only expressed in words. Sidney's speaker urges attention to pain not expressed through a human voice, to the "plaint of guiltless hurt" that "doth pierce the sky" when humans injure animals.

men, hauing the gouernment of any such cattell. Gathered and set forth by Leonard Mascall. London: Printed by Iohn Wolfe, 1587. EEBO, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu> Accessed 07/11/19.

³¹ Philip Sidney, *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia: The Old Arcadia (First Edition)*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, www.oxfordscholarlyeditions.com accessed 02/08/19.

This attention to wordless suffering points, as Sidney wishes it to, to the silent characters that fill the pastoral genre, the flocks that surround the noisy, singing shepherds and mutely await their fate. As Edmund Spenser's *Willye* puts it, "Neuer knewe I louers sheepe in good plight" (20). The eclogue, oriented around the speeches and feelings of humans, also allows room for the depiction of unintended consequences in the "guiltless hurt" of the sheep. The mute presence of animals, living and dead, in the background of human actions and in the material things that add comfort to human lives, is a reminder of all the suffering that has contributed to the material substrate of everyday life. It is also a reminder of individual power over the circumstances of others; even Spenser's most powerless, hopeless, lover, has a flock to tend to, that depends upon him for sustenance and upon which, in turn, he depends for all the materials of his everyday life.

The acorn and the sheep are figures of what is left behind, taken advantage of, and ignored in the rush to improve human life. The acorn is abandoned for grain, while the sheep is dismembered and loses its agency and its voice to serve human interests. But the acorn remains on earth, a latent reminder that human progress can come undone at a moment's notice, while sheep retain their capacity, if they only knew what was in their own best interests, to bite back at their human oppressors and consumers. Chapter Three, "Fishing Before the Net," tells a different and in many ways more optimistic story about human technological progress on earth and on the water, as a mutual seduction between humans and the natural world, a relationship of destruction but also of pleasure, one that may end badly but that is worth the pain it causes.

The story of the invention of fishing is a story about human progress. Angling is an ever-improving art, one that not only grows ever more advanced but that also promises to improve its practitioners. As John Dennys puts it, after angling was invented as a way to feed the surviving humans after the Biblical Flood, despite the downward trajectory of human history, although "worse and worse two ages more did passe, / Yet still this Art more perfect daily grew."³² This poem occurs in a treatise on angling, a genre that, from Juliana Berners's influential medieval entry in the genre, through Dennys, to Izaak Walton, presents fishing as at once a scientific experiment and a labor of love. In renaissance love poetry, fishing becomes a metaphor for the dangers and pleasures of persuasive language, with the lover becoming, for example in John Donne's *The Bait*, both fish and fisherman. The discourse around fish and fishing becomes a lightning rod for attitudes towards human curiosity about nature and the advancement of human knowledge and technology. As I argue, Walton ties himself in knots trying to present the angler both as dispassionate observer of the world's folly (as instantiated by fish taking the bait) and curiosity-driven explorer of the secrets of nature (in Piscator's fascination with an unnamed fish that, because it has no mouth, can never be caught or known.) Fishing thus becomes a metonym for the ways in which humans compromise their integrity by meddling with the natural world. The fish may be foolishly curious to taking the bait, but the angler may in turn be foolishly curious in trying to catch the fish. The inquiring human mind and the

³² John Dennys, *Secrets of angling: teaching, the choisest tooles baytes and seasons, for the taking of any fish, in pond or riuer*, 1613, Beinecke Uz3 613d

natural world it enquires into contaminate each other, leaving no room for dispassionate observation.

It makes sense, therefore, that fish and the bodies of water within which they are found become metaphors, not only for attempts to understand natural history, but for history in general. Bacon, in *The Advancement of Learning*, characterizes history as flotsam, "*tanquam tabula naufragii*."³³ Karen Newman explains that "though *tabula* is usually translated in modern editions as 'board' or 'plank,' thus 'like the planks of a shipwreck' [...] there is an additional network of meanings: *tabula* also denotes a writing tablet or slate, a list or schedule, an account book or ledger, a formal accusation, a stature, public records, state papers."³⁴ The sea stands here both for the material record, the mass of written materials out of which historical understanding is plucked, partially and at random. And this connection between the water and its creatures and the developing understanding of book history and historical method comes out in two self-avowed curiosities: the case of the miraculous Book-Fish that emerged in Cambridge Market as described in the pamphlet *Vox Piscis*, and Thomas Nashe's pamphlet in praise of the illustrious history of the red herring, *Lenten Stuffe*. These pamphlets are themselves ephemera, cheap print just a few readers away from becoming waste paper. But, although they acknowledge their pulpy nature, they delve, via attempts to write the history of fish, into complex questions of the interpretation, conservation, and propagation of the historical record and what it can tell the careful reader about the past of human relationships to each other and to the

³³ Quoted in Karen Newman, *Cultural Capitals: Early Modern London and Paris*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007, 122.

³⁴ Newman 122.

environment. In both pamphlets, the book trade is conflated with the fish trade, and the discipline of history is conflated with the preservation of fish. This latter process was, in the early modern period, associated with a certain amount of stink and waste. These pamphlets try to save what they can out of the shipwreck of history, arguing that this enterprise, if it even partially succeeds, will be worth the mess.

Richard White has studied contemporary narratives of climate change, finding competing narratives of "decline" and "finishing."³⁵ But the early modern period had not two narratives but an infinite proliferation of them, as it was through the medium of the story that early modern readers and writers tried to wrap their heads around the possibility that human actions could affect the environment. Each narrative I discuss is slightly different, pointing to different causes for the beginning of human exploitation of the earth and fearing different ends. That is because narratives about the invention of agriculture are, in the early modern period, tools for figuring out what happened in the past and what might happen in the future. They are test cases, microcosms of the many needs and responsibilities that humans face on earth, war games against a natural world that might turn violently against humans at any moment.

The question of what kinds of sources should be used to understand the early modern past animates and perplexes the burgeoning corpus of Renaissance ecocriticism, especially when it comes to the incorporating the perspectives of earth's marginalized human and non-human inhabitants. Thus Laurie Shannon's *The*

³⁵ See Richard White, "Play it again, Sam: Decline and finishing in environmental narratives" in eds. Ursula K. Heise, Jon Christensen, and Michelle Niemann, *The Routledge Companion to the Environmental Humanities*, London: Routledge, 2017.

Accommodated Animal uses both "the rangy, encyclopedic archive of classical natural history and Genesis's spare but driving narrative of the six days of creation" to find an "unabashedly political vocabulary" around animal interests.³⁶ The difficulties Shannon encounters in combining theological, literary, and historical evidence reflect the experiences of many ecocritics: "this archive has occasionally required the odd defense of literal reading as a proper part of the critical repertoire: not all textual animals labor equally under the yoke of human symbolic service. Indeed, to assert the power of language to transmogrify everything into a common denominator of anthropodetermination presumes the security of 'the human' in the first place—even as that halting and defrocked figure haunts domains ranging from evolutionary theory to the cyborg landscapes of posthumanism."³⁷ Shannon's search for the animal across the realms of literature, law, and theology, among others, reveals the animal's presence not only as a figure in literature but in the early modern world, and it depends upon taking every statement about animals seriously, whether it is theological or natural-historical. This approach has a certain similarity to that of Jeffrey Theis, whose work on sylvan pastoral and English anxiety about deforestation shows "the ways in which writers transformed pastoral, a well-worn literary genre, to register and negotiate the historical and environmental anxieties the English held toward their woodland regions."³⁸ This connection between the real woods and their instantiation within the genre of sylvan pastoral is the literal mode of reading that Shannon defends. As Theis

³⁶ Laurie Shannon, *The Accommodated Animal: Cosmopolitanism in Shakespearean Locales*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2012, 2-3.

³⁷ Shannon 5.

³⁸ Jeffrey Theis, *Writing the Forest in Early Modern England: A Sylvan Pastoral Nation*, Ann Arbor: Duquesne University Press, 2009, 1.

puts it, "The forest ultimately cannot be contained or commodified. There is always something physically and symbolically left in reserve"³⁹ At its best, ecocriticism combines attention to the natural world as metaphor and attention to the material substrate, the "something" that metaphor cannot quite obliterate.

Such an approach reaps particular reward at a time when threats from, as well as the threats to, the natural world were newly made clear by changes in the agricultural system that marked the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in conjunction with widespread exploration and colonization by European powers. Indeed, recent scholarship suggests that England was beginning to change its views on nature in the early modern period as a proto-environmentalist discourse emerged. As Ken Hiltner argues, "while not all pastoralists were budding environmentalists, the evolution of the mode points to the ways in which writers adapt established literary forms to engage environmental issues."⁴⁰ Like Shannon, Theis, and Hiltner, I argue that environmental thought emerges through the adaptation of traditional literary genres, and the development of new ones: not only pastoral and its cousin, georgic, but adage, satire, beast fable, popular pamphlet, and fisherman's manual. But I am less willing to look beyond or set aside the instrumentalizing relations that structured such genres, and their material production, circulation, and consumption in print. Use is fundamental to early modern English ecology and early modern English literature, which is one reason that particular foodstuffs - the acorn, the sheep, and the fish - become metaphors for the material book and its effect upon the world.

³⁹ Theis, 41.

⁴⁰ Ken Hiltner, *What Else is Pastoral?*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011.

That conviction locates my research at the increasingly busy intersection of book history and the environmental humanities. Joshua Calhoun's *The Nature of the Page: Poetry, Papermaking, and the Ecology of Texts in Renaissance England* examines Renaissance texts and the paper on which they are printed as "legible ecologies that record the environmental negotiations of people and things, of humans, humanists, and nonhumans."⁴¹ Building on work on the materiality of the parchment page such as Sarah Kay's *Animal Skins and the Reading Self in Medieval Latin and French Bestiaries*, Calhoun argues for the importance of "textual negotiation as an ecopoetic motif."⁴² Calhoun claims that "sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writers express frustration, surprise, impatience, and inventiveness as they confront the affordances of various ecological materials in textual form."⁴³ I like Calhoun's focus on the ways in which ecological materials manifest within and as texts, because much ecocritical work threatens to elide ecological thought with the metaphor of the text as ecology. For example, in the recent *Premodern Ecologies in the Modern Literary Imagination*, edited by Vin Nardizzi and Tiffany Jo Werth, the editors argue that "the circulation of texts, habits of thought, and architectural styles" is "a social and ecological template that settlers transferred to new environments by means of rhetorical translation and physical transportation."⁴⁴ Although valuable in its own right, study of the circulation of texts must be distinguished from study of the circulation of books, and therefore of

⁴¹ Joshua Calhoun, *The Nature of the Page: Poetry, Papermaking, and the Ecology of Texts in Renaissance England*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020, 1.

⁴² Calhoun, 2.

⁴³ Calhoun, 2.

⁴⁴ Vin Nardizzi and Tiffany Jo Werth, "Introduction. Oecologies: Engaging the World, from Here" in Vin Nardizzi and Tiffany Jo Werth, eds, *Premodern Ecologies in the Modern Literary Imagination*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019, 5.

paper, animal skin, the oak gall that makes up ink, and the other material elements that underlie the text. I argue in this dissertation that it is precisely the physicality of the individual book, its ineradicable materiality within the archive, its corruptibility, and of course its price both in terms of its exchange value and the animal lives that have been sacrificed in its making, that allows it to become a figure for the struggle of maintaining life upon an often-inhospitable earth. The idea of going back to the beginning brings with it an uncomfortable reminder of the wastefulness of the present. The past, for all that it is endlessly reusable as grist for the narrative mill, reminds us of the many losses (of life, of time, of empathy, of resources, and of opportunity) that have led to the present.

Chapter I. Enough of the Oak

According to Desiderius Erasmus's *Adagia*, the sixteenth-century Dutch humanist's massive and influential compilation of proverbs and sayings from antiquity, *Satis Quercus*, "Enough of the Oak," is "[a]n old adage, aimed at those who have left behind a squalid way of life [victu sordido] and proceeded to a more polished and wealthier one."⁴⁵ Punning on the sordid realities of acorn-eating, Erasmus describes the acorn as a *victus sordidus*, a base way of life or a dirty food. *Victus* means both a way of life and the food that sustains that life. For Erasmus, the abandonment of this *victus* heralds the beginning of history, civility, and civilization: "early men, rough and wild [*rudes atque inculti*] as they were, abandoned the habit of living on acorns as soon as Ceres showed them the use of grain." To eat acorns is to be *incultus*, uncultivated and uncultivating. Contemplating the fact that acorns were served as a dessert among certain peoples in Pliny's time, Erasmus dismisses the taste for such "sweetmeats" as a fitting accompaniment to the use of urine as toothpaste. But however uncompromising his views on acorns as food, Erasmus's appreciation of their proverbial significance is more nuanced. Within the same essay, he goes on to note that "The proverb is not inapplicable to those who leave behind the fine old-fashioned virtues and take up with the behaviour and outlook of their times, beginning to copy the ways of modern folk."⁴⁶ To have had "enough of the oak" might therefore be a step toward civility or a lapse from virtue. For a writer who has devoted himself to collecting the fragmentary remains

⁴⁵ All quotations are from Desiderius Erasmus, *Collected Works of Erasmus: Adages*, trans. Margaret T. Phillips, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982, 320.

⁴⁶ Erasmus, *Collected Works*, 320.

of ancient learning and persuading others of their value, it is a telling ambiguity. Erasmus, like countless other writers from antiquity through the early modern period, encodes in the figure of the acorn a profound ambivalence towards the past, and towards the present. Leaving acorns behind involves a fall into history, out of the virtues of time immemorial and into the specificity of a particular present — yet the unfallen, prehistoric state evokes disgust as well as nostalgia. Acorns are squalid, the food of rough and wild men, but they are also analogous to ancient virtue. Disgusting, insufficient, noble, and old-fashioned, acorns make sympathy with the past difficult but compel admiration for its integrity. There is in the acorn an entire way of life, violent, off-putting, dangerous, but unspoiled by the extravagances of modern existence.

As the *Oxford English Dictionary* suggests, in English the very word “acorn” straddles the boundary between wilderness and civilization. Etymologically, “The word perhaps originally denoted wild fruit, i.e. fruit to be collected, as distinguished from cultivated fruit to be harvested (compare the apparent earlier association of the base of *acre*, *n.* with unenclosed land), and was thence applied to the fruit of mast-bearing trees.⁴⁷” But its English spelling and pronunciation were shaped by association with the word “corn,” meaning grain, and thus with the emergence of agriculture. William Turner, in 1551, suggested in his *Herball* an etymological connection between “corn” and “Acorn”: “The oke whose fruite we call an Acorn, or an Eykorn, that is the corn or fruit of an Eyke.”⁴⁸ At least for Turner, the acorn’s edibility was intrinsic in its name. Yet “corn” here too refers to a particular kind of edible grain or seed, one that has

⁴⁷ “acorn, n.” OED, accessed 10/16/18

⁴⁸ OED, accessed 07/23/18.

superseded the acorn and for which it can only be a pale substitute. As *An herbal for the Bible* put it, “It is a mere folly, when we have Corn, still to eat Acorns.”⁴⁹ This etymological confusion bespeaks a much older and more widespread sense of ambivalence toward acorns and those who were imagined to have eaten them.

For in numerous classical, medieval, and early modern accounts, the prehistoric Golden Age ends with the beginning of agriculture. The precise reason it ends differs from tale to tale, and the precise allocation of blame depends on the teller’s understanding of the relationship between humans and nature. Perhaps nature failed humans by stinting its generosity, perhaps humans betrayed nature’s trust, or perhaps it was a mutual failure, with small acts of withholding and greed on either side culminating in the systematized exploitation of the earth. But the end of the Golden Age is always marked by the cultivation of grain and the abandonment of acorns and other scavenged fruit and nuts. Initiating an exploitative relationship to the land, the turn from acorns to wheat captures in two foodstuffs the crux of the problem of agriculture itself. On the one hand, hunger and suffering attend a life of acorn-gathering, although at least these ills are distributed equally. On the other hand, agriculture is a fragile and often inequitable system. It involves a great expense of labor by one portion of society, frequently on behalf of another, to wrest sustenance from natural resources, even at the risk of depleting them. The fact that both approaches may end in hunger and lost labor only makes more poignant the cataclysmic upheavals and disasters that await agricultural endeavors

⁴⁹ *An herbal for the Bible*, EEBO, <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/A48734.0001.001>, accessed 07/23/18.

The taste of the acorn thus depends entirely on the knowledge one brings to it: knowledge of other, better foods, but also knowledge of other ways of life, better or worse. The acorn endures; the human palate changes. Francis Bacon explains the adage “*Satis quercus*” by pointing out that “Acorns were good, till Bread was found.”⁵⁰ According to one early modern medical treatise, the acorn, bitter and tannic, shares a “rough taste” with “Apples... and Galls,” but it is often described in writings on the Golden Age as ambrosial.⁵¹ Their state of blissful ignorance allows the people of the Golden Age to enjoy their meager food: because they know nothing else, they desire nothing more. This ignorance is, besides acorns, the most important thing they abandon when they enter into history. The jaded modern palate knows what it is missing, unable to find luxury in mere sufficiency. To have escaped the acorn is to be in constant fear of having to go back to it, forced by the failure of the land to turn to a food no longer palatable to sophisticated tastes.

For that reason, as its mention in the *Adagia* suggests, the acorn is a node for general ambivalence about history and human progress across the classical, medieval, and early modern periods. But it has a particular relation to literature and the role of the poet in society. The ambivalence it encodes is not just an uncertainty about the nature of the good life, but a pressing doubt about the relative worth of natural ignorance and poetic knowledge. Hence, according to Servius, Virgil’s fourth-century commentator, its preeminent position at the opening of the Roman poet’s *Eclogues*. For Servius, the

⁵⁰ *The essays, or councils, civil and moral, of Sir Francis Bacon, Lord Verulam, Viscount St. Alban with a table of the colours of good and evil*, EEBO, <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/A48734.0001.001>, accessed 07/20/18.

⁵¹ *Thirteen books of natural philosophy*, EEBO, <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/A48734.0001.001>, accessed 07/23/18.

first line of Virgil's first *Eclogue* is a metaphorical evocation of the generous and inclusive literary economy of the Golden Age, contrasted with the current, chaotic system of selective patronage for poets. Tityrus, the stand-in for Virgil, lies under a beech:

an acorn-bearing tree, which was a source of food: for formerly men fed on acorns, and that's where the word "beech" [*fagus*] comes from, from φαγεῖν, "to eat." This means: you lie under the shadow of a beech in your fields, keeping your possessions, which feed you, just as mortals were formerly fed by acorns.⁵²

quasi sub arbore glandifera, quae fuit victus causa: antea enim homines glandibus vescebantur, unde etiam fagus dicta est ἀπὸ τοῦ φαγεῖν. hoc videtur dicere: iaces sub umbra fagi in agris tuis, tuas retentans possessiones, quibus aleris, sicut etiam glandibus alebantur ante mortales.

His situation under the acorn-scattering beech tree allows Tityrus the luxury of "wooing the woodland Muse on slender reed" and "teach[ing] the woods to re-echo "fair Amaryllis"—a miniature recreation of the Golden Age.⁵³ Yet the comparison is inexact. The acorn is a *victus*, a food and a way of life, alien to poetry and to the written word. As Servius no doubt knows, the acorn-eating age was, according to most classical writers, pre-literate—and even, according to Horace, pre-linguistic. It was an age of radical innocence, before technology and agriculture, but also before that peculiar form of knowing called poetry. Tityrus's pastoral recreation of acorn-eating is only a pose, precisely the sort of artifice unknown to its actual practitioners.

For writers otherwise as different as Ovid and Boethius, the state of not-knowing was precisely what made the Golden Age golden, as well as so remote and

⁵² My translation. Maurus Servius Honoratus, *Commentary on the Eclogues of Virgil*, Eclogue 1, 1, Perseus Digital Library, accessed December 26 2017.

⁵³ All quotations and translations of the *Eclogues* are from Virgil, *Eclogues. Georgics. Aeneid: Books 1-6*, translated by H. Rushton Fairclough, revised by G. P. Goold, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1916.

unimaginable. Ovid's Golden Age humans, as a corollary of their ignorance of boat-building and lack of desire to travel, "knew of nothing beyond their shores", "nullaque mortales praeter sua litora norant" (I.96).⁵⁴ The placement of "norant" at the end of the line is echoed by Boethius in his description of the Golden Age's sober diet: "they didn't know how to mix Bacchus's gifts with liquid honey," "non Bacchica munera norant / liquido confundere melle" (2.m5).⁵⁵ Chaucer took this intertextuality one step farther when, in his poem "The Former Age", based on Boethius, he included the line "Unknowen was the quern and ek the melle" (6), a line that echoes the meaning of "norant" and the sound of "melle" from Boethius.⁵⁶ It also echoes Boethius's meaning, tying the Golden Age's ignorance about the preparation and consumption of food to a broader ignorance about luxury and modern customs. It is precisely in the almost unbearable knowingness of Chaucer's interlingual pun and allusion that between the present and the Golden Age is felt.⁵⁷ The Golden Age's not-knowing provides a theme on which poets build extravagant and increasingly complicated homages to the simplicity of the past. There can be no poetry fed by the acorn but only poetry about and after it, because poetry is a symptom of society's complicated, compromised, post-agricultural state.

⁵⁴ All citations are from Ovid, *Metamorphoses, Volume I: Books 1-8*, translated by Frank Justus Miller, revised by G. P. Goold, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1916.

⁵⁵ All citations and translations are from Boethius. *Theological Tractates. The Consolation of Philosophy*, translated by H. F. Stewart, E. K. Rand, S. J. Tester, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973.

⁵⁶ All citations are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2008.

⁵⁷ As Andrew Galloway puts it, "this past is defined predominantly by what it is *not yet*." Andrew Galloway, Chaucer's "Former Age" and the Fourteenth-Century Anthropology of Craft: The Social Logic of a Premodernist Lyric" *ELH* Vol. 63, No. 3 (Fall, 1996), 536.

But poetry about the acorn also tends to reveal—by means of poetry’s own compromised, complicated ecology—the constant possibility of ecological calamity within the modern world. A seed that stands for the almost unimaginable changes that have brought the present into being—for changes in taste, in custom, in technology, in economic and class structures, and in gender relations, in early modern England as in classical Rome—the acorn is a catalyst for reflection about where a society came from and where it is going. It is also a figure for change in itself, not only because, as a seed, it contains within it the propensity to change and grow, but because its actual and its metaphorical value is so unstable. The acorn is at once a signifier of paradisiacal ease and of unbearable hardship, the food of the blissfully happy Golden Age and the food of last resort in an early modern England wracked by political, religious, and environmental disasters. To early modern readers and writers, the acorn serves as a potent and volatile emblem of ambivalence toward the past and anxiety about the present and future, whether one’s own or that of humanity as a whole.

The Acorn on One’s Shores

The Golden Age of classical and medieval literature is always the same in its incidentals: acorns, shores that form the bound of human knowledge, an unbroken earth. Yet the wide array of attitudes adopted toward it, from Ovid’s elaborate idyll of miraculous natural occurrences to Juvenal’s biting condemnations of early man’s hygiene and intellect, show these incidentals to be anything but obvious tokens of the age’s superiority to the present. Ovid’s Golden Age is the most Golden of them all. He describes humans at peace with each other and with the earth and implies that

agriculture is war waged with the earth, as if both war and agriculture fall under the umbrella of compulsion.

There was no need at all of armed men, for nations, secure from war's alarms, passed the years in gentle ease. The earth herself, without compulsion, untouched by hoe or plowshare, of herself gave all things needful. And men, content with food which came with no one's seeking, gathered the arbuté fruit, strawberries from the mountain-sides, cornel-cherries, berries hanging thick upon the prickly bramble, and acorns fallen from the spreading tree of Jove [*quae deciderant patula Iovis arbore glandes*]. (1.99)⁵⁸

The peace of the Golden Age is idleness, ease, a lack of force. The food comes “with no one's seeking.” For Ovid, acorns and grains grow together in this golden age. The earth gives early humans all the foods it can grow, granting it freely, “of herself,” with no stimulus from agricultural implements. Ovid's Golden Age ends when the seasons as we know them begin. The routine change in weather forces humans into providence and foresight, introducing a system in which excess balances shortage.

Ovid's Golden Age is supported by an earth very different from the one to be found in his own time, characterized by botanical and agricultural miracles: “Streams of milk and streams of sweet nectar flowed, and yellow honey was distilled from the verdant oak” (1.99). Nature was once unrecognizably different in its workings. The causality of natural processes, the fact that milk comes from mammals, honey from the work of bees, is shown to be a historical development, an evolution, a fall. How could progress happen when there was no point to labor, when the products that we now associate with human or animal labor sprung from the earth itself? Perhaps it is for this reason that “No pine tree felled in the mountains had yet reached the flowing waves to

⁵⁸ All citations are from Ovid, *Metamorphoses, Volume I: Books 1-8*, translated by Frank Justus Miller, revised by G. P. Goold, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1916.

travel to other lands: human beings only knew their own shores.” If there were meant to be ships in the Golden Age, they too would have sprung from the earth. But as it is, pine trees and foreign peoples go unmolested. Ecological exploitation and the subjugation of other peoples to exploit their resources are linked in this image of the pine tree-ship, still in its tree form, still moored to its mountain.

Boethius was deeply influenced by Ovid’s vision of primordial ease, which he contrasted with both the excessive idleness and the acquisitive drive of his present:

*felix nimium prior aetas
contenta fidelibus aruis
nec inerti perdit luxu,
facili quae sera solebat
ieiunia soluere glande. (2.m5)*

The former age was very happy
Content with faithful fields
Not lost in idle luxury,
When hunger was easily sated
At need by the acorn.⁵⁹

The Latin *felix*, like the English “happy,” means both lucky and, therefore, glad. The happiness of the Golden Age is dependent on chance, and therefore all too easily lost. The transition between the former age and the current one is characterized by a change in humans’ relationship to labor, the beginning of the desire not for satisfaction but for “gain”: “fiercer now than Etna’s fires / Burns the hot lust for gain.” The gathering of excess resources allows the beginning of trade, which entails the breaking down of the Golden Age’s borders, and allows people to become “strangers,” to have a relationship to a land that is not their own:

Not yet did they cut deep waters with their ships,
Nor seeking trade abroad

⁵⁹My translation, with reference to H. F. Stewart et al.

Stand strangers on an unknown shore.

The “hot lust for gain” can only belong to the modern world, which moves from the short-term cycle of need and satiation toward opportunities to amass resources.

Even in Ovid’s and Boethius’s glowing accounts, there is something uneasy in the human relationship to acorns, in the idea of an economy based entirely on chance.

Lucretius imagines acorns as a food fitted to, and increasing, the natural toughness of early humans. Their diet, largely made up of acorns, was “hard but amply sufficient for poor mortals” (6.945).⁶⁰ This hard diet changed those who ate it:

And the race of men at that time was much hardier on the land, as was fitting inasmuch as the hard earth had made it: it was built up within with bones larger and more solid, fitted with strong sinews throughout the flesh, not such as easily to be mastered by heat or cold or strange food or any ailment of the body. Through many lustres of the sun rolling through the sky they passed their lives after the wide-wandering fashion of wild beasts. (6.925-935)

This wandering life of beasts (*volgivago vitam... more ferarum*) involved accepting the gifts the earth created on its own accord, rather than forcing crops from it. This meant that there was constant danger that these resources would prove insufficient, just as the excess of resources can sometimes threaten modern humans’ health: “In those days again, it was lack of food that drove fainting bodies to death; now contrariwise it is the abundance that overwhelms overeating” (*tum penuria deinde cibi languentia leto / membra dabat, contra nunc rerum copia mersat*. 6.1007-8). This phrase, *rerum copia*, lies somewhere between “abundance of things” and “variety of things.” The older state

⁶⁰ All quotations and translations are from Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, translated by W. H. D. Rouse. Revised by Martin F. Smith, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1924.

lacked both abundance and variety. All it could offer was sufficiency, and not even always that.

As in most evocations of acorn diets, this way of life ends with the acorn being abandoned in favor of grain. Lucretius, typically, has a scientific explanation for this:

the pattern of sowing and the beginning of grafting first came from nature herself the maker of all things, since berries and acorns falling from trees in due time produced swarms of seedlings underneath; and this also gave them the fancy to insert shoots in the branches and to plant new slips in the earth all over the fields. (1361-9)

In other words, acorns modeled for humans their own supplanting. In doing so, they also supplied the hint for landscape alteration—and, with the institution of new crops, the hatred of acorns began, “*sic odium coepit glandis*” (1416). The acorn is a seed of thought itself, a catalyst of change. Once humans understand what a seed is and what it does, they are ready for agriculture: they have grasped the essential. And with this first change, the disdain for the old creeps in. The acorn, which made agriculture possible, is abandoned in disgust, for other seeds that will lead to a variety and abundance of different crops.

This hatred of the old, this enchantment with new possessions, is essential to humanity after Lucretius’s Golden Age. It is the reason the Golden Age can never return, because humans are addicted to trade and war. As Lucretius puts it:

Therefore mankind labours always in vain and to no purpose, consuming its days in empty cares, plainly because it does not know the limit of possession, and how far it is ever possible for real pleasure to grow and this little by little has carried life out into the deep sea, and has stirred up from the bottom the great billows of war. (1430-35)

Vain labor and unlimited possession cause modern unhappiness. Taking to the sea is both a metaphorical way of thinking about the tumult and the risk of desiring things,

and a literal corollary of the desire to expand and to own that comes with modernity. War and trade come of the failure to be satisfied; they stem from desire for more. Yet the comparatively peaceful state of acorn-gathering is not, for Lucretius, idyllic. Living with bare sufficiency, leading a life that sustains itself off the bare minimum, is almost more than the human organism can handle. It makes humans hard, and even beastlike, and eventually kills them. Hunger is what humans die of in Lucretius's Golden Age.

For Lucretius, as in some degree for all the writers discussed above, acorns erode humanity. Finding acorns appetizing means taking on animality, becoming like the animals who live off them. Boethius, who praised the acorn as the food of the Golden Age, also calls upon it to reveal the bestial inhumanity of men transformed to animals. Describing the effect of Circe's potions on Ulysses's men, Boethius writes that "the sailors had drunk of her cups, and now had turned from food of corn to husks and acorns, food of swine."⁶¹ Although the men are transformed into a menagerie of different animals, it is in their turn to acorns, "the food of swine", that their animality reveals itself and finds its expression.⁶² The connection between acorns and swine runs deep; in Plato's *Republic*, Socrates imagines founding a city full of people who live moderately. Creating a menu for this city, he mentions berries, chickpeas, and, finally,

⁶¹ Translation by W.V. Cooper, ed. Israel Golancz, *The Temple Classics*, J.M. Dent and Company London, 1902.

⁶² For an insightful reading of the religious and moral connotations of Circe's cup, see Karen Raber, "Fluid Mechanics: Shakespeare's Subversive Liquors" in David B. Goldstein and Amy L. Tigner, *Culinary Shakespeare: Staging Food and Drink in Early Modern England*, Ann Arbor: Duquesne University Press, 2016.

acorns.⁶³ Unimpressed, Glaucon replies, “If you were founding a city of pigs, Socrates, what other fodder than this would you provide?”⁶⁴

Chaucer’s “The Former Age,” a translation of Boethius’s Golden Age passage, picks up on acorns’ complicated status in Boethius’s text. Chaucer describes life in the ““former age” as both blissful and unbearably hard, and scarcely human in either state.

The poem begins:

A blisful lyf, a paisible and a swete,
Ledden the peple in the former age.
They helde hem payed of the fruites that they ete,
Which that the feldes yave hem by usage;
They ne were not forpampred with outrage,
Unknowen was the quern and ek the melle;
They eten mast, hawes, and swich pounage,
And dronken water of the colde welle.
Yit nas the ground nat wounded with the plough,
But corn up-sprong, unsowe of mannes hond,
The which they gnodded and eete nat half ynough. (1-19)

The tone of Chaucer’s poem is difficult to pin down. It is full of turns: this way of life was “blisful”, yet humans ate “pounage”, “the food of pigs.”⁶⁵ This means that the ground was not “wounded with the plough” but gave food freely, of its own accord. But not enough for humans who “eete nat half ynough.” Karl Steel describes the poem as an “unflinching accounts of the misery humans would experience if they sought to harm nothing.”⁶⁶ It exposes the vulnerability of care, showing the inevitability of being harmed in an attempt not to harm anything. But Steel also describes life in the golden

⁶³ Plato, *Republic*, translated by Paul Shorey. William Heinemann Ltd. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1969, 2:372d. All quotations are from this edition.

⁶⁴ 372e

⁶⁵ Riverside n7.

⁶⁶ Karl Steel, “A Fourteenth-Century Ecology” in *Rethinking Chaucerian Beasts*, ed. Carolynn Van Dyke, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, 186.

age as “a life of wonder and uncertainty”, in which there is “a kind of hope” that “may be a hope that erases the human altogether.”⁶⁷ Although Steel is right to find this wretched sort of hope made most explicit in Chaucer’s poem, it is often present in descriptions of the Golden Age. Acorn-eating is always ideal and impossible, unimaginable and almost inhuman. There is in it “a kind of hope” based in forgetting and cutting away humanity and its technologies, its arts, and its tastes. The alternative is one of almost boundless harm: to the land and the things that live on it, to other humans, and to oneself. To turn from acorns is to allow oneself to be dissatisfied, to want more than the bare minimum, to want more than the land naturally grants, to want what belongs to other people. On an acorn diet, one’s body might suffer and even die from lack of food, but there is so much more to die from once hunger is (at least for a while and for some) banished by modern agriculture. The turn from acorns is the turn to war, to trade, to colonialism, and to the endless desire for gain. It is a turn from precarious ease to the rigors of making a living in a world that cannot support its populace - and in the early modern period, that turn invariably transpires under the aegis of Virgil.

Under the beech: beginning to know

Virgil, whose great topic was labor, describes its origin in the beginning of hardship, when the earth began to deny what it once gave freely:

First yellow Ceres taught the world to plough
When woods no longer could afford enough
Wild crabs and acorns, and Dodona lent
Her mast no more:

⁶⁷ Steel "Ecology" 194-5.

[cum iam glandes atque arbuta sacrae
deficerent silvae et victum Dodona negaret]
then miseries were sent
To vex the art of tillage: blastings killed
The stalks, and fruitless thistles in the field
Prevailing spoiled the corn⁶⁸

Dodona denies, *negaret*, her former gifts, and this lack prompts agriculture, the topic of the *Georgics*. Acorns allowed humans a brief time of idleness before labor began. Since then “all things conquered be / By restless toil, and hard necessity [*Labor omnia vincit improbus et duris urgens in rebus egestas*].” *Egestas*, for Virgil, “indigence, extreme poverty, necessity, want,” begins when the natural world stops giving its gifts of food, when Dodona denies her mast.⁶⁹

Virgil is the poet most implicated in the story of the move from acorns to grain. His *Georgics* described the beginning and proper course of agriculture and, perhaps as a consequence, his first work, the *Eclogues*, was explained and taught in the Renaissance as starting with a metaphorical evocation of a Golden Age diet. The eclogue is a genre in which food plays a large part. Although the classical and Early Modern eclogue often ends with a sunset, it is frequently interrupted by details about a picnic or by offers of food. In Virgil’s first eclogue, this focus on food and the sharing of food is expanded into a discussion of the inequitable distribution of resources in the agrarian economy. At the beginning of this poem, the shepherds Meliboeus and Tityrus discuss their different fates. Meliboeus has lost his land and must abandon Arcadia with a flock of sheep that will probably sicken and die before he can establish himself once again, while Tityrus

⁶⁸ All quotations are from *Virgil's Georgicks Englished. by Tho: May Esqr*, 1628. EEBO, <http://name.umd.umich.edu/A14500.0001.001>, accessed 07/20/18.

⁶⁹ “ēgestas , ātis, f. egeo,” *Lewis and Short*, Oxford. Clarendon Press, 1879. Dodona, as in, the Dodonian oaks at Dodona, Jupiter’s shrine.

has been granted leave to stay by his patron and is about to have a comfortable picnic under a beech tree. Meliboeus, with admiration and a touch of envy, describes Tityrus's comfortable position as one of ease and carefree artistic endeavor:

Tityre, tu patulae recubans sub tegmine fagi
silvestrem tenui musam meditaris avena:
nos patriae finis et dulcia linquimus arva;
nos patriam fugimus: tu, Tityre, lentus in umbra
formosam resonare doces Amaryllida silvas. (1-5)

You, Tityrus, lie under the canopy of a spreading beech, wooing the woodland Muse on slender reed, but we are leaving our country's bounds and sweet fields. We are outcasts from our country; you, Tityrus, at ease beneath the shade, teach the woods to re-echo "fair Amaryllis."⁷⁰

The reigning economic system is one of chaos mitigated by patronage for the lucky few. His fortunate situation allows Tityrus the luxury of "wooing the woodland Muse on slender reed" and "teach[ing] the woods to re-echo "fair Amaryllis" (5). Tityrus, describing the fruits of his poetic patronage, lists apples, chestnuts, and cheese. These foods are the wages that Tityrus receives for his poetry, and they are what allow him to keep producing his songs. If one takes him to be a stand-in for Virgil, as Renaissance commentators invariably do, the poet here dramatizes his own complicity in an inequitable system, explaining how it is that he is free to spend his time writing and reciting when others must labor for their food. The countryside of the eclogue is not naturally abundant, welcoming, or capable of sustaining life in itself. Rather, it is the site for a haphazard economy, one that cannot provide sustenance for all and in which a shepherd can only make a living by the whim of a patron.

⁷⁰ All quotations and translations of the *Eclogues* are from Virgil, *Eclogues. Georgics. Aeneid: Books 1-6*, translated by H. Rushton Fairclough, revised by G. P. Goold, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1916.

Servius, Virgil's fourth-century commentator, explains the first line, Meliboeus's greeting, "*Tityrus, you, lying under the canopy of a beech,*" as a metaphor for Tityrus's economic security:

TITYRE TU PATULAE R. SUB T. FAGI inducitur pastor quidam iacens sub arbore securus et otiosus dare operam cantilenae, alter vero quomodo cum gregibus ex suis pellitur finibus [...] quod autem eum sub fago dicit iacere, allegoria est honestissima, quasi sub arbore glandifera, quae fuit victus causa: antea enim homines glandibus vescebantur, unde etiam fagus dicta est ἀπὸ τοῦ φαγεῖν. hoc videtur dicere: iaces sub umbra fagi in agris tuis, tuas retentans possessiones, quibus aleris, sicut etiam glandibus alebantur ante mortales.

"*Tityrus, you, lying under the canopy of a beech.*" A certain shepherd is introduced lying under a tree, safe and idle, to labor at a song, but another one is thrown off his land with his herds. [...] When he says that this man lies under a beech, this is an extremely creditable [*honestissima*] symbol for an acorn-bearing tree, which was a source of food: for formerly men fed on acorns, and that's where the word "beech" [*fagus*] comes from, from *φαγεῖν*, "to eat." This means: you lie under the shadow of a beech in your fields, keeping your possessions, which feed you, just as mortals were formerly fed by acorns.⁷¹

For Servius, Tityrus lies under the shade of a pun, under a canopy of food, in token of both the leisure and the resources that go with his well-supported life. The tree is metaphorically food, the beech tree, *fagus*, from *φαγεῖν*, "to eat" in Greek. Tityrus's idle song is possible because he has something to eat, because he has "to eat" in tree form. But beyond that interlingual pun, a reach by any standard other than Servius's, the reference to a former age in which humans were fed by acorns reminds the reader of a state other than and prior to the disparities in wealth and lifestyle that the eclogue dramatizes. The two shepherds, one well-fed and one in dire need of food, would not be in their different situations if acorns still fed men.

⁷¹ My translation. Maurus Servius Honoratus, *Commentary on the Eclogues of Virgil*, Eclogue 1, 1, Perseus Digital Library, accessed December 26 2017.

As Servius suggests, Virgil's eclogue is about finding security in a cruel and inequitable system, a position that can be characterized as good fortune or as complicity in the system's abuses. Despite a systemic collapse in the rural economy that forces Meliboeus off his land, by the grace of his patron, Tityrus keeps his position among his possessions "as if" they are still able to feed him and sustain his existence. The failure of the pastoral landscape to sustain life equally and comfortably is underlined by a metaphorical reversion to a previous failure, the failure of nature to feed humans with its acorns or of humans to be satisfied with such food. The Golden Age is present only in glimpses, as a buried metaphor for patronage, within a world that abandoned the Golden Age mode of life in favor of a failing system.

Servius's reading had an enduring appeal: of the annotated editions of Virgil in the collection of Yale's Beinecke Library, every one retains the gist of Servius's reference to acorns.⁷² And the illustrations to early modern print editions of the

⁷² Beinecke MS 787, a 1450 "Lexicon on the works of Virgil after Servius", Beinecke 1971 +70, Jacobus Rubeus's 1475 *Opera*, Antonio Miscomini's 1486 *Opera*, Jean Petit's 1507 *Opera* (2005+176), Angelus Scinzenzeler's 1511 edition (Gnv60 +a472k), Robert Estienne's 1532 edition (Gnv60 +a472q), Johann Walder's 1534 edition, and Hieronymus Curio's 1544 edition (Gnv60 +a544). Servius's gloss also influenced other commentators who expanded on it or repeated it. For example, the commentator Ascensius glosses the line as "that is, you meditate, rejoicing in the fruits of your glandiferous tree", which, if anything, seems to take away the metaphorical element of Servius's reading and make it seem as though Tityrus is eating beechnuts throughout the encounter. ⁷² In *The Bucolics of Virgil Maro containing the context of words around the poetry for the support of beginners*, Hermanus Torrentinus gives an abbreviated version of Servius's etymology for "fagus:" "A beech is a glandiferous tree the fruit of which was once eaten. It comes from the Greek verb *phago*, which means to eat."⁷² Torrentinus's commentary was directed at very young beginners with no Greek; the Greek is transliterated into Latin, implying either that the imagined readership could not read Greek or that the press did not have Greek type. Even these beginners were told about the connection between beeches and eating, as though this explanation is necessary in order to understand the poem.

Eclogues frequently reproduced his attention to the tree and the shepherds' positions relative to it, one seated comfortably and the other standing to the side.⁷³ But for early modern English readers of Virgil, the significance of the acorn-bearing tree as a figure of innocence lost and knowledge gained appeared in very different guise: as an allegory of learning to read Virgil himself.

In 1512 and again in 1514, Wynkyn de Worde published an edition of the Latin text of Virgil's *Eclogues*, with a commentary. The copy of the first edition at the British Library, which is digitized on EEBO, has no surviving illustration. A copy of the 1514 edition, at the Bodleian, does. In this woodcut, a teacher holding a whip sits in a high chair, surrounded by students. Located inside rather than outside, showing readers rather than shepherds, highlighting acts of reading, explanation, and interpretation, this woodcut presents the eclogue as it was first encountered by readers in Tudor England, as a classroom text. De Worde used this woodcut repeatedly, in nearly all of his yearly editions of grammar books and other textbooks. In his definitive compilation of English woodcuts, Edward Hodnett laments that "the low artistic worth of most of the woodcuts, as well as the small percentage of books containing cuts specifically made to illustrate the text, and the much smaller number containing cuts that are neither importations nor copies of continental designs, would reduce the fruitfulness of any

⁷³ As Annabel Patterson points out in *Pastoral and Ideology*, Sebastian Brant carried out "illustration as exegesis", filling his woodblocks with details from the poems. Annabel Patterson, *Pastoral and Ideology: Virgil to Valéry*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987, 92. Brant's illustrations circulated both in other editions of Virgil's works, such as Angelus Scinzenzeler's 1511 edition, and in other contexts entirely. Carlo Ginzburg even finds one of the illustrations to the *Eclogues* reprinted in the sermons of Geiler von Kaisersberg as a representation of the wild hunt. Carlo Ginzburg, *The Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, tr. John and Anne C. Tedeschi, Baltimore: the Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983, 43.

quasi-aesthetic inquiry almost the vanishing point.”⁷⁴ The problem in other words (besides low artistic worth) is that English woodcuts are not original: they are endlessly recycled, constantly copied from each other and from abroad. Hodnett records six variations on this “miserably executed” schoolmaster woodcut in Caxton’s possession (which De Worde inherited), and finds more copies of it in the possession of Richard Pynson. From 1485, it was used to advertise textbooks and schoolboy editions of classical works such as (in 1485) Aesop. A 1505 version of this cut was, according to Hodnett, “the most used of all early English woodcuts.”⁷⁵ So in many ways this woodcut’s presence in De Worde’s edition of the eclogues is predetermined. De Worde was a printer of school texts, of which the Virgil was one. But that very predetermination makes inquiry about the woodcut fruitful in a different way than Hodnett imagines. By appearing instead of a version of the conventional illustration to Virgil’s first eclogue, it shifts the focus of interpretation, off the shepherds and the tree, to the classroom environment.

The accompanying commentary, not Servius’s but loosely based on it, makes the same connection as Servius between the beech tree and food: “at first the fruits of the beech were eaten, therefore from *fagus* to *fagin*, which means to eat.” But the woodcut does not bring these elements to prominence by emphasizing Tityrus and his secure position seated under a tree. Rather, it emphasizes the rather more precarious position of students sitting around the high chair of a teacher. The main structure is not a tree but a cathedra, a chair associated with authority and learning. The schoolchildren

⁷⁴ Edward Hodnett, *English woodcuts, 1480-1535*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973, vi.

⁷⁵ Hodnett 12.

sit not under a canopy of beech but under the fronds of a whip. The book is imagining its own reception in the readers at the foot of the schoolmaster. In their expressions (of concentration? Boredom? Pain?) the book presents a vision of labor and idleness that is distinct from, but perhaps related to, pastoral pursuits and problems. And it offers a version of a beginning, a version of the end of the Golden Age, that is suggestively like the one that Servius finds in Virgil's beech tree: innocent and ignorant plenty gives way to the rigors of knowledge acquisition. The *Eclogues* are poems for beginners about beginning, and as such it makes sense that the myth of the Golden Age should sneak in to complicate the idea of pedagogy. Pedagogy is always beginning again and always failing, always replacing what comes naturally with a complex schematics of knowledge and culture that comes to seem second nature. With knowledge comes an awareness of the failings in the system and perhaps a wish to have been educated better or at least differently, to have exchanged innocence for something more worthwhile. This illustration presents reading Virgil as a way of returning to - if not the - then a beginning.

Slimy Kempes: Poverty and Poetry in Early Modern England

The Tudor poet Alexander Barclay uses the acorn and its fellow Golden Age foods to highlight the need for societal change and to place the shepherd speakers in his eclogue at the beginning of history, in need of progress and better sustenance. Barclay was both a Doctor of Divinity and an irreverent satirist of church and state. His life and his poetry were marked by dissatisfaction with the status quo and a keen awareness of

being part of a moment of social and political change. Briefly exiled from England for his politics, he was mentioned in 1528 by an informer to Cardinal Wolsey as part of a group of apostate Franciscans in Cologne.⁷⁶ A decade later, back in England, he was “moving around the country stirring up trouble and speaking against the royal supremacy.”⁷⁷ By this time he had already written the poems for which he is still known. His *Eclogues* were probably written between 1509 and 1514, at which point they may have been printed separately and only retroactively compiled; no complete early edition survives.⁷⁸ Of Barclay’s five eclogues, two were based on Mantuan’s 1498 *Adulescentia*, and three on a work called *Miseriae Curialium* by Aeneas Sylvius, who would become Pope Pius II.⁷⁹ Whatever the order and beginning of the project, these eclogues are full of Barclay’s own opinions and concerns.⁸⁰ These concerns include social, economic, environmental, and poetic crises that are symbolized and come to a head in the sharing or withholding of a bottle.

For example, in Barclay’s fourth eclogue, “of the behaviour of rich men against poets,” also printed separately as *The Booke of Codrus and Minalcas*, Minalcas, a poor

⁷⁶ R. J. Lyall, “Alexander Barclay and the Edwardian Reformation 1548-52,” *The Review of English Studies* 20 (1969): 455. See also Antony J. Hasler, *Court poetry in late medieval England and Scotland: allegories of authority* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2010), 98.

⁷⁷ Lyall, “Edwardian Reformation,” 456.

⁷⁸ David Carlson claims that the separate editions of the fourth and fifth “are evidently derivative rather than authorized, reprints rather than first editions.” David Carlson, “Alexander Barclay and Richard Pynson: A Tudor Printer and His Writer”, *Anglia : Zeitschrift für englische Philologie* 113 (1995): 298.

⁷⁹ Alexander Barclay, *The eclogues of Alexander Barclay from the original edition by John Cawood*, ed. Beatrice White (London: Oxford University Press, 1928), lvii.

⁸⁰ For a study of Barclay’s changes and additions to his Latin sources, see John Richie Schultz, “The Method of Barclay’s Eclogues,” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 32 (1933): 549-571.

poet, explains to the wealthy Codrus that poets must eat well if they are to write well, or write at all: “without repast,” he asks, “who can indite or sing” (226)?⁸¹ In the course of this argument, Minalcas makes reference to Tityrus, a character in Virgil’s *Eclogues* understood in the Renaissance commentary tradition to stand for Virgil.⁸² Minalcas explains that Tityrus’s patron gave him “large giftes” that “gaue conforte to his minde.”(418). Without such patronage, poet-shepherds are thrown into such abject poverty that the muses themselves disdain them:

We other Shepherdes be greatly different,
Of common sortes, leane, ragged, and rent.
Fed with rude frowise, with quacham, or with crudd,
Or slimy kempes ill smelling of the mud,
Such rusty meates inblindet so our brayne,
That of our fauour the muses haue disdayne (421-426)

Minalcas claims that the quality of the food a person eats has an impact on the quality of the art that he produces; food changes the brain, blinding it with its rust and slime, leading the muses to disdain poor poets who are inevitably changed by the rough food they must eat to survive. There is terroir in poetry: it captures the tastes, feel, and smells of the food that sustained its author. Fed with “rusty meats,” these shepherds are, according to Minalcas’s logic, incapable of poetry. Yet here it is, and although it is a different sort of poetry from Tityrus’s, it is full of vibrancy and urgency, specific and acute in its expression of the ways in which it has been stunted by the circumstances of its own creation. Minalcas finds in his own uncertain situation and that of his fellows a historical difference from the comfort in which Tityrus-as-Virgil rests. Barclay is

⁸¹ All quotations are from White, *Alexander Barclay*.

⁸² David Scott Wilson-Okamura, *Virgil in the Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 62.

interested in delineating the feeling of being part of a generation that, for no fault of its own, reaps fewer gains within its chosen profession than past generations did, but thinks that this feeling, the awareness of difference that is also an awareness of being formed by imperfect circumstances into a less than perfect version of who one might otherwise have been, is part of the solution.

Barclay's first eclogue begins by reworking the beginning of Virgil's first eclogue, the one to which Minalcas makes reference, in which the shepherd Tityrus boasts about his patronage to the exiled Meliboeus. In Barclay's eclogue too, two shepherds meet to discuss the wretched state of the agrarian economy. But in contrast to the differing situations of Virgil's speakers, in Barclay's version both speakers are poor and overworked; there are no exceptions made for poets in the chaos of rural poverty. In Barclay's eclogues, unlike Virgil's, although the shepherds can talk about almost nothing else, food is hard to get, and, when one gets it, almost inedible. At the root of the agrarian economy, there is something rotten. The countryside seems to be falling in on itself, offering even (or, perhaps, especially) to poets nothing but "slimy kempes" to fuel their artistic endeavors. This poetry that describes itself as "inblindet with rusty meates" constantly returns to the importance of proper nourishment. Asked to perform by the wealthy Codrus, Minalcas begs him for food and, when that fails, for drink: "I pray thee Codrus (my whey is weake and thin) / Lend me thy bottell to drinke or I begin" (811-12). Codrus denies the request, saying that the sun does not shine so hard as to make it necessary for Minalcas to share his bottle and urging him to recite his poetry unrefreshed. Whatever is in the bottle, Minalcas believes it will improve his

song.⁸³ This desire for the bottle and the poetry that it makes possible runs throughout Barclay's eclogues, a constant reminder of the material basis of all artistic endeavor, the need to eat and drink, and to eat and drink well, before one can write. The bottle is not only a symbol of court patronage for poets, although it is that as well: it offers the possibility of an equal basis, of a material substrate that might, in an ideal world, foster rather than spoil a natural talent.

Cornix once lived in the city and was driven by its vices and a desire for rest to the countryside; "after labours and worldly busines," he "Concluded to liue in rest and quietnes" (143-4). Cornix insists in this eclogue that his present life is indeed easy and restful - if only compared to the pain and lost labor that characterize life at court. But even as he attempts to describe his life as comparatively idyllic, Cornix is contradicted by his own circumstances. He is hungry and dressed in rags ("his heare grewe through his hode," 146) and the speaker reveals that Cornix's only belongings are the ones that he is wearing, the wooden spoon in his hat and his wallet full of bread and cheese. It seems that Cornix's poverty is common to Barclay's shepherds. The other shepherd, Coridon, describes their condition as "dayly payne," "wretchyd labour," "greuous labour," and, simply, "pouerte". Coridon insists that theirs is a life in which anything gained is gained with difficulty. In fact, that is precisely why, he reveals, he wishes to leave for the city: "They rest, we labour," he says (345).

⁸³ That the bottle holds whey that is thick and strong as opposed to "weak and thin" seems unlikely due to the nature of whey; the implication seems to be that it holds something stronger, particularly given Minalcas's assurance elsewhere in the poem that he would be "apt to write & sing" if he had a "seller couched with bere, with ale or wine" (393).

Over the course of their conversation, Cornix dissuades Coridon from leaving, citing the unpleasantness, disorder, and risk that characterize life at court. Convinced, Coridon suggests they withdraw and adds that “yf ought more remayne / Thou mayst tel to morowe whan we tourne agayne” (1321-2). This dialogue has no end: it is the ongoing, circular conversation of two people who aren’t going anywhere, who always turn again to morrow, as if the morrow is a verb and a destination, both a way of moving and the place one is moving towards. The shepherd’s daily pain is a pain that is repeated every day. The phrase “tourne again” or “return again” comes up five times in this eclogue, each time at the end of the line and spoken by Cornix - until now. Even as Coridon accepts Cornix’s argument about the relative ease of a shepherd’s life and accepts that he must turn again, not leave and start over, he accepts his language too.

But it isn’t entirely true to say that Cornix wins the fight only with his arguments, if it even is an argument to state that what someone else perceives as labor is really rest. Coridon’s mind has been changed not only by his conversation with Cornix but, it turns out, in a more complicated and temporary way, by alcohol: “take vp thy bottell sone,” Cornix advises; “Lesse is the burthen nowe the drinke is done.”⁸⁴ Coridon does not leave for the city in search of rest; he eases his burden with drink, here, in the countryside, as he always does. Cornix’s possessions, all present here with him, consist not only of a wooden spoon, bread, and cheese, but of a bottle that, we are told, has

⁸⁴ The contents of this bottle too are left deliberately mysterious. In the English of Barclay’s time, like now, there is no clear distinction between two senses, both old enough to be attested in Old English sources, of “drink:” it can mean either any beverage or specifically an alcoholic one. The soporific and calming effects of the drink convince me that it is to be understood to be alcoholic, but at any rate it clearly acts upon the minds of the shepherds as a drug. “Drink, n.,” *OED*, accessed 09/03/2019.

worn down the fabric of his clothes. The contents of this bottle grant what rest can be achieved in this way of life. Carrying a bottle of “drinke” is a burden that can be allayed by drinking (“Lesse is the burthen nowe the drinke is done” (1324)) and the contents of the bottle allay the burdensome labor of shepherding. This poem lasts as long as the bottle does, until Coridon’s concerns are put to a temporary rest by the draining of his drink. Perhaps this dialog takes place every night while the shepherds turn to drink again, finding in it truth or forgetfulness and bursts of poetry and, especially, sleep. When Cornix claims that Coridon’s burden is lessened by the ingestion of drink and that tomorrow they will turn again, there is in both “burden” and “tourne” a poetic double meaning, a meaning of a refrain, of an ending that will be repeated. The consumption of this drink, the emptying of this bottle, is the theme and structuring principle of a poem that puts weight on the idea of both the comfort and the harm of repetition, on the possibility of lessening a burden by returning to it, but also perhaps of being lessened by it.

The description of the bottle hanging from Cornix’s side highlights its destructiveness: “A bottle his cote on the one side had torne, / For hanging there was nere a sunder worne.” (151-2). In the word “torne” at the end of the speaker’s line, there is also an echo of “tourne”, the promise of a perpetual return, a repetition of the same complaints under the same circumstances day after day. This damage is the result of repetition; it comes of being slowly worn down. This slow wearing is visible not only in the shepherds’ outer accoutrements, but in their skin itself; Cornix claims that his hands are “stiffe as a borde by worke continuall,”

My head all parched and blacke as any pan,
My beard like bristles, so that that a pliant leeke

With a little helpe may thrust me throw the cheeke,
And as a stockfishe wrinkled is my skinne,
Suche is the profite that I by labour winne. (235-46)

The shepherd's life is fundamentally unprofitable, and the only result of his labor is that it wears his body away, so that it can even be destroyed by vegetables, the shepherd's cheek pierced by a leek. The shepherd is too weak to eat - instead, he is placed in the position of food, consumed by his profession, partly preserved by suffering so that he resembles a dried cod or stockfish.

At the end of this poem, cataclysm still threatens, despite the small comforts of the dialog and bottle. A storm looms, one with potentially fatal effects: "My clothes be thin, my shepe be shorne newe, / Such storme might fall that both might after rewe," says Coridon. Yet, the shepherds seemingly survive the storm and, in the Third Eclogue, do indeed return, once again seeking rest. Coridon no longer hopes for a whole life of rest, instead taking it where he can, intermittently, in the cessation of labor and the consumption of alcohol:

After sore labour sweete rest is delectable,
And after long night day light is comfortable,
And many wordes requireth much drinke,
The throte wel washed, then loue the eyn to wink. (1-4)

This describes a cycle that seeks comfort from labor in drink, then speech, then rest, then day, which brings more labor: a cycle that is continually seeking respite from the very thing that promised comfort, a cycle that repudiates the past and is motivated by constant hope for the future. Speech itself requires drink, as though the poem and the bottle make each other necessary, and both are ultimately soporific.

Coridon drinks in order to utter many words but also in search of the rest he desires so intensely. "I drank to bedwarde (as is my common gise)", says Coridon. The Third Eclogue is precipitated, however, by the disturbance of rest. Coridon's sleep has been interrupted by a dream of being in court. Already practically a piece of preserved meat, in court he is served for dinner. He is attacked by the scullions, the kitchen workers: "Came some with whittels, some others with fleshhokes" (17). This dream serves to prove, to Cornix at least, that Coridon has fully internalized his stories of the court's iniquities. But to imagine a poor shepherd eaten alive at court is also to point to the reliance of the upper classes on the labor of the poor. Not only do "they rest, we labor," they eat, we are eaten. This scenario is a fantasy of abundance and excess: nothing is forbidden to courtiers' appetites, not even the flesh of their fellow men. But it is also a manifestation of the shepherds' fixation on food - by its scarcity, food has come to color Coridon's language and his dreams.

Paul Alpers argues that the quintessential pastoral figure, such as Melibee in Book 6 of the *Faerie Queene*, is "able to be a pastoral figure because he has been to court."⁸⁵ It is by leaving his pastoral life that the pastoral figure becomes fully convinced of its superiority. For Alpers, this is because pastoral "is essentially a mode of courtly and humanistic self-representation."⁸⁶ This paradigm is applicable to Cornix. Cornix is a courtier seeking respite from politics in the countryside. But Coridon, who can find no rest in the countryside because he has nightmares of court, offers a counterpoint to Cornix's placidity and his point of view. Barclay's poem depicts a

⁸⁵ Paul Alpers, *What Is Pastoral?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 193.

⁸⁶ Alpers, *Pastoral*, 194.

countryside economically and psychically drained by the city.⁸⁷ This pastoral is not so much concerned about the mores of the court as it is concerned about the court's effect on the rest of the country.⁸⁸ Barclay's eclogues differ in this particular from other, roughly contemporary refusal-of-court poems. Thomas Wyatt's speaker in "Mine own John Poynz," politely hints at the court's excess without identifying it either as excess or as specific to the court: "I cannot honour them that sets their part / With Venus and Bacchus all their life long."⁸⁹ John Skelton's speaker in *The Bowge of Court* is urged by Ryot to "make the mery, as other felowes done" because "This worlde is nothyng but ete, drynke and slepe, And thus with us good company to kepe (380-5)."⁹⁰ Less than pleased with this company, the speaker tries to escape but, although traumatized by the allegorical figures that assault him, does not reflect on the societal consequences of such merry-making. Barclay's speakers, on the other hand, take as their theme not only their

⁸⁷ This could be argued about Book 6 of the *Faerie Queene* as well, which shows the ultimate courtier Calidore reacting to both Melibee's words and Melibee's daughter with undisguised hunger: "Whylest thus he talkt, the knight with greedy eare / Hong still vpon his melting mouth attent; / Whose sensefull words empierst his hart so neare, / That he was rapt with double rauishment, / Both of his speach that wrought him great content, / And also of the obiect of his vew, / On which his hungry eye was alwayes bent" (VI.ix.26). Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. A. C. Hamilton, London: Longman, 2007.

⁸⁸ Kathryn Little argues that Barclay's poems owe their social conscience, not to the pastoral tradition, but to the medieval "plowman" tradition: "they use the shepherd speaker to attack corruption (as opposed to the 'Arcadian' or idealized mode, which is primarily interested in love)." Katherine C. Little, *Transforming Work: Early Modern Pastoral and Late Medieval Poetry*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013, 53.

⁸⁹ Thomas Wyatt, ed. W.S. Merwin, *The Essential Wyatt*, New York: The Ecco Press, 1989, 79.

⁹⁰ John Skelton, ed. Rev. Alexander Dyce, *The Poetical Works of John Skelton*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1862.

individual happiness or lack thereof or the moral implications of feasting as opposed to fasting, but the justice of a system in which the many labor so that the few can party.

The speakers of Barclay's *Eclogues* debate what to do in the absence of normality, at the end of an era, in the wreckage of systems (social, political, agricultural, economic) that, if they ever functioned, were never fair. The question of whether to go or stay seems impossible to decide, when even staying still involves a continual and restless return. Coridon is easy to convince, but seems unwilling to stay convinced, that his way of life is the easiest and least unpleasant. Once again, he asks his friend, "But tell me Cornix one thing or we departe, / On what maner life is best to set my harte?" (811-2). Cornix's answer is, of course, "Liue still a shepheard" (818) and Coridon a little morbidly replies, "To dye a shepheard established is my will" (820). Although he means that he will live a shepherd, to live a shepherd means to be particularly susceptible to dying. Minalcas mentions offhandedly in Eclogue Four that Cornix has died, and, while the suddenness and casualness of the revelation raise doubts that he may mean a different Cornix, the shepherds' way of life is so brutal that no one's death seems particularly unlikely. At least for Coridon, life as a shepherd seems to involve dreams of his own death. This way of life requires continually deciding to remain, to take up the burden again the next day then lessen it with drink.

This seems, at any rate, to be better than the alternative: to lack even a bottle to drink from before bed. Asked to perform by the wealthy Codrus, Minalcas begs for food and drink but is denied. Codrus is rich and selfish, or, in the words of the eclogue, rich "but" selfish: "by no meane would he depart with good" (13-14). Here, to depart is to part with, but it is also to share; Minalcas complains that "of thy bottell nought wilt thou

yet depart” (818). Codrus’s argument against sharing his drink is that the sun does not shine hard, and that Minalcas can hide from it in the shade. Weak and thin whey is enough to sustain the weak and thin shepherd, for now. Yet again, Barclay stages a scene of one shepherd telling another that he rests comfortably in the shade, ringing the changes of the first line of Virgil’s first eclogue with greater and greater savagery. Here, it is an excuse to deny charity to someone who asks for it. At least in the case of Cornix’s explanation to Coridon that what he takes for pain is actually ease, what he takes for labor is actually rest, this mystification occurs over the sharing of a bottle, and moreover of a bottle that helps enact this very transmutation of pain into pleasure. When Codrus refuses to share his bottle with Minalcas, he denies him and the reader a better poem, one better fed or at least watered than the one that comes of the “slimy kempes” Minalcas has eaten until now. He prevents a poem that pulls back from complete condemnation of the system, its criticism softened by the restful effects of drink. Codrus suggests what such a poem might look like when, weary of Minalcas’s complaints about rich men’s lack of culture, he asks him to “Talke of the bottell, let go the booke for nowe” (725). That’s “talk,” not “take” – he isn’t willing to share the bottle he wants serenaded. Codrus goes so far as to suggest a fit subject for poetry: “Bentleyes ale which chaseth well the bloud” (721). Minalcas dismisses this topic as “vilany” (732). “Vilany:” “The condition or state of a villein; bondage, servitude; hence, base or ignoble condition of life; moral degradation.”⁹¹ Minalcas believes in the radical honesty of poetry, that it must reflect the conditions it comes from or be forced, unfree, base.

⁹¹ 7 a., “villainy, n.” *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, www.oed.com/view/Entry/223429. Accessed 9 September 2019.

Minalcas's insult temporarily alchemizes higher class to low, making of the bottle-loving Codrus a villein, and exalting Minalcas, who merely needs the bottle, to higher (moral) status.

Codrus's refusal to share the bottle forces Minalcas to abandon his hopes of patronage, to rebuke Codrus for his failure of charity, and to set off on his own. "*Dieu te garde*, [may God protect you] / Neare is winter, the worlde is to harde," (1152), Codrus tells Minalcas mock-pityingly, and Minalcas curses the rich man as he departs: "Go wretched, nigarde, God sende thee care and payne" (1153). In the immediate present, it seems that it is Minalcas who will endure care and pain. Winter, like the approaching storm that haunts the first eclogue, promises nothing but want and destruction. But Minalcas's parting curse suggests, in its abruptness from the possibility of patronage, that the coming cataclysm may not stop at winter. Minalcas asks for help from the only source left, the source Codrus has suggested. Whether God sends Codrus pain and care remains to be seen. The end of the eclogue ends any illusions that might have been left about rich men's charity towards poets, but it also promises more ends: winter's fatal approach, God's retribution. There seems nowhere to go from here.

Barclay's *Eclogues* are deep in conversation with Virgil's on the subject of how poets are to be sustained in an imperfect world. Barclay sets up this comparison carefully, mirroring the opening of Virgil's first eclogue in the opening of his own; this declares his intention to reflect upon the classical poet, but also the fact that this reflection centers upon historical changes in the agrarian economy. This is does not entirely have to do with the fact that what Virgil's shepherds talk about in his first eclogue is the dissolution of the agrarian economy, although there certainly is a tradition

of arguing that Virgil's First Eclogue dramatizes the failure of pastoral life and literature; Jonathan Unglaub describes it as engaging in "the poetics of dispossession."⁹² But Virgil ostensibly solves the political situation for his poet-shepherd, giving him a patron and allowing him to remain where he has always been, and Barclay seems to take this solution at face value. When he attempts to describe the situation of shepherd-poets in his own day, Barclay draws not only upon Virgil's description of the failure of the agrarian economy, but also upon the historical failure of the land to provide sufficient food for the first humans, and the subsequent end of the Golden Age and beginning of agriculture.

Barclay seems to have been familiar with at least one glossed edition of the *Eclogues*. Beatrice White suggests that Barclay would never have attempted the eclogue form were it not for the printer Wynkyn de Worde's edition of Virgil: "The publication of Virgil's *Bucolics* by Wynkyn de Worde in 1512 and again in 1514 may have re-directed [Barclay's] attention to the pastoral and set him revising previous translation from Mantuan [...] and then, correcting his *Miseries of Courtiers*, [Barclay] inserted it into a pastoral frame."⁹³ De Worde's edition contains a gloss adapted from the one by Hermanus Torrentinus quoted above that also describes the beech as a reference to the acorn-eating Golden Age.⁹⁴ But the interpretation of Virgil went beyond particular glosses in particular books. For example, the pictorial tradition of illustrating Virgil's

⁹² Jonathan Unglaub, "The *Concert Champêtre* and the Poetics of Dispossession" in *Pastoral and the humanities : Arcadia re-inscribed*, edited by Mathilde Skoie and Sonia Bjørnstad-Velásquez, Exeter : Bristol Phoenix, 2006, 126.

⁹³ White, *Alexander Barclay*, lvii.

⁹⁴ Daniel Wakelin, "Humanism and Printing" in *A Companion to the Early Printed Book in Britain, 1476-1558*, eds. Vincent Gillespie and Susan Powell (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2014) 238.

first eclogue is also a tradition of glossing Virgil. This tradition is exemplified by the most widespread and influential set of illustrations to Virgil in Northern Europe, those first printed in Sebastian Brant's 1502 edition.⁹⁵ In Brant's edition, the first eclogue is illustrated by a woodcut showing one shepherd sitting under a tree with his pipes and another standing, holding a staff. The tree takes a central place in this image, for it is both a material aspect of the environment and, metaphorically, if understood to mean the possibility of a secure source of food, the topic of conversation between these two shepherds. A 1530 edition of Barclay's eclogues has this tradition in mind when it opens with a woodcut in which Cornix and Coridon (whose names are written in banderoles above their heads) are transposed into the traditional Virgilian scene, taking the same positions as Tityrus and Meliboeus.⁹⁶ The characters' positions and dress and the inclusion of a tree in this image do not come from Barclay's poem and even contradict it in certain details. By means of this visual reference, this illustration claims for the eclogue it accompanies a connection with Virgil's, calling attention to the similarities between the poems and making the differences meaningful.

⁹⁵ As Annabel Patterson points out in *Pastoral and Ideology*, Brant carried out "illustration as exegesis", filling these woodblocks with details that symbolize his interpretation of the poems. Annabel Patterson, *Pastoral and Ideology: Virgil to Valéry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 92. The illustrations to Brant's Virgil circulated both in other editions of Virgil's works, such as Angelus Scinzenzeler's 1511 edition, and in other contexts entirely. Carlo Ginzburg even finds one of the illustrations to the Eclogues reprinted in the sermons of Geiler von Kaisersberg as a representation of the wild hunt. Carlo Ginzburg, *The Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, tr. John and Anne C. Tedeschi (Baltimore: the Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 43.

⁹⁶ *Here begynneth the egloges of Alexa[n]der Barclay prest*, (London: 1530, Early English Books Online Text Creation Partnership), <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A03715.0001.001?view=toc>, accessed 09/05/19.

Barclay's poems share with the traditional glosses to Virgil's first eclogue a pained fascination with the idea of living off the land and the possibility that mere sufficiency might be unbearable. But Barclay's eclogues go further, in that they stage a return to a Golden Age in which life is barely maintained, in order to dramatize the beginning of a revolt from that state, of a demand for a way of life that has room for a little superfluity, for a better drink, for better art. Minalcas knows himself to be "greatly different" from the more fortunate Tityrus, and with the awareness of this great difference comes the possibility of change. Refusing to sing Codrus's songs of excess, Minalcas instead returns to his theme: that art is always affected by the conditions of its creation. When Codrus refuses to reward Minalcas for his songs, leaving Minalcas to face the coming winter alone, he ends any allegiance Minalcas might feel to a possible patron, any urge to temper his critique. Honest, if desperate, Minalcas is left to "talke of the bottle" in his own way: to talk of the bottles denied to him, the bottles he needs in order to make art worthy of himself and the muses, the bottles hoarded by rich men while poor men are starving.

Whether present or absent, the bottle causes arguments about the proper distribution of labor and resources. It is a fermented, alcoholic, glimpse of a *victus*, a food and a way of life, that is not basic, foraged, "kempe." It is palliative in the short term, and, granting a moment of desired rest, it opens the way to dreams of court and of a meal that might satisfy the mind and the body. But, when it sends the shepherds to sleep, it sends them visions of class warfare. If Tityrus, as Servius explains it, represents the contented humans of the Golden Age, Coridon and Minalcas are men whose Golden Age has ended. They know that their food is slimy and that their lives are miserable.

They are ready for the future. Barclay's poems do not address head-on the environmental problems of his day, in some of which, Ken Hiltner argues, "our current environmental crisis clearly has roots."⁹⁷ But they are poems about tainted food, growing inequity, deadly storms, and the danger of constantly deciding to do nothing about any of this, which makes them, in spirit, poems of ecological crisis. Poetry is shaped by the material constraints of its creation. But it can also, in the very moments in which it is distorted by an imperfect world, attest to the need for a better one. Anything else would be "vilany."

Stewardship and colonial expansion

For Alexander Barclay, the Golden Age ended long ago. For Edmund Spenser it is possible to understand it as just now ending, with all the complicated emotions of excitement and regret that that perspective entails. The Golden Age is full of wasted possibility: the waste of the land in not tilling and sowing it, and the waste of human life in unfitting pursuits. "The Teares of the Muses" in Spenser's poem of that name are shed because of the sorts of attitude demonstrated in acorn-eating: the muses lament the general public's incapacity to appreciate the onward march of civilization and Empire and the public's tendency to look to their own bodily, personal, wants and needs before those of the state. Polyhymnia says, using the pronoun "her" to refer to a conjunction of the queen and of poetry personified:

⁹⁷ Ken Hiltner, *What Else is Pastoral?: Renaissance Literature and the Environment* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), 1. Hiltner notes particularly the beginnings of air pollution, the spread of London, and debates over land use.

Some few beside, this sacred skill esteme,
Admirers of her glorious excellence,
Which being lightned with her beawties beme,
Are thereby fild with happie influence :
And lifted vp aboue the worldes gaze ,
To sing with Angels her immortall praize .

But all the rest as borne of saluage brood,
And having been with Acorns alwaies fed ;
Can no whit sauour this celestiaall food;
But with base thoughts are into blindnesse led,
And kept from looking on the lightsome day:
For whom I wail and weepe all that I may. (583-594)⁹⁸

The muses wailing and weeping for those who have always been fed with acorns is a reversal of Servius's gloss of Tityrus as metaphorical acorn-eater and receiver of royal patronage. Spenser, in this poem, sets acorn-eating in opposition to the patronage of poets. He splits this image in two, associating royal patronage with "celestiaall food", and acorn eating with a disregard for poetry and, by implication, the monarch who supports it.

The word "saluage" sets acorn eating in opposition to both civilization and civility. Spenser routinely associates this word with gathering rather than growing food: the Saluage Man in Book 6 of the *Faerie Queene* feeds his guests "the frutes of the Forrest," "For their bad Stuard neither plough'd nor sowed" (VI.4).⁹⁹ Being a bad steward, not plowing or sowing, is a corollary of a "saluage" state for Spenser. Acorn eating is always bad stewardship, because it literally involves eating the seeds that will go to making new oaks, consuming capital rather than investing it. Stewardship is planning for the future, putting labor into future gains. For Spenser, the salvage man is

⁹⁸ Edmund Spenser, *The Shorter Poems*, ed. Richard McCabe, Penguin Books: Penguin, 1999.

⁹⁹ Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. A.C. Hamilton, London: Longman, 2007.

not only *not* a steward, he is a bad one, as though there is no way to opt out of the obligation of stewardship and as though any system of living off the land that is not based on the rewards of agricultural labor is necessarily a bad one.

As R. H. Tawney argues, the years between Barclay and Spenser had entirely changed the nature of the English economy and therefore the English psyche. This change took the form of detachment, from the land, from old social classes, and from “customary relationships:” “It was a society in rapid motion, swayed by new ambitions and haunted by new terrors, in which both success and failure had changed their meaning” and included the pursuit of gain away from home.¹⁰⁰ Abroad, England was just beginning to realize its colonial ambitions and consequently the story of converting acorns to grain took a new and vital form.

Colin Clouts Come Home Againe, Spenser’s version of the return of Tityrus from Rome, contains the inherently contradictory figure of the Shepherd of the Ocean, Walter Raleigh. With this figure, Arcadia leaves the Golden Age behind. The Ocean is no longer the bound of knowledge. It is a resource to be exploited: “For Land and Sea my Cynthia doth deserve / To have in her Commandement at hand.” The myth of the Golden Age is a myth about there being new land, land that has not been developed and does not yet belong to anyone. Raymond Williams implies this in his explanation of the desire to place pastoral bliss in a better time before the present: “In the justified hatred of any current race of landlords, and in a time of historical ignorance, there could be an

¹⁰⁰R.H. Tawney, *Religion and the rise of capitalism; a historical study* Gloucester, MA: P. Smith, 1962, 137

endless retrospect to a time before they existed.”¹⁰¹ In the Golden Age, as in Arcadia, land is held, or rather used, in common, although it is about to be divided because property is about to be invented. The Golden Age is always right before expansion, before the boats leave the shore, before the desire for gain begins

In some hands and sometimes, the abandonment of acorns can be described as a straightforward story of progress from barbarity to civility. So, the travel writer Nicholas Nicholay Dauphinois laid out the “barbarity” of acorns most clearly:

The Graecians in their ancient manner of living were very uncivil & barbarous, for they lived & dwelled with the beasts in all idleness, having no meat more daintier for their nourishment then the fruits of wild trees , to wit , acorns & other mast. But through long succession of time, they became so to be framed & ordered unto all human society & good manners, that amongst all other nations they were reputed to be the most civil, wise, & valiant in all Europe.¹⁰²

Acorns exemplify the incivility and barbarity of the older Greeks, as though until they stopped eating acorns they were strangers (the original meaning of “barbarous”) to themselves. They once ate acorns, but then they grew to be civil, wise, and valiant.

Acorns provide a narrative of foreignness, “barbarity,” that will in the course of time be brought to order. They are used to denote a foreignness that is not other, but rather former: a prior state before civility and good manners. And thus a state that can and will change from the foreign to the familiar.

¹⁰¹ Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975, 42.

¹⁰² *The nauigations, peregrinations and voyages, made into Turkie by Nicholas Nicholay Daulphinois, Lord of Arfeuille, chamberlaine and geographer ordinarie to the King of Fraunce*. EEBO, <http://name.umd.umich.edu/A48734.0001.001>, accessed 07/23/18.

Acorn eating figures frequently in the stories English settlers tell about their encounters with indigenous Americans and their settling of the New World. The alleged acorn diet of some Native Americans serves to position their culture, and the culture formed by the settlers in the colonies, as at the beginning of a trajectory, the first state in a story about transformation. To describe America when European settlers find it as a place characterized by acorn-eating is to present it as ready for unimaginable change. It is full of possibility, full of seeds. This serves to emphasize the fruitfulness, both literal and metaphorical, of North America. It is a land ripe for agriculture, and it is a place that is about to enter into history. *A relation of the successefull beginnings of the Lord Baltemore's plantation in Mary-land* claims that the land “abounds with Vines, and salletts, herbs, and flowers, full of Cedar, and sassafras” and “acorns bigger then ours.” A land springing with salad is a land that is ready to be eaten, but also ready to be planted.

Several accounts describe Native Americans methods of preparing these acorns as food. *A briefe and true report of the new found land of Virginia. of the commodities and of the nature and manners of the naturall inhabitants* describes Native Americans using “a kind of berry or acorn” to make “loaves or lumps of bread.”¹⁰³ Ferdinando Gorges’s untitled account describes the making of acorn oil “out of the white Oak Acorns , (which is the Acorn Bears delight to feed upon)” to “eat [...] with their Meat.”¹⁰⁴ Whether or not these writers are describing actual customs matters less than the fact that

¹⁰³ *A briefe and true report of the new found land of Virginia. of the commodities and of the nature and manners of the naturall inhabitants*. EEBO, <http://name.umd.umich.edu/A48734.0001.001>, accessed 07/23/18.

¹⁰⁴ Untitled, printed by E. Brudenell, for Nathaniel Brook, EEBO, <http://name.umd.umich.edu/A48734.0001.001>, accessed 07/23/18.

they choose to describe the raw materials as “Acorns.” Native people’s knowledge of how to make acorns edible or even “sweet” stands in contrast, in Gorges’s account, to European settlers’ helplessness. In Salem, the settlers are refused food by the Native Americans with the result that

They that came over their own men had but little left to feed on [and] but little Corn, and the poor Indians so far from relieving them, that they were forced to lengthen out their own food with Acorns¹⁰⁵

This story of European settlers being forced to eat acorns is common. Richard Hakluyt’s *The principal nauigations, voyages, traffiques and discoveries of the English nation* describes settlers put into precisely this position: “want came upon them in such sort, that they were fain to gather acorns, which being stamped small, and often washed, to take away the bitterness of them, they did use for bread”¹⁰⁶ Forced at first to live off acorns the way that Native Americans do, the European settlers dream of converting the land to farmland so that they can set up agricultural systems to reproduce their European diet.

In Gorges’s account, the settlers comfort themselves in their hunger by imagining future agriculture:

delighting their Eye with the rarity of things present, and feeding their fancies with new discoveries at the Springs approach, they made shift to rub out the Winters cold by the Fire-side, having fuel enough growing at their very door, turning down many a drop of the Bottle, and burning Tobacco with all the ease they could, discoursing between one while and another, of the great progress they would make after the Summers-Sun had changed the Earths white furred Gown into a green Mantle.

¹⁰⁵ Brudenell, untitled.

¹⁰⁶Richard Hakluyt’s *The principal nauigations, voyages, traffiques and discoveries of the English nation* EEBO, <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/A48734.0001.001>, accessed 07/23/18.

Acorns are a rough diet to subsist on, but they are a sign of the possibilities inherent in the land: they feed fancies more than bodies. They are seeds that promise “great progress” in the future. This memorable image of settlers sitting around drinking, smoking, and planning for the beginning of agriculture holds a mirror to Barclay’s shepherds and their bottle; in Barclay too, it is the bottle that facilitates the telling of stories about how things could be otherwise, how one might someday find a way of life that could sustain itself. But here, this change involves changing the land, of making “great progress” on it. This acorn-fed first winter is the last gasp of the Golden Age, a time of scarcity characterized by dreams of progress - at least as the settlers see it. This is modern pastoral. The analogue to Barclay’s shepherds’ bottle, the American settlers’ collation of liquor and tobacco is haunted by the specter of Barclay and the broader pastoral tradition. Tobacco and rum are commodities that fueled and were made possible by the very system that is about to be more fully implemented. Raleigh, Spenser’s Shepherd of the Ocean, was said to have been first to bring tobacco to England. This American meal is already partly post-acorn, but exists in a limbo before agriculture begins.

The acorn is an ambivalent seed, one that reminds post-agricultural humans of their complicity in creating and enjoying the products of a violent and exploitative relationship with the earth and its peoples, particularly in regard to the colonial appetites that have developed since the beginning of agriculture. The acorn necessitates a kind of reading that jumps around in history, not an ahistorical reading but one that makes reference to many different points in time at once. This temporal complexity is clear in

an account by John Smith that quotes the alleged words of Powhatan, who explains why he has come to capitalize to the author:

think you I am so simple not to know, it is better to eat good meat, lie well, and sleep quietly with my women & children, laugh and be merry with you, have copper, hatchets, or what I want, being your friend; then be forced to fly from all, to lie cold in the woods, feed upon acorns, roots, and such trash, and be so hunted by you, that I can neither rest, eat, nor sleep¹⁰⁷

This distinction between good meat and comfort on the one hand and acorns and discomfort on the other feeds into a particular kind of Golden Age narrative that presents acorn-eating as a prior, perhaps more honorable, but deeply unpleasant state that ends with the improvement of food production, in other words a state meant to be superseded. But in this case the acorn-eating is caused in the first place by the European settlers' hunting of Powhatan's people. The Golden Age, defined as an age of acorn-eating, is here caused by precisely the people who will end it by ceasing to persecute Powhatan's people. This makes it likely that Smith was the author of these words, for the story of abandoning acorns is ultimately in his interest. It also makes it apparent just how openly the idea of acorn-eating being superseded by farming is planted in early printed material about America. It is at once primary and secondary, an honorable former state and the disastrous result of war. The figure of the acorn, even here, however, expresses pathos about the loss of a better, former state. Even as it allows Smith and others like him to justify their predations, it expresses doubt about all the losses that are lumped together and called progress.

¹⁰⁷ *A map of Virginia. VVith a description of the countrey, the commodities, people, government and religion. VVritten by Captaine Smith, sometimes governour of the countrey.* EEBO, <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/A48734.0001.001>, accessed 07/23/18.

Powhatan describes roots and acorns as “trash,” and indeed to read about acorns in the Early Modern period is to understand them as barely food and barely edible. This has to do with the fact that they were still eaten sometimes in early modern Europe, and therefore that they were not just a last vestige of a past relationship with the earth. As Richard Mulcaster puts it, “when corn was once in prouf, acorns grew out of place, though a jolly mastie meat in a hoggish world.” Acorns were still the food of last resort in Early Modern Europe, still there to be eaten when agriculture failed, as it did so often in the course of the sixteenth century. Ambrose Parey claims that “the Plague often follows the drinking of dead and musty Wines, muddy and standing waters, which receive the sinks and filth of a City; and fruits and pulse eaten without discretion in scarcity of other Corn, as Peas, Beans, Lentils, Vetches, Acorns, the roots of Fern, & Grass made into Bread.”¹⁰⁸ Acorns stand in during times of hunger for “other Corn”, but they prove an insufficient and harmful substitute.¹⁰⁹ William Gouge explains that

When people know not whither to go, or can not go from the place where they are (as in a city besieged) it bringeth men to feed on the coursest things that they can get. As on horse bread, on all manner of roots, on acorns, on horses and asses, on mice, rats, and all kind of vermin, on doves dung, on leather, and any other thing that can be chewed, and swallowed.¹¹⁰

Acorns, set in the company of rats and dove dung, are clearly a culinary last resort, not so much food as a “thing that can be chewed, and swallowed.”

¹⁰⁸ *The workes of that famous chirurghion Ambrose Parey translated out of Latine and compared with the French.* by Thomas Johnson. EEBO, <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/A48734.0001.001>, accessed 07/23/18.

¹⁰⁹ The first part of the elementarie vvhich entreateth chefelie of the right writing of our English tung, set furth by Richard Mulcaster. EEBO, <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/A48734.0001.001>, accessed 07/23/18.

¹¹⁰ *Gods three arrowves plague, famine, svword, in three treatises.* EEBO, <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/A48734.0001.001>, accessed 07/23/18.

Although humanity is no longer fed by nature's gifts, acorns remain as the last food to turn to when the apparatus of food distribution is disrupted. *Brachy-martyrologia, or, A breviary of all the greatest persecutions which have befallen the saints and people of God from the creation to our present times paraphras'd by Nicholas Billingsly* describes Queen Mary's reign as one of these persecutions, leading to famine:

God o'er her land then such a famine spread,
That her poor subjects upon Acorns fed.¹¹¹

In accounts of contemporary history, Renaissance writers drew on the acorn to paint a picture of conditions close to starvation: "About the beginning of the Reformation in France, the Duke of Lorraine had proscribed some thousands of his Lutheran Subjects, who were forced to feed upon haws and acorns , &c ."¹¹² A similar example describing wartime conditions in Germany runs:

there followed such a fearful famine, that the most part of men, especially of them that dwelt in the country, being urged by pressing necessity, was driven to feed on Acorns, all manner of herbs, roots, briars, nettles , grass, leaves of trees, so that we may truly take up the complaint of the Psalmist (though there it's to be taken in another sense) that man is become like the beast that perishes¹¹³

¹¹¹*Brachy-martyrologia: or, A breviary of all the greatest persecutions which have befallen the saints and people of God from the creation to our present times: paraphras'd by Nicholas Billingsly, of Mert. Col. Oxon*, London: Printed by J.C. for Austin Rice, at the three Hearts near the west-end of S. Pauls, 1657, 208.

¹¹² *A commentary or exposition upon all the Epistles, and the Revelation of John the Divine wherein the text is explained, some controversies are discussed, divers common-places are handled, and many remarkable matters hinted, that had by former interpreters been pretermitted ... by John Trapp ...* EEBO, <http://name.umd.umich.edu/A48734.0001.001>, 07/23/18.

¹¹³ *The lamentations of Germany*, EEBO, <http://name.umd.umich.edu/A48734.0001.001>, 07/23/18.

Acorns always were somewhat bestial, reflecting badly on those who lived off them. The “other sense” that the author of the description refers to is that the quotation comes from a Psalm chiding humans for too great attention to wealth because “man being in honour abideth not: he is like the beasts that perish.” (KJV Psalm 49:12) Although the description is of desperate measures against hunger, the quotation implies that acorn-eating is a sign of faulty emphasis, of the overvaluing of material things, as well as animality. But acorns are the staples of a time when the amassing of wealth is impossible, the food of those who wish only for sufficiency. This disjunction between the literal situation and its metaphorical implications has to do with the stress of acorns cropping back up in a system that supposedly no longer needs them. Agriculture has failed under the pressure of that other modern innovation, war, and humans are thrown back to their first state. In fact, this cataclysm proves the words of the Psalmist: wealth and honors do not last. The condemnation brought to bear on desperate people who eat acorns is half a judgment on acorns and half a judgment on a society that no longer depends on them, wrongly putting its trust in wealth. Falling back on acorns is a failure of progress, a return to a Golden Age that is, to modern tastes, almost unbearable. This is the Golden Age understood as societal and ecological apocalypse.

The end of the Golden Age is often a story about choice: choosing progress over equity, choosing the new over the honorable. But this description of the fall back into acorns shows it to be no such thing. There is not really a choice when the alternative to living in an inequitable system is that everyone must live off “trash” and “any thing, that can be chewed, and swallowed.” That is not really a choice; or if it is, the stories

told about acorns reveal it to be a choice to be like a beast and perish or to live like a human, even if that entails regret about the exploitation of the land.

There is no simple solution to the problem of human want and inequity, certainly not a return to the economics of the Golden Age. The Golden Age is all too close to early modern England, for it is a state easily brought back by any failure of the fragile and imperfect agricultural system that supplanted it. And it is a state to be found in the New World, potentially fatal for the under-prepared. Fear of the acorn, fear of being thrown on the mercy of the land, makes it a seed full of danger and regret.

Gall

Acorns raise the question of what a life of bare sufficiency is worth and what compromises can and should be made, what violent measures taken, to amass more than the bare minimum. Like the apple, which, according to the Christian story, was the cause of the Fall from Eden, the acorn too is a food that damns, but mainly with faint praise. The humans of the Golden Age, those happy acorn eaters, are praised for the simplicity of their diet but also criticized for it, depicted as violent, animal-like, vicious, or simply deluded. The animalistic side of acorn-eating is fundamentally human, perhaps more natural to humans than the delicate balance of civility that agriculture maintains.

Because of the contradictions they contain within them, acorns are fitted for satire. They point to the desires that underpin human lives, the needs that will burst out into violence if they go unfulfilled. Horace describes the acorn-eating stage as one of endless conflict that ends when language is invented:

cum prorepserunt primis animalia terris,
mutum et turpe pecus, glandem atque cubilia propter
unguibus et pugnīs, dein fustibus atque ita porro
pugnabant armis, quae post fabricaverat usus,¹¹⁴

When animals crawled from the first lands, a mute and ugly herd, they
fought for acorns and lairs with nails and fists and then clubs and so on
with the weapons their custom produced¹¹⁵

The muteness of early humans seems to make their armed conflict necessary, as well as their lack of a relationship to land: “tillage,” the establishment of cities, and the invention of language together end this struggle over acorns. In fact, these first humans are described as “animals”, *animalia*, in a “herd”, and their acorn diet serves to reinforce this animality. An expression of the needs and indignities of the flesh, acorns are the first thing that humans interact with, and in this interaction they reveal the baseness of their desires.

In the Early Modern period, the satirist Joseph Hall built off both Horace’s example and early modern uses of the seed to condemn, in the figure of the acorn, the exploitation of the land and its peoples. Hall begins the first poem of Book 3 of his satire *Virgidemarium* with an evocation of “the time of gold” which, it turns out, was the time of “mast:”¹¹⁶

Time was, that whiles the autumn-fall did last,
Our hungry sires gap’d for the falling mast
Of the Dodonian oaks.
Could no unhusked acorn leave the tree

¹¹⁴ Horace, *Satyrarum libri*, ed. C. Smart, Theodore Alois Buckley, 1863,
<http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:latinLit:phi0893.phi004.perseuslat1:1.3.76-1.4.38>.

¹¹⁵ My translation, with reference to *The Satires of Horace and Persius*, trans. Niall Rudd, Penguin: London, 1973.

¹¹⁶ R. McCabe, “Joseph Hall” (1574–1656), *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Retrieved 9 May 2018, from <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-11976>.

But there was challenge made whose it might be. (3.1.5-9)¹¹⁷

This fight for resources is prophetic for Hall of future human depravity; it evokes humans' greed for natural resources, a greed that Hall connects to the exploitation of the earth and colonialism:

Nor fearfull beast can dig his caue so lowe,
All could he further then earths center go:
As that the ayre, the earth, or Ocean,
Should shield them from the gorge of greedie man.
Hath vtmost Inde ought better then his owne?
Then vtmost Inde is neare, and rife to gone.
O Nature: was the world ordain'd for nought,
But fill mans maw, and feede mans idle thought? (3.1)

Men eat everything, even Nature itself, and make it into nought, to feed idle thoughts.

Nature is all too edible, all too sweetly digestible.

But acorns are famously disgusting to modern humans, almost uniquely unpalatable to the sort of sophisticated palate attached to someone capable of invading “utmost Inde.” If acorns serve as the first target of men’s greed, the first piece of nature they insist on eating, acorns can also serve as the materials for satire. By not being sweet, not being easily edible, acorns resist humans’ colonialist drive. In his “Prologue” to the third book, Hall addresses criticism that his works do not “hide their gall enough from open show” (Prologue, 5). He ends the third book by vowing to “write in crabbed oak tree rind” next time:

Thus have I writ, in smoother cedar tree
So gentle Satires, penn’d so easily.
Henceforth I write in crabbed oak tree rind,
Search they that mean the secret meaning find.
Hold out ye guilty and ye galled hides,
And meet my far-fetch’d stripes with waiting sides. (Conclusion, 1-6)

¹¹⁷ Joseph Hall, *Virgidemarium: Satires*, London: William Pickering, 1825.

This “gall,” the gall that Hall’s book does not hide and with which he galls the hides of his targets, is oak gall, the base material for early modern ink.¹¹⁸ “Gall” is also bile, bitter in its taste, standing for the bitterness of satiric speech.¹¹⁹ Asperity, in short, is what the oak can offer, asperity in commenting on the very problems of scarcity, inequity, and greed that the acorn, in its ambivalent way, perpetuates and excuses. Hall’s turn from society is not a turn back to the innocent Golden Age but a turn to the oak that makes angry writing possible. Hall criticizes both the state of the Golden Age, one that he (like the final figure in this chapter) describes as a state of war, and the changes in human technology and aspirations that came with the end of the Golden Age. Farming and exploration are, for Hall, different variations on environmental destruction. Dismissing both human prehistory and human history, Hall finds in the oak a figure for the bitterness he aspires to in his poetry: a bitterness that, upsetting digestion, allows neither men’s maws nor their idle thoughts to sit comfortably. The acorn is traditionally the node around which feelings of regret and nostalgia are expressed, but in the understanding that the earth and human society have, overall, changed for the better, or at least inevitably. Hall takes away that comfortable nostalgia, asking his readers instead to feel disgust at their own complicity in a destructive system and to see technology and imperial expansion as corollaries of the sins of greed and gluttony. Hall’s gall attempts to cure such gluttonous desires. He describes himself

¹¹⁸ "An excrescence produced on trees, especially the oak, by the action of insects, chiefly of the genus *Cynips*. Oak-galls are largely used in the manufacture of ink and tannin, as well as in dyeing and in medicine," "gall, n.3" OED, accessed 10/15/18.

¹¹⁹ OED gall n.2

whipping his readers like a teacher correcting his pupils, his “gall” leading to “galled hides.”¹²⁰

“the fruit thereof is uncertain”

Like Hall, Thomas Hobbes denies the acorn its peaceful, nostalgic place at the beginning of history and the end of the Golden Age, describing the Golden Age instead as already war-torn. Hall does so because he cannot stand the idea of progress and because he resists the implication that the present developed from the past in the same necessary stages and with the same inevitability as an oak changes and develops from an acorn. Hobbes leaves out the acorn from his story because he does not believe in the nostalgia the acorn allows for, the feeling that something is lost in the move from primordial innocence to a more sophisticated state.

Not everyone was willing to relinquish that feeling, even if they mistrusted its origins. In a sermon on Ash Wednesday of 1671, Adam Littleton described the acorn myth as a fable, a “pleasant story:”

The *Poets* and some Ancient *Philosophers* too, who knew not the original of mankind, make a pleasant story of it, that men were used at first to fall out and q

¹²⁰ Roger Ascham equates rhyme with acorns: “surely to follow rather the Goths in rhyming, than the Greeks in true versifying, were even to eat acorns with swine, when we may freely eat wheat bread amongst men.”¹²⁰ This contrast sets up many of the divisions inherent within the symbol of the acorn: the primitive versus the civilized, the animal versus the human, and the natural versus the artificial and highly-processed. Roger Ascham, *The Schoolmaster*, in *The Whole Works of Roger Ascham*, ed. Dr. Giles, London: John Russell Smith, 1864, Book 2, 250

uarrel about their Acorns, and other such provisions, Nature could furnish them with before the invention of Tillage¹²¹

Littleton emphasizes the fact that this Golden Age scenario is only a “pleasant story” in order to follow it with an attack on Hobbes, who “sets down that for *doctrine*; which with them [i.e. classical writers] past only for *fancy*, or at best but *conjecture*” (18). If this less than “pleasant” story about the violence of the first age is indeed true, this means that human nature is ruled by its desires, driven to violence by them. Hobbes famously describes the state of nature as “a time of Warre, where every man is Enemy to every man”:

In such condition, there is no place for Industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain; and consequently no Culture of the Earth; no Navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by Sea; no commodious Building; no Instruments of moving, and removing such things as require much force; no Knowledge of the face of the Earth; no account of Time; no Arts; no Letters; no Society; and which is worst of all, continuall feare, and danger of violent death; And the life of man, solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short.¹²²

This is a version of the Former Age that sees that age as all too present, a state of war that exists wherever strong curbs are not established. Hobbes adds that

It may peradventure be thought, there was never such a time, nor condition of warre as this; and I believe it was never generally so, over all the world: but there are many places, where they live so now. For the savage people in many places of America [...] live at this day in that brutish manner, as I said before.

Here, in Hobbes, the work begun by early travel narratives to present Native Americans as representative of the Golden Age is complete. Hobbes sees human nature as driven by the need to achieve short-term goals, and the state of nature is characterized by the

¹²¹ *A sermon preached in Lent-assizes, holden for the county of Bucks, at Alesbury, March 8th 1671/2 being Ash-Wednesday by Ad. Littleton ...* EEBO, <http://name.umd.umich.edu/A48734.0001.001>, 17-8. Original emphasis.

¹²² Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. C. B. MacPherson, New York: Penguin, 1968.

constant indulgence of this need. Hobbes describes an age that, as in classical accounts of the Golden Age, knew of nothing beyond its shores and did not practice agriculture, but for Hobbes this age is ever-present, potential within any society and still to be found at its edges. Primordial ignorance is described as a lack: of industry, of navigation, of the culture of the earth. Hobbes describes this state with no nostalgia. It is a “condition,” a state of mind. For Hobbes, the detail that men used to live on acorns is lost in the statement that the state of nature had “no Culture of the Earth.” The loss of this detail, the loss of the acorn, although a small loss, takes from the story of the end of the first state all the ambivalence, regret, and awareness of complicity in an exploitative relationship to the land and to other people that the acorn brought with it.

The “pleasant story” of the acorn, that small quirk in the story of the Golden Age, allowed classical, medieval, early modern writers to reflect on stewardship and responsibility to the earth and other people. It allowed a small departure from the present, a step outside of the modern world, to a place untouched by agriculture. And, although the story of the acorn always ended the same way, it allowed a small moment of hesitation before the great change, before humans had had “enough of the oak.”

Chapter II. Dwellers in Innocency

My first chapter analyzes a series of stories, originating in classical poetry and myth and persisting into the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in which the acorn represents the harshness of the natural world unimproved by agriculture. The acorn stands for earth in its primordial state: still possessed of its primitive integrity, unharmed by human touch, and barely sufficient to sustain the humans who depend on it for life. Grain can be manipulated in a way that acorns cannot; its seeds grow quickly and regularly and it offers a predictable yield. It allows humans to settle down and build cities and governments rather than wander in search of food. In the movement between these two seeds, the acorn and the grain of corn or wheat, is the choice to become fully human instead of living, as Lucretius puts it, “in the wandering way of beasts.” It is also a fall from a primal innocence and simplicity, into a set of interconnected acts of violence: the plowing of the earth, the invention of war, the brutal oppression of supposedly uncultivated others. But the abandonment of the acorn for grain is not the only story early modern writers told to explain the origins and evolution of their own society and culture. A different strand in late medieval and early modern thought treated beasts as equal protagonists with humans in the shift from wildness to civility, making animals central figures in and for the emergence of social hierarchies. Beast fables and other narratives about the beginning of animal husbandry are stories about the use and abuse of power, and, in fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth century England, they inevitably turn into etiologies of class.

As I argue in what follows, this is partly because relations between humans and domesticated animals entail striking paradoxes of dominance and dependency: animals raised for food, clothing, raw materials, or labor require care, but that care is offered in the service of human needs, appetites, and desires. The plowman's violence towards the earth shows a betrayal of the primordial bond between humans and the earth, making it an apt figure for the violence of colonial conquest, but the shepherd's gentleness is a more subtle and familiar form of exploitation, both literally and figuratively closer to home. Imagining the origins of animal husbandry allowed early modern English authors to probe a linked set of philosophical, ethical, and literary problems, all having to do with vulnerability, violence, innocence, and entitlement: in addition to their material value, animals provided food for thought and figures of speech. Like acorns, however, which remained an indispensable if undesirable staple of the early modern diet in times of famine, animals resist reduction to mere figures of thought and speech; the manuscripts and printed books in which imaginary beasts appear were made at least in part from the skins, fur, and feathers of once-living animals. Foregrounding the material omnipresence of animals in early modern books is thus a way to think through what humans owe to the beasts they exploit, and to allow those beasts a voice in the matter.

When Adam delved

The classical myth of the Golden Age supplied early modern writers with a template for representing and theorizing the process of civilization, that uncertain and ambivalent transition from ignorance, idleness, and uncultivated ease to learning,

understanding, and effortful sophistication. But in the biblical story of Cain and Abel, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writers found a very different account of the origins of human culture and society, one in which violence, rather than education or changing tastes, figured as the essential and inevitable mechanism of change. The story of Cain and Abel was a narrative touchstone for writing about structures of hierarchy and oppression because Cain's murder of his older brother was interpreted by early modern authors, translators, and biblical commentators as an allegory of both the abuse of power by the powerful and the violent impulses of the powerless.

Significantly, the story of Cain and Abel was also a story about origins of animal husbandry: like his father, Adam, Cain was a farmer, but Abel was the first shepherd. These two professions are what set the two men at odds in the first place, when Cain's sacrifice is less pleasing to God. As in classical myths of the Golden Age, where the growing of grain coincides with the introduction of war, it is agriculture—the tilling of the soil by men—that the Genesis account identified with violence; Abel's shepherding is the peaceable alternative to his murderous brother's planting and plowing. Thus Thomas Tryon's retelling of the biblical account in his 1691 discourse on vegetarianism makes the somewhat paradoxical case that Cain, though himself a grower of grain, was the real originator of the harmful practice of meat-eating. For Tryon, the story of Cain and Abel dramatizes not only the first homicide but the beginning of the use of animals for human gain:

Abel was a Keeper of Sheep; (that is, a Keeper of, and Dweller in Innocency) But Cain was a Tiller of the harsh Earth; (which must be broken and torn up by Violence and hard Labour both of Man and Beast, which was the Curse that the Lord laid upon Adam.) [...] Abel's Blood cried unto the Lord. The very same is to be understood in all kind of Oppression, both to Man and Beasts; they all by a sweet sympathetical operation call for Vengeance; for God is no respecter

of Persons or Things; but whensoever any Creature is oppressed, the same doth from the awakened Wrath, curse the Oppressor, and send up Cries and terrible Complaints to Heaven....¹²³

For Tryon, Cain is the first manifestation of the “principle of Wrath” inherent in fallen human nature, a principle that spurs men to kill animals and each other and is fed by animal flesh. Humans

are never satisfied, either full or fasting; but always contriving Mischief, and how they may betray not only those of their own kind, but also all other Creatures; insomuch that all the Elements mourn, and are filled with the Cries, Groans, and mournful Complaints of their miserable Inhabitants.¹²⁴

The final image of a chorus of misery that includes the “harsh earth” that Cain tills helps to resolve the paradoxical conjunction of farming and murder, shepherding and vulnerability: the harshness of the earth is mirrored by the hard labor that must be used to subdue it, while the sheep’s innocence seems to be shared by the shepherd who dwells with them.

The curse of labor imposed on Adam, here understood to refer particularly to the labor of tilling the earth, combines in Tryon’s account with the curse imposed on his murderous son, Cain, and together those curses stand in contrast to the idleness and innocence of shepherding, a gentler conjunction of man and beast. Thus Cain, vegetarian though he may have been, is the originator of “all kind of Oppression, both to Man and Beasts.” And for Tryon, every “kind of Oppression” is the same, whether it is the oppression of humans, animals, or the earth itself. The violence of Cain’s tillage

¹²³ Thomas Tryon, *A way to health, long life and happiness, or, A discourse of temperance and the particular nature of all things requisite for the life of man as all sorts of meats, drinks, air, exercise &c.*, 1691, Wing / T3201. 302. All quotations are from this edition.

¹²⁴ Tryon *A way to health* 305.

continues in fratricide and is repeated in the slaughter of animals for food. Though he is banished as a wanderer, his violence becomes a precedent for human society, which feeds itself on every further act of violence against animals, the earth, and the rest of the weak. Tryon is an advocate for vegetarianism, but by his account, there is no way to eat without harm. The apparent illogic in blaming a tiller of the earth for the eating of meat results in a condemnation of both tillage and meat-eating as violence against the natural world. Only Abel is excluded by his untimely death from complicity in the exploitation of the earth. His harmlessness is both unsustainable and impossible outside the confines of the story's metaphors, in which the sheep he cares for stand for his "innocency."

Tryon's dark allegorization is one of many inventive early modern re-readings of the story of Cain and Abel, most of which interpreted the rivalry between the brothers not as a case for vegetarianism but as an etiology of class conflict. But whether Cain was the revolting peasant or the overweening aristocrat was often less clear. In a 1530 English translation of *The Vanity of Arts and Sciences*, Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim finds in Cain the marks of incipient tyranny. Cain is "a Husbandman and a Hunter," he declares, and "Huntinge was the beginninge of Tyrannye, because it findeth no Authoure more meete then him, whiche hathe learned to dispise God, and nature, in the slaughter and boocherie of wilde beastes, and in the spillinge of bloude."¹²⁵ But early modern allegories of class in the story of Cain and

¹²⁵ Agrippa von Nettesheim, Heinrich Cornelius, *Of the Vanitie and vncertaintie of Artes and Sciences, Englished by Ia. San. Gent.* Cambridge Chadwyck-Healey, 1999, 125, 121. <https://literature.proquest.com/searchFulltext.do?id=Z000726004&childSectionId=Z000726004&divLevel=0&queryId=3125839078540&trailId=16B4AC4CA28&area=prose&forward=textsFT&queryType=findWork>. Accessed 07/11/19. All quotations are from this edition.

Abel could also go the other way, interpreting Cain as the lower-class agent of rebellion upsetting the natural order. A fifteenth-century treatise on hawking, hunting, and heraldry, attributed to the prioress Juliana Berners, takes a kinder view of the slaughter and butchery of wild beasts and of the upper classes; in it, Cain represents not the aristocracy but the original betrayer of the nobility: “A brother to slee his brother contrari to the lawe: where myghte be more vngentylnesse[?] By that dyde Cayn become a churle.”¹²⁶ In this fable of class origin, the lower class is created in an act of violent and unnatural rebellion, divided from the nobility by fratricide and doomed to agricultural labor as punishment: for Berners, Cain’s occupation follows from his crime, rather than inciting him to it. There is a similar circular logic to her politics: class rebellion, because it is ungentle, naturalizes the class hierarchy, dividing humankind into those who are gentle and those who rebel against them.

When Adam delved and Eve span, either Cain or Abel was definitely a gentleman, but it’s hard to pin down exactly which one. As the contrast between Agrippa von Nettesheim’s and Berners’s versions of Genesis suggests, Cain and Abel afforded early modern writers a malleable template for associating class relations and the relations between men and beasts: Cain the plowman is an ambivalent figure, a churlish tyrant. For his part, Abel is always innocent, meek, and unambitious, but his passivity can be read as a mark of gentility or of weakness. But in either case, Cain’s violation of the natural and social orders through fratricidal rebellion is linked to his

¹²⁶ Juliana Berners, *This present boke shewyth the manere of hawkyng [and] huntyng and also of diuysyng of cote armours*, 1496, STC (2nd ed.) 3309, EEBO, accessed 07/11/19.

identity as a tiller of the earth, while shepherding figures a more peaceable relation to the earth, animals, and humankind. Turning nature upside down, plowing a field, killing animals or fellow human beings – these actions spring from Cain’s restless unwillingness to leave creation be, to have dominion without domination.

Because medieval and early modern writers used a single story to think through the origins of both class and animal husbandry, the two became subtly interconnected. In retellings of the story of Cain and Abel, the pull between care and exploitation, innocence and violence, is dramatized between the first cultivated field and the first sheep-pen. What men owe to animals is understood to be a facet of what men owe to the natural world, each other, and God. The rest of this chapter traces a similarly complex set of associations between violence, power, agriculture, ambition, culpability, and the care and consumption of animal bodies, particularly sheep, across two very different early modern English literary modes: fable and pastoral. Both fable and pastoral are imaginary spaces for re-thinking the beginnings of the human and natural orders; they are also imaginary spaces shared by men and beasts where both parties can weigh the ecological and moral costs of killing animals and the political and social risks of inequality. But they also confront the difficulty, or even the impossibility, of avoiding harm—whether inflicting it on others or suffering it oneself. As I demonstrate in what follows, stories about animals are thus often stories about the moral hazards of power over vulnerable others who may not be quite as helpless as they seem.

To man most profitable

Beast fables reflect on origins, but the genre also stands at the origins of English print. William Caxton's 1484 English translation of a French version of Aesop's fables was popular enough for him to reprint it in 1497, 1500, and 1525.¹²⁷ Wynken De Worde included a version of the Latin Aesop, *Fabule esopu com commento, Aesop's fables with a commentary*, in his series of schooltexts, printing it in 1503 and 1514. De Worde printed another edition of Aesop in 1535, an edition that deliberately presented itself as a humanist production.¹²⁸ Printed in italics, it included interpretations by Erasmus, Aulus Gellius, Valla, Angelo Poliziano, and others. Thus Caxton and De Worde marketed animal fables to three different audiences, in Caxton's English translation, de Worde's schooltext, and De Worde's luxurious humanist production. Mark Loveridge, reflecting on the absence of "independent, original, collections of beast fables" in sixteenth century England while Aesop was frequently printed, particularly for use in the classroom, calls this "the time (and place) where the Aesopian fable entered early modern culture decisively" but states that "depending on one's point of view, the period may be bereft of fable or full of it."¹²⁹

Fables were defined as stories about speaking animals in the Renaissance because of the etymology of "fable," from *fari*, Latin for "to speak." De Worde's Latin schooltext explains the way in which the book will mold the conduct of its young readers through giving speech to animals and objects:

Magister esopus de ciuitate atheniensi actor [sic] huius libri volens omnes
homines communiter informare quod agere & quod vitare debeant hoc opus

¹²⁷ According to EEBO. There is also a Huntington Library fragment attributed to Pynson.

¹²⁸ STC 1193:05, the Bodleian copy, EEBO.

¹²⁹ Mark Loveridge, *A History of Augustan Fable*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, 95.

composuit in quo fingit bruta irrationalia animalia & inanimata loqui nobis.
Per hoc inconueniens docet nos cauere cauenda & sectari sectanda.

Master Aesop of the city of Athens, author [actor] of this book wanting to inform all men at once what they should do and what they should avoid wrote this book in which he pretends that brutish irrational animals and inanimate things speak to us. By this dissimilarity [or, unsuitability], he teaches us to beware what we should be wary of and to pursue what we should pursue.¹³⁰

So, for *De Worde*, it is precisely the alien nature of the protagonists of Aesop's fables that allows the reader to judge their behavior rightly. It is the unsuitability of their speech that makes it clear that they are standing for humans.

In *The chorle and the bird*, the poet John Lydgate discusses the purpose and origin of fables, or, as he calls them in the first lines of his poem, "Problemes of olde liknes and figures / Which prouyd ben fructuous of sentence."¹³¹ A problem of old likeness is at once a problem about the past and a problem that is solved by similitude. For Lydgate, the fable serves to invent versions of the past that help clarify the problems of the present. So, he gives as examples of the topics of fables trees choosing a king, which he attributes to the Bible, and of eagles and lions giving some animals lordship over others, claiming that poets:

By derke parables ful conuenyent
Feyne that birdes and beestes of estate
As ryall egles and lyons by assent
Sente oute writtes to holde a parlament
And made decrees briefly for to seye
Some to haue lordship & some tobeye

The fable is itself a sort of parliament, which allows animals to assent to structures of human power to which they are ordinarily subservient. This parliament serves to

¹³⁰ *Fabule esopu com commento*, British Library C.38.d.1. My translation.

¹³¹ All quotations are from John Lydgate, *Here begynneth the chorle [and] the byrde*, 1497, British Library, STC (2nd ed.) / 17011.

reinforce the existing power structure by making it seem deliberately imposed, by dramatizing a beginning in which it was chosen from among other options. What is “convenient” for Lydgate in dark parables is precisely what the Latin Aesop finds “*inconueniens*,” unsuitable, that animals are brought in to stand for humans, to speak as and to them. In the same poem, Lydgate claims that

poetes wryte wonderfull lykenes
And ynder couerte kepe hem self cloose
They take beestes and fowles to witnes
Of whos faynyng fables first aroos

Making beasts and fowls witnesses to human society allows poets to express truths about their own societies, but also brings beasts and fowls, with their own concerns and perspectives, into the discussion. Animals capable of bearing witness are at once convenient and inconvenient – convenient because they allow the powerful and powerless to talk out their differences, and inconvenient because they may say something more, or something else, than they were supposed to.

Lydgate’s own beast fable, *The hors, the shep and the ghoos*, takes place in a past time that is not quite at the beginning of agriculture, but long enough ago that there is still some question as to how human and animal relations should be organized. In the mythic period in which it is set, animals still rule themselves. But their debate is already about their profitability to humans – not whether they should be profitable, but which of them is most profitable. As the speaker puts it:

The processe was not to perfounde ne depe
Of their debate but contryued of a fable
Whyche of hem was to man most proffitable¹³²

¹³² All quotations are from the Cambridge University Library copy from 1476, *The hors. the shep and the ghoos*. Inc.5.J.1.1.[3489].

Lydgate points to the artificiality of this idea that animals would care about their profitability to humans by calling the speaker's interpretation of it into question. The speaker finds this scene or "symylitude" of a debate between animals "Full craftely depeynted upon a wall." How he knows what they are debating is unclear, although the implication is that he merely assumes it has to do with human interests. So, the poem is ambiguously inhuman: set in a time before animals were subordinate to humans, animals discuss their usefulness to humans, while criticizing human greed.¹³³

The poem suggests in some ways an allegory of human society, in which the animals stand for different classes. The horse is, like the nobility, martial and suited to war. The goose warns humans of threats, in this admonitory function resembling the clergy. And the sheep, like the laboring class, produces the necessities. Yet the poem does not fully function as a fable. Rather, it uses its fabular structure to thwart readers' expectations by discussing the uses of real animals. It punctures, with its discussion of

¹³³ Jeremy Withers offers a somewhat different explanation for the poem's uncertainty as to whether humans have desires that differ from humans' and its discussion of the violence that sheep provoke: "Unlike (say) an animal's agricultural or culinary value, the military value of the animal is often *reintroduced* in the animals' speeches after its initial discussion, signaling its conspicuous importance for the overall debate and for our understanding of Lydgate's deeper message in the poem. As I will argue, the importance that the Horse, Goose, and Sheep place on their own military function reflects late medieval developments in the role of animals in the logistics, strategies, and technologies of warfare, developments which drew upon the resources of geese and sheep and which put horses into harm's ways on levels never before seen in the Middle Ages. Although Lydgate at times resists in the *Debate* his culture's widespread estimation of animals according to purely anthropocentric values, his attitudes in the poem are more complicated and contradictory than that. In fact, by the end of the poem, he appears completely disinterested in the more biocentric or even theocentric perceptions of animals that he has gestured toward elsewhere in the poem, and instead concludes the work with a socially symbolic reading of the animals and their debate." Jeremy Withers, "The Ecology of Late Medieval Warfare in Lydgate's *Debate of the Horse, Goose, and Sheep*," *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 18: 1, 2011.

animal profitability, the useful fiction that animals are to be read as humans. Instead, the poem delves into the specific ways in which each animal is used by human society. If it is possible to read the sheep as a symbol of the lower class, this reading is quickly muddled by the statement, for example, that parts of the sheep can be used to make tallow for candles. It turns out that the poem is interested, not in representing humans through animals, but in discussing how humans exploit animals as a resource, including as a repository of metaphors for human social class.

Of the three animals, the sheep has the most numerous and diverse uses. The ram, speaking for the sheep because it is too “meke” to argue its own claim, states that “to reherce worldely commoditytes / In re publyca,” no animal “Dooth so grete prouffyte / horse / ghoos / ne swan / As dooth the sheep vnto the ease of man.” While this list, by introducing the swan, a symbol of royalty, promises at first an allegorical reading about the function of the lower classes in late medieval society, it becomes clear that it is actually about the sheep as a commodity that is used by all humans. This profit to man is calculated by the value of the sheep’s parts, for example that:

There is also made of the sheeps skynne
Pylches & gloues to dryue awaye the colde
Therof also is made good parchemyne
To wryte of bookes & quayers manyfolde [...]
Of the sheep is caste awaye no thyng

These lines foreground the importance of sheep to the creation and manufacture of the very book the reader is holding. Even read in a printed edition such as William Caxton’s of 1476, these words have the power to alienate the reader from the comfortable act of reading, to implicate him in a system of production that has begun with a sheep and

ended in the book that he holds in his hands. Even a book printed on paper might be bound in animal skin or have been composed on parchment.

What is only gradually revealed, and made explicit in the horse's challenge to the ram, is the poem's interest in the dangers of profit, which it presents as a temptation to war and other ills. The ram describes the sheep as an emblem of peace, not only because it is naturally peaceful but because it is cultivated in peacetime: "Lete all warre and stryue be sette a syde / And vpon peas do with the sheep abyde." The sheep can bring "grete rychesse" to men with its skin and wool. But the horse claims that it is precisely this promise of profit that causes wars to break out: "The sheep is cause and hath be full longe / Of newe stryues and of mortall werre." Sheep, in their complete usefulness, in their promise of eternal profit, are a temptation to strife. The question is not just which animal is most profitable, but what people will do for profit, whether profit might not be worse for the human spirit than dearth. The sheep's very profitability and meekness make it an agent of temptation. The poem's turn against profit reveals the hidden violence of sheep: the violence they can incite in people. To the ram's call, "Lete all warre and stryue be sette a syde," the horse replies that the sheep itself is a cause "Of newe stryues and of mortall were." This chiasmus marks the unpredictable consequences of peace, the corruption that it works in human minds. By this chain of causation, the harmless sheep turns harmful.

But in the sheep's meek unwillingness to speak about its own usefulness there is a double recalcitrance: the sheep's meekness is proverbial, its inability to harm or even to stand up for itself written into its nature. But the meekness also takes the form of refusing to participate in a celebration of its own exploitation for human ends. The

sheep, by not speaking, at once reinforces its animality by acting as any sheep would, and opts out of the fable about its own profitability.

Caxton seems to have recognized the poem's hesitation between fable and husbandry manual. In his quarto editions of this poem, Caxton follows Lydgate's text with a list of carving and hunting terms known as the JB treatise.¹³⁴ Scott-Macnab suggests that Caxton "decided to include the J.B. material in his HSG quartos because so much of it consists of terminology relating to animals, and so forms a natural link with Lydgate's animal fable on which the whole pamphlet is based."¹³⁵ This material on hunting and carving suggests an uncertainty about, or perhaps a playfulness with, the poem's genre. As a poem that describes the uses of animals, it can be used as a manual to exploit animals. But as a poem about the danger of thinking only about profit, it cautions against the sort of thinking that sees in animals a repository of meat and useful parts. To follow this poem with a lexicon of hunting and carving terms is to give pause to the hunter and carver, to ask them whether their use of animals comes from necessity or greed.

To follow the ram's lead and to dwell upon the utter usefulness of the sheep is eventually to imagine a world made of sheep, not just lit by them and warmed by them.

¹³⁴ David Scott-Macnab, "Caxton's Printings of 'The Horse, The Sheep and the Goose': Some Observations Regarding Textual Relationships," *Transactions of the Cambridge Bibliographical Society* 13: 1, 2004, 5. Remarkably, four of Caxton's seven first printings were of books by Lydgate, including this poem. Caxton and Wynkyn de Worde reprinted *The hors, the shep and the ghoos* at least in 1478, 1495, and 1500, more often than any of Lydgate's works except *The temple of glas*. David Carlson points out that "Dead poets were safer bets" for early printers given that their success was proven and they couldn't complain about liberties taken with their work. David Carlson, "Alexander barclay and Richard Pynson: A Tudor Printer and his Writer," *Anglia* 113, 1995, 283.

¹³⁵ Scott-MacNab, "Caxton's Printings," 6.

Leonard Mascall, clerk of the kitchen to the archbishop of Canterbury and author of many husbandry manuals, wrote in one of them “A praise of the sheep,” a poem that evokes this possibility:

These cattell sheepe among the rest,
Is counted for man one of the best.
No harmefull beast nor hurt at all.
His fleece of wooll doth cloth vs all:
Which keepe vs from the extreame cold:
His flesh doth feed both yong and old.
His tallow makes the candels white,
To burne and serue vs day and night.
His skinne doth pleasure diuers waies,
To write, to weare at all assaies.
His guts thereof doe make whele strings,
They vse his bones to other things.
His hornes some shepeheardes will not loose,
Because therewith they patch their shooes.
His dung is chiefe I vnderstand,
To helpe and dung the plowmans land.
Therefore the sheepe among the rest,
He is for man a worthie beast.¹³⁶

Julian Yates argues that, in this poem, “the Englishman himself as hybrid sheep-person-thing, as something no longer, and not yet human, but, most assuredly human.”¹³⁷ But while the reader does become somewhat sheep-like, the sheep too changes form, disappearing into the day-to-day objects of Early Modern English life, becoming the ground under the reader’s feet, the wheels that cross it, the shoes of those walking over it. Only once does the sheep’s cooperation seem to be revealed as compulsion, as bidding

¹³⁶ *The first booke of cattell wherein is shewed the gouernment of oxen, kine, calues, and how to vse bulles and other cattell to the yoake, and fell. With diuers approued remedies, to helpe most diseases among cattell: most necessarie for all, especially for husband men, hauing the gouernment of any such cattell. Gathered and set forth by Leonard Mascall.* London: Printed by Iohn Wolfe, 1587. EEBO, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu> Accessed 07/11/19.

¹³⁷ Julian Yates, "Counting Sheep: Dolly does Utopia (again)," *Rhizomes*, issue 8 <http://rhizomes.net/issue8/yates2.htm>, 2004, accessed 02/13/20.

its time before it can get its revenge: “To burn and serve us” invites a second reading, in which “burn” is transitive and the object is “us.” But overall, the sheep seems all too invisible, “his” desires and needs so inseparable from humans’ that he becomes the book in which these words are written, the instrument by which they are written, the light that falls across the page.

Mascall’s poetic catalogue invites us to inhabit a world in which humans eat sheep, wear them, walk on them. Sheep insulate humans against the world’s extremes. This harmless beast is not only easy prey, but a boon to humans who need tools to write with and tallow candles to light them as they do so. This poem in praise of sheep is thus also a poem in praise of man-made objects and human ingenuity—including the poet’s own. The sheep is turned into “things,” commodities and aids to human comfort. The poem, if not written on sheep, may well be read by the light of sheep, while digesting sheep. Sheep are everywhere. Or, rather, *everything*. But this same omnipresence verges on over-reliance—sheep are a measure of human ingenuity but also of human inadequacy. Hence the hint of wariness in the poem, which manifests not only in the ambiguity attached to the subject of the verb “burn,” but in Mascall’s insistence on the sheep’s harmlessness. Mascall is interested in the sheep’s complete availability to human use, not the possibility that the sheep might resent those uses or that these uses might ultimately demand some sacrifice on the human side. Mascall personifies the sheep enough to allow “him” a desire to help humans, a solicitude for human comfort, but not enough to allow him to resent or protest his exploitation. He is, as the poem says, “for man.”

What might happen if a world turned into sheep suddenly came back to its senses and became “for sheep” instead? One possible answer is hinted at in a famous passage in Thomas More’s *Utopia*:

your shepe that were wont to be so meke and tame, and so smal eaters, now, as I heeresaye, be become so great deuowerers and so wylde, that they eate vp, and swallow downe the very men themselues. They consume, destroye, and deuoure whole fieldes, howses, and cities. For looke in what partes of the realme doth growe the fynest, and therefore dearest woll, there noble men, and gentlemen: yea and certeyn Abbottes, holy men no doubt, not contenting them selves with the yearely reuenues and profytes, that were wont to grow to theyr forefathers and predecessours of their landes, nor beyng content that they liue in rest and pleasure nothinge profiting, yea much noyinge the weale publique: leaue no grounde for tillage, thei inclose al into pastures; thei throw doune houses: they plucke downe townes, and leaue nothing standyng, but on the church to be made a shepehowse. And as though you loste no small quantity of grounde by forestes, chases, laundes, and parkes, those good holy men turne all dwellinge places and all glebeland into desolation and wilderness.¹³⁸

Raphael Hythloday’s description of the enclosure crisis is much discussed in the critical literature, including the ways in which it conflates questions of human politics and animal husbandry. Karen Raber suggests that animals in the *Utopia* have the power to “subvert the (to More) fundamental distinction between human and animal” by “highlight[ing] the flaws in economic systems that create false differences between kinds of labor and/or laboring identities.”¹³⁹ Christopher Burlinson also finds in the sheep a challenge to human-animal distinctions: *Utopia* “persistently plays upon,

¹³⁸ Translated by Ralph Robynson, *A frutefull pleasaunt, wittie worke, of the best state of a publique weale and of the newe Yle, called Vtopia*, 2nd edition, 1556. EEBO, Accessed 07/11/19.

¹³⁹ Karen Raber *Animal Bodies, Renaissance Culture*, Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013, 176-8.

interrogates, and overturns the relationships between humans and animals within the bounds of its fiction.”¹⁴⁰ This is a response to Julian Yates’s claim that

Raphael's sheep are, of course, not sheep at all. Stunt sheep, maybe, rhetorical sheep, yes-sheep pressed to service in the zoographics of the text, sheep at their most mediated point, and in a way interchangeable with the other anti-mimetic effects the text generates [...] At the same time, Raphael's sheep are, as in Latour's zoomorphisms, a real attempt on More's part to find a language adequate to representing an occluded set of agents, not sheep this time, but the human victims of enclosure, eaten not by sheep exactly, but by a sinister cannibal companion species - the landlord / sheep hybrid.¹⁴¹

But Mascal’s much less well-known poem suggests that the uncertainty about where humans end and sheep begin also has to do with early modern England’s self-aware reliance on sheep and the things made from their bodies. Sheep are a source of everyday products. In the bodies of each revolting sheep, there are countless revolting candles, books, and muttonchops as well. It is the sheep's tendency to disappear into objects and human subjects that they reject in their enthusiastic embrace of enclosure. Once set aside on land reserved specifically for them, sheep gain a monstrous confidence, turning everything to their use. You could characterize this as landlord/sheep hybridity, or you could say that the sheep, after invading the fields and buildings of human life, also invade that last structure erected to keep out the wild unknowability of nature: personhood. "They eate vp, and swallow downe the very men themselues." This eating up and swallowing down is a metaphor for the ruinous effect of enclosure on the poor, but it is also an image of the tables of interspecies dynamics being turned. The sheep, once eaten by men, get a chance to do as they were done by.

¹⁴⁰ Christopher Burlinson, “Humans and Animals in Thomas More's Utopia,” *Utopian Studies* 19:1 2008, 25.

¹⁴¹ Yates, *Dolly*, accessed 02/13/20.

Hythloday himself characterizes the enclosure controversy—whereby poor English farmers lost their lands to the demands of an increasingly rich and rapacious class of sheep owners, who needed the ground for pasturage—as a hybrid of literal and figurative beastliness, part zoological anomaly and part class conflict. It’s worth recalling that this story about hunger is told over dinner, in the same way that the drinkers in Plato’s *Symposium* discuss the effects of wine. Hunger is a disorienting force in Hythloday’s story, one that pushes animals and people to uncharacteristic actions, to destruction and theft. The sheep, swallowing down the very men themselves, also represent them. They almost mirror their owners’ actions: the sheep “consume, destroye, and deuoure whole fieldes, howses, and cities” while their owners “throw doune houses: they plucke downe townes, and leaue nothing standynge.” The sheep are at once agents of the landlords’ greed and beastly barometers of civil unrest, signs – in their unnatural appetites – that all is not well with England. The sheep’s reluctance to cut back, to change, to leave room for the future and its crops, mirrors human disregard for the future. The landowners do not bother to ensure the continuation of agriculture. They “leaue no grounde for tillage,” and the passage overall is about losing ground, allowing ground that was once cultivated or built on to devolve into wilderness.

Hythloday’s sheep stand figuratively for their society’s reckless use of natural resources. But taken literally, the sheep’s disordered eating stands also as an act of resistance against human desires and human technology. It is a taking back of the earth from agriculture, a return to the wild. In the passage quoted above, the landlords “turne all dwellinge places and all glebeland into desolation and wilderness,” undoing the boundaries that allow land to be used and lived in. Turning all the farmland and

dwelling places that tied the English population to England back over to nature, in the form of sheep, More effectively goes back to the beginning: before agriculture and before animal husbandry. The sheep's hunger takes the place of humans' hunger, which the landscape was set up to feed. Richard Halpern writes that the vagrants turned off their land by the process of enclosure are "utopian" in that "they have nowhere to live. Their territorial nomadism, the lack of an inhabitable *topos*, merely expresses the fact that they occupy no place within the productive regime, or indeed within the polity at large... they are already latently utopian. Precisely because they have been expelled from society, the decoded masses are perfect subjects for imaginative recombination."¹⁴² They are also, because of their expulsion from society and the agricultural systems that make it possible, thrown back into an ancient mode of life, the prehistoric, wandering way of beasts.

This return to a pre-agricultural wilderness entails loss and destruction, but it also allows a renegotiation of the structures of power and social class. So, too, the effect of the enclosure crisis, as Hythloday describes it, is most visible in a change to the lower classes' standard of living: "For not only gentle mennes seruauntes, but also handicrafte men: yea and almooste the ploughmen of the countrey, with al other sortes of people, vse muche straunge and proude newefanglenes in apparell, and to much prodigall riotte, and sumptuous fare at their table."¹⁴³ The plowmen's (or "almost" the plowmen's) "prodigall riotte" is tied to that of the sheep; their small appetites grown larger, both sheep and plowmen eat sumptuously and the realm is given over to

¹⁴² Richard Halpern, *The Poetics of Primitive Accumulation: English Renaissance Culture and the Genealogy of Capital*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991, 155.

¹⁴³ Robynson translation, *Vtopia*, accessed 07/11/19.

“idleness.” To which, Hythloday urges a simple cure: “let husbandry and tillage be restored.” The desire for restoration is a desire for a new beginning but also for a return to an old state—a state that, this time, will not lead to the same destructive end. It is a wish for a new agriculture and a new husbandry to which idleness is not preferable, a system that is not dismantled by individual greed. The enclosure crisis is presented here not a break from but a logical end to a particular way of thinking about husbandry, one based on personal greed and the optimization of profits. The sheep’s overconsumption allows animals to work out the consequences of human demands, and to impose demands of their own. Pushed too far, overexploited, sheep bite.

The *Utopia*’s ravenous flocks weren’t the only imaginary sixteenth-century sheep to display such violent tendencies. In *Henry VI, Part Two*, Shakespeare’s Jack Cade describes sheep as unwitting but potentially devastating agents of harm:

Is not this a lamentable thing, that of the skin of an
innocent lamb should be made parchment? that parchment,
being scribbled o’er, should undo a man? Some say the bee
stings: but I say, ’tis the bee’s wax; for I did but seal
once to a thing, and I was never mine own man
since. (2H6 4.2.71-76)

Cade’s complaint that parchment, the result of an “innocent lamb” undone, taken apart, “should undo a man,” resists blaming lambs for the damage done with their carcasses. Sheep’s meekness allows them to be stripped for parts, parts that, once incorporated in the machinery of the state and the law, oppress the poor. The sting of beeswax, as Cade describes it, is the sting of entanglement in legal structures made possible by animal products and men are undone by undone sheep, by the skins of slaughtered lambs.

Julian Yates describes this moment as the working of a “skin memory:”

a memory that sympathetically transfers the pain of the knife that flays the lamb to human skin that is stung by a seal, because it makes legible the anthropo-zoo-genetic bases to the worlds we live. This virtual pain, pain that went unfelt by the lamb, dead already, endures or dwells within the parchment as a potential that Jack realizes.... The parchment itself a literal and figural passage between them.¹⁴⁴

But it also makes of the sheep a potential weapon, as though harm done to an innocent is stored in that innocent even after death, potentially releasable back against society, turned back against its oppressors. The lamb's death and dismemberment allies it to the poor man who is "undone" by the law. The sheep's injured innocence makes it an emblem of the injured lower classes and its power to harm after its death is a threat about what might happen when the innocent are pushed too far.

A charge to bear

The speeches animals make in fables, or the parts they play in allegories like Raphael Hythloday's or Jack Cades, are projections of human voices. But there is one exception to this rule: when animals cede power over themselves to humans in fables, they are understood to be speaking on their own behalf, insofar as what they are saying is an assent to the status quo, to their exploitation by humans. This exceptional utterance is precisely what is dramatized in Philip Sidney's *Old Arcadia*, in the Ister Bank eclogue, which, like Lydgate's fable, imagines a past in which animals still ruled themselves. Lydgate's animals do not suggest that human power over them might be inherently unjust, but only that it can corrupt humans and lead to unpredictable

¹⁴⁴ Julian Yates, *Of Sheep, Oranges, and Yeast: A Multispecies Impression*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017, 2.

consequences. But in Sidney's poem the transition from a world ruled by animals to one ruled by humans is rocky and violent and raises difficult questions about the responsibilities that come with power.

In the Third Eclogues of the *Old Arcadia*, the shepherds begin to grow quarrelsome, arguing about marriage and love. The shepherd Dicus, "who knew it more wisdom to let a fray than part a fray," turns for this letting to Philisides, asking for a "country song" to distract the angry shepherds.¹⁴⁵ Philisides agrees, and, avoiding the subject of his own sorrows in love, "loath either in time of marriage to sing his sorrows, more fit for funerals, or by any outward matter to be drawn to such mirth as to betray (as it were) that passion to which he had given over himself, he took a mean way betwixt both and sang this song he had learned before he had ever subjected his thoughts to acknowledge no master but a mistress" (255). This story is not about the shepherds' romantic lives, but their professional responsibilities. It avoids the topic of love to describe a different kind of care—indeed, a moment of professional crisis. The shepherd, filled with worry about his charges, cannot find a way forward. He stops, trying instead to hold the moment and his sheep in stasis, to prevent disaster. The

¹⁴⁵ Philip Sidney, *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia: The Old Arcadia (First Edition)*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, www.oxfordscholarlyeditions.com accessed 02/08/19. According to a note in this edition, in text 93 of Sidney's *Old Arcadia*, printed for William Ponsonby in 1593, this passage is altered to add a further reason for Philisides to choose this song: the crowd "would gladly have taken this occasion of requesting Philisides in plainer sort to discover unto them his estate. Which he willing to prevent (as knowing the relation thereof more fit for funerals than the time of a marriage), began to sing." Philisides wants to conceal his "estate" in this version, which is at once the state of his heart (sorrowful because he is in love) and his true social class.

speaker is full of fear about what might happen to his flock, and it seems that this fear is a constant part of his life.

Amid my sheep, though I saw naught to fear,
Yet (for I nothing saw) I feared sore;
Then found I which thing is a charge to bear,
For for my sheep I dreaded mickle more
Than ever for myself since I was bore.
I sat me down, for see to go ne could,
And sang unto my sheep lest stray they should. (256)

This song that allegedly treads a “mean way” between the extreme emotions of romantic love begins with a feeling of “fear” and “dread” that is, it seems, part of the experience of being a shepherd. The fear that the speaker feels for his sheep comes from his awareness of responsibility for them: it is his “charge to bear.”

The song is learned from an older shepherd, of whom the narrator says:

With old true tales he wont mine ears to fill:
How shepherds did of yore, how now, they thrive,
Spoiling their flock, or while twixt them they strive. (256)

The shepherd’s life is full of fear, fear of what might be lurking beyond the limits of one’s sight but also fear of mismanagement, of “spoiling [his] flock.” This idea that shepherds harm their flocks by fighting amongst themselves calls his audience’s attention to their present quarrels. It asks what might have happened to their sheep while they argued about love. Quarrelling is presented as a potential danger to the flock because it distracts the shepherd from his responsibilities.

The song within the song dramatizes the beginning of this responsibility, describing it as a choice made both by the first animals and by the first man. The animals created man to rule them, and man took advantage of the power they gave him

to exploit them. It begins with a description of a time before the domestication of animals:

Such manner time there was (what time I not)
When all this earth, this dam or mould of ours,
Was only woned with such as beasts begot;
Unknown as then were they that builden towers.
The cattle, wild or tame, in nature's bowers
Might freely roam or rest, as seemed them;
Man was not man their dwellings in to hem. (257)

Sung to keep the sheep from wandering, the song weighs the loss of the sheep's freedom, part of that primordial bargain between animals and humans that allowed humans to circumscribe beasts' freedom to roam or rest. This "manner time" is prehistoric in that it takes place before, and until, the beginning of human history and therefore before architecture and agriculture. There are no human structures for animals to be banned from, that have to be protected from animal incursions. Whether or not there was a beastly architecture as well as "beastly policy," there were no bounds to the animals' "dwellings." This word picks up on More's claim, in Robynson's English translation, that sheep are fatal to "dwellings" and will "turne all dwellinge places and all glebeland into desolation and wilderness." Sidney's description of a dwelling-less prior state, an unconstrained and boundless wilderness before men could come around to build in Nature's bowers. This parallel suggests that Hythloday's evocation of the free rein of sheep in England is a story about historical devolution, a return to a state prior to man. Although Hythloday does not put it quite that way, his yoking together of agriculture and architecture and his suggestion that they fall together implies a narrative of human progress in which fields and structures make each other possible and depend on the penning up of animals, the circumscription of their wandering.

Sidney's animals enjoy a long "harmless empire" but, tired of making their own decisions, they come to ask Jove for a king:

Thus man was made; thus man their lord became;
Who at the first, wanting or hiding pride,
He did to beasts' best use his cunning frame,
With water drink, herbs meat, and naked hide,
And fellow-like let his dominion slide,
Not in his sayings saying 'I', but 'we';
As if he meant his lordship common be. (258)

"Wanting or hiding pride," the first man is "fellow-like," "as if" he wants "his lordship common." The man's mind is opaque to the narrator and the beasts. It is in ambiguity that he conceals his true desires: "beasts' best use" means not only the best treatment of beasts but the most effective use of them. This first man is fundamentally ambiguous, and whether or not he has yet decided to exert tyrannical rule over the natural world, that option seems already to be present in the language that describes him. Letting "dominion slide" hovers between praise and blame, as though man, in his initial leniency, is not holding up his obligations. The first man's seeming commonalty with the animals, his failure to exert lordship over them, is at once a triumph of humility and insufficient humanity: "man was not man," we are told, before humans started to put bounds on the wandering of beasts. Thus the state before the development of animal husbandry is not quite a human one. The telescoped "With water drink, herbs meat, and naked hide" hides a variety of meanings; "with," unusually left without an adjoining noun or pronoun, contradicts its meaning by leaving man alone, without any grammatical fulfillment of the preposition. "Drink," "meat," and "hide" could be understood as nouns or verbs, which suggests, in the pun on "naked hide," man's ability to hide (his pride, for his example) even when most exposed. The line's tortuous

grammar is a form of man's fast-talking, but it also suggests a state difficult to express in language, perhaps the state of being animal-like.

The man's leniency is short-lived, and he soon sets to, inventing agriculture and animal husbandry:

But when his seat so rooted he had found
That they now skilled not how from him to wend,
Then gan in guiltless earth full many a wound,
Iron to seek, which gainst itself should bend
To tear the bowels that good corn should send.
But yet the common dam none did bemoan,
Because (though hurt) they never heard her groan.

The man's agricultural pursuits are a betrayal of the "guiltless earth." He wounds it to dig out iron, which is then used, in a further betrayal, to turn the earth's product against itself to, in an ambiguous phrase, "tear the bowels that good corn should send." The passage gestures to familiar paradox of the acorn, and the central question about agriculture in the early modern period, was its beginning necessary or destructive, an enhancement or a betrayal of the earth's natural bounty? The earth "should send" good corn by itself, but does it? Sidney could mean that the man is getting in the way of the earth's sending of good corn by wounding it or that he must do so in order to elicit good corn from the earth. At any rate, the man seems just as interested in eating his fellow creatures as corn, and his first violation of fellowship soon leads to more:

Worst fell to smallest birds, and meanest herd,
Who now his own, full like his own he used.
Yet first but wool, or feathers, off he teared;
And when they were well used to be abused,
For hungry throat their flesh with teeth he bruised

Beasts' "best use", it seems, turns quickly to "abuse." Sidney's speaker warns "man" to "rage not beyond thy need" - to rage at a sustainable level, but not to stop raging

completely. Sidney does not imagine that there is a way for humans to live harmlessly. The description of flesh eating is brutal, imagined as an attack on sheep and birds (animals with “wool” and “feathers”). The description of man tearing wool off sheep then tearing out their throats is brutal and graphic, but it is not accompanied by a plea to abandon the use of animal flesh. Sidney’s evocation of the harm done to animals by the implementation of agriculture and animal husbandry is not balanced by a request to refrain from harming animals.

In the final lines of the song, the shepherd-speaker warns humans:

But yet, O man, rage not beyond thy need;
Deem it no gloire to swell in tyranny.
Thou art of blood; joy not to make things bleed.
Thou fearest death; think they are loath to die.

The speaker argues for empathy, rooted in a common biology (“Thou art of blood; joy not to make things bleed”) and a common fear, the fear of death. The man, made of the very blood he drains from animals, must take on the burden of feeling what they feel. Even if it is impossible to keep “things” from bleeding, it may be possible not to enjoy it. The shepherd urges, not vegetarianism, but thought: “think they are loath to die.” The shepherd addressed a final call to the “beasts” for patience—or, if they prefer, for violent uprising:

A plaint of guiltless hurt doth pierce the sky.
And you, poor beasts, in patience bide your hell,
Or know your strengths, and then you shall do well.

These lines echo the description of the first man turning against the “guiltless earth.” Any attempt to feed humans, whether through agriculture or animal husbandry, turns into a calculation of guilt, a negotiation about whose suffering matters more.

Arguing that this song fits into an “English tradition of political fabling as a form of resistance to unjust power relations,” Annabel Patterson traces this tradition through Lydgate and Spenser to Dryden’s *The Hind and the Panther*.¹⁴⁶ Patterson reads Sidney’s fable as an allegory for the origins of monarchy and British class relations, and her study focuses on fables as political statements. She describes the tradition of the English fable as “a form of resistance to unjust power relations.”¹⁴⁷ In this reading, the beasts are the lower classes, oppressed by the upper class’s greed. Todd Borlik claims, of Annabel Patterson’s reading, that “A more nuanced interpretation will, I think, perceive the ecological and the political as inextricably entangled: that is, readers will be stirred by the poem’s clarion call to restrain the monarch’s authority in proportion to the extent they also recognize a need for limitations on human dominion.”¹⁴⁸ In support of this, Borlik argues that Sidney held “ethical beliefs that would register as green on a modern spectrum” because he “detested hunting” and, in a joust in 1581, forbade anyone to hurt a horse.¹⁴⁹ There is not enough evidence to call Sidney a green thinker or writer, but in his Ister bank eclogue he uses the sheep-shepherd relationship to consider the grounds for allowing the strong to rule the weak, and the potential for “guiltless hurt,” which is at once the suffering of the guiltless and the absence of the feeling of guilt in the one doing the hurting. The poem does not call for a complete halt to the oppression of the weak, but it calls for social and ecological

¹⁴⁶ Annabel Patterson, *Fables of power: Aesopian writing and political history*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1991, 98.

¹⁴⁷ Patterson, 98.

¹⁴⁸ Todd Borlik, *Ecocriticism and Early Modern English Literature: Green Pastures*, London: Routledge, 2011, 174.

¹⁴⁹ Borlik, 174.

responsibility, the awareness – as manifested in thought and feeling – of having a charge to bear.

Philisides, Sidney's speaker, ends his song with call to the "beasts" to "know your strength": either, that is, to submit to their status as the vulnerable charges of men or—contrarily—to recall the power they once possessed and reclaim it through force. This call is met by blank incomprehension both by the sheep it is addressed to and by the shepherds who are listening to Philisides's song. The song ends as pastoral eclogues inevitably end:

Thus did I sing and pipe eight sullen hours
To sheep whom love, not knowledge, made to hear;
Now fancy's fits, now fortune's baleful stours.
But then I homeward called my lambkins dear;
For to my dimmed eyes began t'appear
The night grown old, her black head waxen grey,
Sure shepherd's sign that morn would soon fetch day. (260)

The sheep love the shepherd enough to "hear" him, but perhaps not to understand. They know enough to follow his call to go home but not his summons to rebellion.

Philisides's human audience is more vocal in its response to his poem, but what this audience expresses is confusion:

According to the nature of diverse ears, diverse judgements straight followed: some praising his voice; others the words, fit to frame a pastoral style; others the strangeness of the tale, and scanning what he should mean by it. But old Geron (who had borne him a grudge ever since, in one of their eclogues, he had taken him up over-bitterly) took hold of this occasion to make his revenge and said he never saw thing worse proportioned than to bring in a tale of he knew not what beasts at such a banquet when rather some song of love, or matter for joyful melody, was to be brought forth. 'But', said he, 'this is the right conceit of young men who think then they speak wiseliest when they cannot understand themselves.' (260)

It seems this poem cannot find its audience, for this strange story is wasted on animals and criticized by humans. And, for a song that was told to soothe and distract from an

argument, it only half works, instead giving the shepherds something different to argue about. The song, introduced as an anodyne attempt to put off a fight by distracting the shepherds from the topic of love, is criticized precisely for being beside the point. What is, Geron asks, “a tale of he knew not what beasts” doing at a “such a banquet?” (260). Philisides’s hearers treat the story as a puzzling anomaly, finding it “strange,” if beautifully expressed. If—as Patterson suggests--the sheep are the commons in Philisides’s allegory, the commons in the *Arcadia* seem not to make that connection. In fact, they meet his story with exaggerated incomprehension, outraged at its inapplicability to their lives. Sidney’s urge to “man” to “think” with the beasts, to sympathize with them, is a hint to see themselves in the animals in the fable. But this interpretation requires a sympathy that Philisides’s listeners seem unwilling to feel.

Philisides’s song is sung to smooth the process of animal husbandry, to soothe a flock of sheep by singing about how they should revolt. Taken in the most cynical sense, it is an extreme example of human cunning, of humans’ willingness to talk about “beasts’ best use” even while they “abuse” them. And yet the song also calls with seeming earnestness for identification between beast and man. The thought that the speaker of Philisides’s song advocates, the thought that extrapolates from human to animal experience, is something like Timothy Morton’s “ecological thought,” an awareness of interconnectedness that “involves becoming open, radically open - open forever, without the possibility of closing again.”¹⁵⁰ What, then, might the song teach an audience willing to hear and sympathize with its message? Philisides’s man torments animals out of hunger, his “hungry throat” pointing both to his greed and his need to eat

¹⁵⁰ Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, Boston: Harvard University Press, 2010, 8.

to sustain himself. His hunger is a manifestation of the material basis of human existence. Hunger is the urge to sustain existence, to remain alive. If it were not for humans' hunger, their need to eat, there would be no such thing as agriculture and no exploitation of the earth. For Philisides, hunger is the rage that must be restrained, balanced by an awareness of animals' capacity for pain and fear for their own lives.

What is a tale of "he knew not what beasts" doing at this banquet, Geron asks – a question that Hythloday's auditors might well ask him. Mascall has an answer, when he points out that the sheep's "flesh doth feed both yong and old." Philisides's song reminds his listeners, shepherds and non-shepherds alike, of the material basis of their existence, of where their food comes from – the hard earth and the innocent animals. At the same time, it reminds his listeners of the class system that dictates who works the earth and who profits from that labor. The song, by building an allegory of class around a fable about beasts, points to the suffering, human and animal, or as Tryon calls it, the "Violence and hard Labour both of Man and Beast" on which English society depends. It is a reminder to care, to think, to feel what it is a charge to bear.

Sidney's return to the beginning in the song on Ister Bank suggests that humanity is a state that can only be achieved and maintained by the circumscription of animal freedoms and rights. The moment of man's creation sees the end of animals' use of speech, although human speech is, in Sidney's poem, not a very powerful instrument of persuasion. In fact, the "throat" is the seat of man's hunger and the part of animals' bodies that he attacks with his teeth, in a violent metaphor for his arrogation of their power of speech. The first man uses his words to lie to animals about his intentions, and the shepherds listening to Philisides's song praise his voice while expressing confusion

over his meaning. If animal fable is usually defined as giving voices to animals in Renaissance etymologies, this is an unfabling, an attempt to capture the consequences of holding power over creatures without voices.

beestes and fowles to witness

Sidney's Ister bank eclogue envisions resistance to animal fable, to the sort of thinking that would allow humans to see themselves in animals. It places this resistance in the mouths of pastoral shepherds. On the one hand, their occupation and their closeness to the land and to their flocks belies their claims that animals have nothing to do with them. As Sidney describes the shepherd's life, it is, or should be, a life of constant worry about the welfare of sheep. But Philisides's fellow shepherds seem to disagree, and their open disregard for their sheep is a statement about the genre of pastoral. That the shepherds find the idea of caring for and about their sheep so ridiculous points to the contradiction inherent in pastoral: that it is a genre about animal husbandry in which caring about animals stands out as a divergence from the norm, a distraction from the topic of love.

But Sidney is not alone in using pastoral to discuss responsibility to the weak in general and to animals in particular. His slightly younger contemporary Edmund Spenser also makes sheep a reminder of social responsibility even in the midst of emotional and artistic turmoil. In *The Shepheardes Calender*—published in 1579 with a dedication to Sidney—the sorrows of shepherds, so often reducible to trouble in love or, sometimes, art, take a toll not only on the shepherd himself but also on his sheep. The

sheep's suffering offers a commentary on the shepherd's situation that is not entirely reducible to metaphor, even when it reflects the suffering of the shepherd. In Spenser's "Januarye," the Argument describes the situation as one of "a shepheardes boy... which with strong affection being very sore traueled, he compareth his carefull case to the sadde season of the yeare, to the frostie ground, to the frozen trees, and to his owne winterbeaten flocke."¹⁵¹ But the poem undermines this comparison, pointing out that the sheep do not just happen to reflect the shepherd's state of mind in the way that the frosty ground does. Rather, the sheep's state reflects on the shepherd's care, or lack of care, for them. The poem begins with a description of Colin Clout and his flock, both the worse for wear:

[He] Led forth his flock, that had bene long ypent.
So faynt they woxe, and feeble in the folde,
That now vnnethe their feete could them vphold.
All as the Sheepe, such was the shepeheards looke (4-7)

This mirrored feebleness in shepherd and flock does not have the same cause. Colin's weakness is not a result of being pent up but because "may seeme he lov'd, or els some care he tooke." (8-9). And, at least as he explains it to the sheep, it is because of his "care" that the sheep are so badly cared for:

Thou feeble flock, whose fleece is rough and rent,
Whose knees are weake through fast and euill fare;
Mayst wnesse well by thy ill gouernement,
Thy maysters mind is ouercome with care.
Thou weake, I wanne: thou leane, I quite forlorne:
With mourning pyne I, you with pyning mourne. (43-48)

¹⁵¹ All quotations are from Edmund Spenser, *The Shorter poems*, ed. Richard McCabe, London: Penguin Books, 2008.

While Colin finds even in the frozen ground “a myrhour, to behold my plight” (20), even he does not see in the sheep merely a mirror, a reflection of himself. Rather, the sheep are “pyning” for their shepherd’s care. His “ill gouernment” has led to their weakness. Colin’s “ill gouernment,” the fact that it is his fault that the sheep are doing so badly, makes the sheep’s plight more than an example of the pathetic fallacy. Colin is revealed to be a bad shepherd, his work suffering from the events in his personal life. The sheep are a mirror of his psychic state because that state makes him unable to care for them properly.

At moments when the sheep in Spenser’s eclogues do seem to represent the psychic states of their shepherds, it is usually also possible to read the sheep’s declining health as evidence of neglect. Cuddie in “Februarie” tell Thenot that his “Lambes bene starued with cold, / All for their Maister is lustlesse and old” (83-84) and Willye, in “August” says, as if it is received wisdom, “Neuer knewe I louers sheepe in good plight.” (20) When Diggon says in “September,” referring to foreign shepherds (in an allegory for the “loose liuing of Popish prelates,” according to the Argument) “Sike as the shepheards, sike bene her sheepe,” (141) the syntax emphasizes the reflection of sheep in shepherd, the way in which a “sike” shepherd leads to “sike” sheep, while not elaborating on precisely how this sickness is communicated. This “sike-“ness is at once sickness and suchness. Hobbinoll asks, “But of sike pastoures howe done the flocks creepe?” (141). Just what can be communicated to sheep - sickness, feelings, thoughts? Are they mirrors of the shepherd’s mind? Or do they suffer from his failure to disengage from selfish desires, his inability to see beyond himself? Spenser cultivates this ambiguity, suggesting, by the flocks of suffering sheep hanging around his

suffering shepherds, the unintended consequences of “ill government.” Colin’s sadness is caused by “some care,” but this care is insufficient to extend to his flock; it is not enough care; it isn’t care for the only creatures he is responsible for. Colin’s indulgence in his emotions seems at first to be celebrated by and reflected in the poem, which makes of the ground and trees and sheep mirrors of the shepherd. But the sheep are revealed to be not mirrors but victims. They represent both Colin’s indulgence in the pathetic fallacy and his inability to perceive his effects on those around him. They seem to be within his experience, representative of his emotions. But in fact they are an anchor in reality, a reminder of the experiences Colin cannot share but can, and must, shape.

In his re-reading of the story of Cain and Abel, Thomas Tryon imagines that the world resounds with cries of animals, organisms, and even non-living beings violated and exploited by the humans to which their care was tragically entrusted: “all the Elements mourn, and are filled with the Cries, Groans, and mournful Complaints of their miserable Inhabitants.” This chorus of cries is an echo of Philip Sidney’s claim that “A plaint of guiltless hurt doth pierce the sky.” But even when animals are not crying out, they might still be able to point out the misuse of power: Colin’s sheep “witness well” their shepherd’s distraction with their “ill gouvernement.” As Lydgate points out, fables are a way to “take beestes and fowles to witnes.” Animal witnesses, however imaginary, to the invention of agriculture are ideally positioned to provide a cynical perspective on human history, to comment on the ways in which humans misuse their power over each other, the earth, and its creatures. They speak from inside the agricultural system, both intimately knowledgeable of its workings and painfully aware

of its shortcomings. They offer a corrective to a triumphalist version of human history, speaking for the advantages of living – as Lucretius says the men of the Golden Age did – in the “wandering way of beasts.”

Chapter III. Fishing Before the Net

Medieval and early modern narratives about the invention of agriculture and animal husbandry tend to build from hopeful beginnings toward impending cataclysm, whether this takes the form of ecological collapse or class warfare. The acorn, a contentious and bitter seed, stands for the impossibility of returning to a past relationship with the earth and the sacrifices involved in the pursuit of modernity. Narratives about the beginning of animal husbandry are even more pessimistic about the value of innovation, progress, and the infrastructure involved in maintaining modernity. They tend to represent modernity as the result of a betrayal of the natural world, particularly the animal realm, and they point to the ways in which contemporary human comfort is made possible by the suffering of animals. Both the acorn and the sheep are figures of what is left behind, taken advantage of, and ignored in the rush to improve human life. The acorn is abandoned for grain, while the sheep is dismembered and loses its agency (and, in some tellings, its voice) to serve human interests.

The story of the invention of fishing uses the elements of innovation and apocalypse to build an entirely different narrative about human progress. It presents innovation not as the cause of environmental degradation, but as a necessary response to ecological apocalypse. As a result, its temporal orientation is projected forward: it is not an emblem the past (like the forgotten acorn) or an embodiment of the present (like the suffering sheep) but a prescription for the future. Angling is an art of improvement, one that grows ever more advanced and promises to advance its practitioners, too. In this respect, fishing proves an unexpectedly rich and resonant analogue to the dominant early modern discipline of self-improvement: the art of rhetoric. As I show in what follows,

historians, philosophers, and poets alike turned to fishing as a sister-technology to the arts of language: at once an analogue to, and an occasion for thinking about, the affordances of a well-honed hook or a supple line. As I also suggest, over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, fish themselves became a strikingly redolent--at times oppressively rank--figure for the material form in which language was embodied, that most transformative of early modern technologies: the printed book.

Technology, desire, and the pleasurable tool

The identification of fishing as a world- and self-transforming art is evident in John Dennys's *Secrets of angling*, "the first extant fishing poem in English," published in 1613 and reprinted several times throughout the seventeenth century.¹⁵² This poem begins as a technological epic. The First Book opens with "Of *Angling*, and the art thereof I sing, / What kind of Tooles / It doth behoue to haue; / And with what pleasing bayt a man may bring / The Fish to bite within the watry waue."¹⁵³ Self-consciously epic rather than georgic or pastoral in tone, this fishing poem sets out to praise and anatomize the instruments and techniques of angling, while advertising the "shamelesse pleasure" it affords. In the body of the poem, the tools of fishing are described in loving detail: "The hooke I love that is incompast round / Like to the print that *Pegasus* did make, / With horned hoof upon *Thessalian* ground." The fetishistic tone of the description is

¹⁵² Nicholas Smith, "Dennys, John (d. 1609), poet," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <https://www.oxforddnb.com>, accessed 02/18/2020.

¹⁵³ These lines and all subsequent quotations come from the EEBO digitized edition of the 1613 Folger Library edition, which has no line or page numbers; these lines are in the section, "Hooks."

fundamental to the discourse of fishing as desire. When Dennys writes of the ideal hook that "His *Shank* should neither be too short nor long, / His point not over sharpe, nor yet too dull: / The substance good that may indure from wrong; / His needle slender, yet both round and full." he offers both an instruction manual and a blazon, a catalogue of use and of sensuous beauty. By contrast, fish figure surprisingly little in the poem: the real objects of longing are the gleaming and shapely tools by which they may be caught. Indeed, catching fish seems at times almost a pretext for the pleasure to be found in fishing itself—not as a means to an end, but as the ongoing perfection of *techne*.

Dennys's investment in fishing is thus neither utilitarian nor merely aesthetic, but practical: fishing is an expression of human ingenuity. When he narrates the invention of angling, he therefore places it not at the origins of agriculture, but as a response to agricultural disaster. He initially demurs from explaining "how this Art of Angling did beginne, / And who the vse thereof and practise found,/ How many times and ages since haue bin," claiming that "[i]t were too hard for me to bring about, / Since Ouid wrote not all that story out." But he nonetheless proceeds to recite and significantly expand the story of the flood in Book One of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, reinterpreting it as an etiology of fishing and of science. In Dennys's telling, as in Ovid's, of the old race of humans Deucalion and Pirrha alone survive the flood, and they must begin a new human race by throwing stones over their shoulders. But Dennys adds that, although the earth was then "replenished a new / With people strange, sprung vp with little paine," its plant and animal life was not, so that these strange new people had nothing to eat:

But now a greater care there did insue,
How such a mightie number to maintaine,
Since foode there was not any to be found,

For that great flood had all destroyed and drowned.¹⁵⁴

In Ovid's telling, boating and fishing figure as signs of the flood's destructiveness: one farmer "sits in his curved skiff, plying the oars where lately he has plowed; one sails over his fields of grain or the roof of his buried farmhouse; another man fishes in the topmost branches of an elm."¹⁵⁵ Dennys draws out the implied agricultural crisis, but cuts the reference to the tree-top fisherman: in his view, fishing is not part of the disaster; it's the obvious remedy.

Thus Deucalion, once he has regenerated humanity, invents the art of angling:

with practise and inuentiue wit,
He found the meanes in euery lake and brooke
Such store of Fish to take with litle paine,
As did long time this people new sustaine.

The repetition of "little pain" to describe both the miraculous emergence of the new human race and the catching of fish characterize the period after the flood as a time of spontaneous creativity, a time when innovation can be achieved with even the most rudimentary tools, such as rocks and hooks. Reproduction and the getting of food are denaturalized, but also streamlined—almost automated.

This might well be the start of a story of degeneration, a dystopian decline from primal ease and natural joy into artifice, labor, and discontent. If this were a story about acorns, it would be. But Dennys's conclusion is that, although everything else might have gotten worse in the flood's wake, fishing just keeps on getting better:

¹⁵⁴ John Dennys, *Secrets of angling: teaching, the choisest tooles baytes and seasons, for the taking of any fish, in pond or riuer*, 1613, Beinecke Uzk23 613d. All quotations are from this edition.

¹⁵⁵ Translation by Frank Justus Miller, revised by G. P. Goold, Ovid, *Metamorphoses, Volume I*, Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1916, I.293-4

So worse and worse two ages more did passe,
Yet still this Art more perfect daily grew,
For then the slender Rod inuented was,
Of finer sort then former ages knew,
And Hookes were made of siluer and of brasse,
And Lines of Hempe and Flaxe were framed new,
And sundry baites experience found out more,
Then elder times did know or try before.

But at the last the Iron age drew neere,
Of all the rest the hardest, and most scant,
Then Lines were made of Silke and subtle hayre
And Rods of lightest Cane and Hazell plant,
And Hookes of hardest steele inuented were,
That neither skill nor workemanship did want,
And so this Art did in the end attaine
Vnto that state vvhether now it doth remaine.

The "skill and workemanship" of fishing is the perfection of art, the slow growth of techne from age to age as obsolete models are replaced by newer and more advanced ones. Flax is replaced by more "subtle" material, its grossness ceding to the deceptive slenderness and tensile strength of silk and hair. Hooks keep growing "finer," until they are made of "hardest steel." An obdurate age makes for an indestructible hook. Pain increases, too—but for Dennys it retains its double meaning of suffering and diligence. The perfection of the iron age is precisely fitted to its scantness and hardness: life is crueler, but technology is proportionately more advanced.

Perhaps for this reason, stories about the invention of fishing, unlike those about the invention of animal husbandry, are not ripe for political interpretation as metaphors for the abuse and exploitation of the lower classes. Fish do grow wary of men, Dennys explains, but their wariness only spurs the refinement of techniques and tools for trapping them; their mistrust, calls not for empathy, but for better technology. In his poem, and most others that follow, fish want no relief from pain but for men to take more and

greater pains: to make finer and better bait, a harder and shinier hook. In this sense, fish are both the objects of human consumption and the consumers of human artifice. They must be known individually, their tastes and characters understood, and, being known, they must be invited to dinner. "Sundry baits experience found out more, / Then elder times did know or try before," writes Dennys, with a healthy reverence for the march of progress, the advancement of technology. At times, it can almost seem as if the beneficiaries are the fish themselves.

To put it another way, the "experience" on which the art of fishing depends is a curiously interspecies affair. Bait is both the result of "experience," in the sense of trial or experimentation by the fisherman, and itself an "experience" for the fish who either disdains or enjoys it. In his 1657 treatise *Barker's Delight, or the Art of Angling*, Thomas Barker describes using salmon roe as bait in a similarly ambiguous way, characterizing the "experience" of fishing as an experiment, an occurrence, and a hard-won skill: "I have found an experience of late, which you may angle with, and take great store of fish."¹⁵⁶ The OED describes this usage of "experience" as: "A piece of experimental knowledge; a fact, maxim, rule, or device drawn from or approved by experience; *concrete* something expertly fashioned."¹⁵⁷ The bait is discovered by experience, and fishing with it is the experience that results from discovery. It's a feedback loop of experimental progress, and it can be hard to say who is feeding whom, and why.

¹⁵⁶ Quoted in Izaak Walton, *The Complete Angler*, London: Nathaniel Cook, 1854, note to page 198.

¹⁵⁷ "Experience, n." 7b, OED, <https://www.oed.com>, accessed 12/30/19.

Tellingly, when Dennys defends his art against an imagined fishing sceptic, he does so by arguing not that it is productive or necessary, but that it yields "delight" and "delectation"—for men and for fish. Of course, this opens him to further critique, as he supposes: "some youthfull *Gallant*" will judge it "A poore delight with toyle and painfull watch, / With losse of time a silly Fish to catch." The Gallant suggests that other pastimes, mainly cards and the wooing of women, offer both "[m]ore ease" and "more delight." Dennys rejects these pastimes as "bad delights" because they cause strife and ruin men's health. The angler, on the other hand, sits and looks at God's earth and its creatures and "takes therein no little delectation, / To thinke how strange and wonderfull they be." Angling is advertised not as a variant on hunting or farming, but as an analogue to contemplation and study. The angler has time to examine the wonders of nature and ponder the mysteries and marvels it contains. In this sense, he a scientist of sorts, a natural philosopher as well as a theologian and a bon vivant, reveling in his growing understanding of nature. The primary object of his contemplation are the fish he hopes to catch: as Dennys and Barker both suggest, the expert fisherman is intensely focused on the desires of fish. Fishing is a strange seduction—closer to courtship than Dennys's youthful gallant might guess—for the angler must convince the fish to take the hook by understanding what it is the fish wants.

Angling is a *techne* of temptation. Thus the anonymous author of the 1614 fishing guide *A ievvell for gentrie* promises to teach the reader "what baytes be best for euery kinde of fish, for all times and seasons of the yéere," terming this "the principall part of this Art" of fishing, "for there is no man can make a fish to swallow the hooke without

the bayte.”¹⁵⁸ This truism leads to a very peculiar sort of food writing, the writing of recipes to serve to fish. Not just one recipe will suffice; different fish have different tastes, some quite elaborate.

For example, the author of *A ievvell for gentrie* writes of the tench:

The Tench is a good fish, and healeth, in a manner, all other fish that be hurt, if they may come to him... and his baytes be these: For all the yéere, browne Bread toasted with Honey, the likenesse of a bantred loafe, and the great red worme, and take the blacke bloud in the heart of a Sheepe, and Flower and Honey, and temper them all together, so make them softer then paste and annoynt the Red worme therewith, both for this fish and for others, and they will bite much the better thereat at all times of the yéere.

Somewhere between a recipe and a lesson in folk natural history, this passage implies that knowing what bait to use means understanding the character and temperament of a particular fish, knowing how to entice him. And it assumes a striking degree of reciprocity: the angler cooks the fish a final meal in the form of bait compounded of all his favorite things, in order to make a meal of the same fish after. Fishing arises from a shared need to eat, and a shared desire to eat well.

Readers are being enticed, too. The title of *A ievvell for gentrie* uses a relatively common analogy between books and jewels or other precious objects to advertise the interest and value of its contents.¹⁵⁹ Implicit in the title, too, is an association between the apparatus of fishing—lines, hooks, bait—and the honed and polished tools of readerly seduction. In Dennys’s poem in praise of fishing, the description of the refinement of fishing lines winks at familiar metaphors for the perfection of the poetic line, and of the

¹⁵⁸ All quotations are from T.S., *A ievvell for gentrie*, 1614, <http://eebo.chadwyck.com>, accessed 10/26/2019.

¹⁵⁹ See OED "jewel, n." definition I.

vernacular itself.¹⁶⁰ "Lines of Hempe and Flaxe were framed new," he writes, before "Lines were made of Silke and subtle Hayre." The making of lines, in this poem about the advancement of angling, is at once the creation of new and improved fishing tackle and the writing of poetry to document that creation. Thus, angling is a metonym of all scientific advancement but also a metaphor for the sharpening of language into a more refined tool. Catherine Nicholson discusses the use of metaphors around cloth for the vernacular in *Uncommon Tongues: Eloquence and Eccentricity in the English Renaissance*, citing Thomas Wilson on the difficulty of translating Ancient Greek into English: "All can not weare Veluet, or feede with the best, and therefore such are contented for necessities sake to weare our Countrie cloth, and to take themselues to harde fare, that can haue no better."¹⁶¹ But where Wilson sees written English as a hard but dependable necessity, Dennys finds in it a tool that by its very hardness can meet the needs of a hard world. This art, too, can "more perfect daily grow."

The small but significant subgenre of early modern love lyrics about fishing make this association explicit, using angling as a playful and provocative metaphor for linguistic seduction and physical entanglement. As its title suggests, John Donne's poem *The Bait* both discusses and is bait:

Come live with me, and be my love,
And we will some new pleasures prove
Of golden sands and crystal brooks,
With silken lines and silver hooks. (1-4)¹⁶²

¹⁶⁰ Catherine Nicholson, *Uncommon Tongues: Eloquence and Eccentricity in the English Renaissance*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014, 78.

¹⁶¹ Cited in Nicholson 78.

¹⁶² All quotations are from John Donne, ed. Robin Robbins, *The Complete Poems of John Donne*, London: Longman, 2008.

The poem's silken lines orchestrate a mutual entrapping, with the imagined fish—a double for the speaker—"Gladder to catch thee than thou him" (12). Spenser's Sonnet XLVII in the *Amoretti* likewise casts the lover as a captured fish, though this prey is less happy with his fate:

Trust not the treason of those smyling lookes,
vntill ye haue theyr guylefull traynes well tryde:
for they are lyke but vnto golden hookes,
that from the foolish fish theyr bayts doe hyde:
So she with flattrring smyles weake harts doth guyde
vnto her loue, and tempte to theyr decay,
whome being caught she kills with cruell pryde,
and feeds at pleasure on the wretched pray:
Yet euen whylst her bloody hands them slay,
her eyes looke louely and vpon them smyle:
that they take pleasure in her cruell play,
and dying doe them selues of payne beguyle.
O mighty charm which makes men loue theyr bane,
and thinck they dy with pleasure, liue with payne.¹⁶³

This is a poem about the fatal confusion of pleasure and suffering, fear and desire, and the convoluted syntax of the fourth line allows for the image of fish attracted to hooks and surprised by bait. The reverse is surely what's intended, but the idea of the hook as bait, its decorative exterior masking its vicious nature, is present in Donne's poem, too, where the gleaming hook is silver rather than golden. The image of the beautiful hook collapses desire and its painful consequences just as fishing—or lovemaking—might: there is difficulty separating pain from pleasure in the "cruell play" of angling, for fish or for love. Bait likewise turns pleasure to pain: to consume it is to love one's bane, to be

¹⁶³Edmund Spenser, *The Poetical Works of Edmund Spenser: In Three Volumes, Vol. 1: Spenser's Minor Poems*, Oxford Scholarly Editions Online, <https://www.oxfordscholarlyeditions.com/>, accessed 12/30/19. <https://www.oxfordscholarlyeditions.com/view/10.1093/actrade/9780198118237.book.1/actrade-9780198118237-div2-89>

poisoned and to enjoy it. The repetition of the word "pleasure," which slips between fisher and prey, adds to the confusion. What is pain that feels like pleasure, if not pleasure? Does it matter whose pleasure or pain this is? If fishing is the seduction of the natural world, it also offers a way of talking about poetry, another painful and painstaking art. The cheerfulness of Donne's fish and the self-loathing of Spenser's are both responses to being hooked on something artificial and untrustworthy, something beautiful and slippery and cruel.

The question of whether poetry is worth the trouble it often entails—for poets or for readers—hovers in the background of *The Bait* when it reappears in the mid-seventeenth century, in the best-known early modern book on fishing, Izaak Walton's *The Compleat Angler*. Walton, a friend and biographer of Donne, wrote his discourse—cast as a conversation between a fisherman and traveler in the first edition and, in the second edition, among a fisherman, a hunter, and a falconer—in 1653.¹⁶⁴ Although it is structured as a dialogue and often called a fishing manual, Walton's text is also, as Marjorie Swann points out, a "commonplace book, displaying both the fish lore and the poems [Walton] has amassed over the years."¹⁶⁵ As John Miller suggests, the conjunction of poetic material and instructions for anglers foregrounds "the structural and affective similarities of fishing and reading."¹⁶⁶ Walton's characters recite a great deal of poetry as

¹⁶⁴ Jessica Martin, J. "Walton, Izaak (1593–1683), author and biographer," Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-28653/version/0>, accessed 06/08/20.

¹⁶⁵ Marjorie Swann, "The Compleat Angler and the Early Modern Culture of Collecting," *English Literary Renaissance* 2007 37:1, 114.

¹⁶⁶ John Miller, "Reading as Pastoral Experience in Walton's *Compleat Angler*," *Reader* 53, 24.

they fish, both to celebrate a catch and to pass the time. But they also treat poetry as an alternative, or even antidote, to angling. Venator, the hunter, recites *The Bait* in order to lighten the discourse of fishing, "which now grows both tedious and tiresome." He suggests that the poem served a similar function for Donne, who "made [it] to shew the world that he could make soft and smooth verses, when he thought smoothness worth his labour: and I love them the better, because they allude to Rivers, and Fish and Fishing."¹⁶⁷ A poem about fishing provides an escape from the rigors of other poems, and the tedium of fishing itself. Piscator, Walton's fisherman, naturally takes a sunnier view of his chosen pursuit: his own angling poem argues for the angler as alone among men in being entirely free. All other sports—hunting, say, or lovemaking—are traps, taking possession of the mind and body. Fishing, being largely passive and almost purely thoughtless once the fly is cast, leaves the fisherman at liberty to pursue other ends:

Of Recreation there is none
So free as fishing is alone;
All other pastimes do no less
Then mind and body both possess;
My hand alone my work can do,
So I can fish and study too. (80)

A mindless pastime promotes intellectual labor. Fishing is thus productive idleness, doubly so in that it yields both studious thoughts and fish. The self is divided into fishing hand and studying mind—each of which is strikingly untethered from the other. Snares, lures, and fetters await lovers and hunters, but fishing sets the body free of the mind and the mind free of the material plane.

¹⁶⁷All quotations are from Izaak Walton, *The compleat angler or, The contemplative man's recreation*, quod.lib.umich.edu, 1653, accessed 12/30/19, 185.

The idea of fishing as a "free... recreation" makes it at once a free man's recreation, one that does not depend on the convenience or sufferance of other people, a kind of eighth liberal art, but also a recreation free of most what one might expect of recreation. The contrast with John Dennys's Deucalian art, which concentrates all effort and ingenuity into itself, is striking. For Walton, fishing is not a distillation of human art and science but a vacancy in which they can flourish. It is boring enough to be enlivened by reciting poetry and effortless enough to allow for the contemplation of philosophical quandaries. Unbound by thought or physical exertion, it fosters distraction, becoming habit or second nature. It is not, perhaps, an art at all, but a rarified form of leisure.

Walton may lean hard on describing fishing as leisure, not labor, precisely because he also sees angling as a metaphor for the potentially dangerous, addictive search for knowledge about the material world. If the angler aspires to detachment in his fishing, the fish's downfall is literally in becoming attached:

And when the timerous *Trout* I wait
To take, and he devours my bait,
How poor a thing sometimes I find
Will captivate a greedy mind:
And when none bite, I praise the wise,
Whom vain alurements ne're surprise. (81)

The taking of bait becomes a metaphor for all entanglement in the world, for all interest and desire. Despite its "timerous" nature, the trout is ensnared by bait that promises both nourishment and entertainment. The angler himself does not stand as aloof from the folly as he pretends; on the contrary, he and the fish are now connected by that "poor... thing," bait strung on a line. The fisherman's smug condemnation of those captivated by "vain alurements" is at odd with his figurative and literal entanglement in the scene that prompts the reflection.

For Walton, fishing never truly escapes the drama of desire: this becomes obvious in the mystical figure of the "Fordig Trout," Piscator's Moby Dick. Of this sort of trout, Piscator reveals,

none have been known to be caught with an Angle, unless it were one that was caught by honest Sir *George Hastings*, an excellent Angler (and now with God) and he has told me, he thought that *Trout* bit not for hunger, but wantonness; and 'tis the rather to be believed, because both he then, and many others before him have been curious to search into their bellies what the food was by which they lived; and have found out nothing by which they might satisfie their curiositie. (86)

The trout's wantonness in biting not for hunger but from a kind of abject recklessness is matched here by the angler's curiosity, which reduces him to cutting up fish for information. His superiority fallen away, the angler is reduced to rummaging in the trout's stomach to search out the mystery of its appetite—his own will have to wait. The case of the fish that eats nothing leads Walton to a deeper imponderable, the case of the mouthless fish, which is impossible to bait and therefore to catch: "it is reported, there is a fish that hath not any mouth, but lives by taking breath by the porins of her gills, and feeds and is nourish'd by no man knows what." Both the Fordig Trout and this mouthless fish want nothing, or else want "no man knows what." The mouthless fish is also a nameless fish: it cannot be caught and therefore cannot be known. It resists observation and repulses curiosity and, therefore, endures. The uncatchable, unnameable fish resides at the limits of human knowledge and technique, beyond the reach of persuasion and or study. Its lack of appetite protects it from being eaten and from being known. Its empty stomach is the gap at the heart of art and science both, an absence where evidence should be.

Fish and the Material Record

In early modern England, then, fishing represents both a utopian fantasy of endless human progress and a melancholy perception of inevitable human limitations: there is always more to know, which is either reason for optimism or a spur to humility. In the broader tradition of European humanism, stretching back to the late medieval period, fish and the water they inhabit are figures for a very particular body of knowledge and its unfathomable contents: the depths of history and its fragmentary remains. Fish are images—and, on rare occasions, literal embodiments—of historical crisis. They excite curiosity then thwart it, reminding humans of how little they know, and how much they have forgotten. Thus, in what is thought to be the first printed cookbook, *De honesta voluptate et valetudine*, the Italian humanist and papal writer Bartolomeo Sacchi, better known as Platina, finds in fish an emblematic failure of the historical record.¹⁶⁸

I had decided to speak about the nature and force [*de natura et vi*] of all fish if only their names had not disturbed me by being changed and confused [*transmutata et confusa*]. There really is no species of living things which has lost the names and descriptions of its separate kinds more than the fish. This era and that of those before us did it through carelessness and ignorance. I shall speak, though, as accurately as possible about the ones that come to our tables, especially those whose names have remained intact until now.¹⁶⁹

It isn't only the fish we can't catch that have no names, Platina laments; the names of all fish been lost, corrupted, or changed. A properly comprehensive study is impossible; a mere cookbook is all that can be attempted. Where there might have been tables of fish,

¹⁶⁸ "Platina, Il." Treccani, <http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/il-platina/>, accessed 06/09/20.

¹⁶⁹ Platina, translated by Mary Ella Milham, *On Right Pleasure and Good Health*, Tempe: Arizona, 1998, Book X, 420.

properly classed and enumerated, edible and inedible alike, there are only fish for the table.

Disturbed in mind, Platina regards fish as an unpromising food, one that disturbs the digestion too: "All fish... are considered hard to digest, because of their coldness and sliminess," he cautions. "Besides, they generate cold and phlegmatic blood from which various serious illnesses arise, soften the nerves and prepare them for paralysis, and arouse thirst."¹⁷⁰ Is the fish food or poison? The fish's sliminess, its coldness, and its phlegmatic nature seem of a piece with its taxonomic irregularity, allowing the fish to be consumed at great risk but never with confidence or understanding. The paralysis for which fish prepare the nerves seems to affect the mind, or maybe the writing hand. Why else would no one have thought to write down their names? Far from signifying the unceasing march of human progress, fishing for Platina is haunted by an awareness of the lost and forgotten knowledge of the past.

Writing over a century after Platina, Francis Bacon also turns to the ocean as a figure for the immensity and obscurity of the past. Despite the optimism of its title, his 1605 treatise *The Advancement of Learning* is famously concerned with the ways in which scholasticism has corrupted the ancient studies of philosophy and natural history, insisting that intellectual recovery—not to mention progress—depends on a restructuring of knowledge and a transformation of scholarly methods. In an oft-quoted passage, he characterizes what others call history as mere flotsam from the wreckage of history itself: "Antiquities or Remnants of History are, as was said, *tanquam tabula naufragii*, when industrious persons by an exact and scrupulous diligence and observation, out of

¹⁷⁰ Platina Book X, 421.

monuments, names, words, proverbs, traditions, private records and evidences, fragments of stories, passages of books that concern not story, and the like, do save and recover somewhat from the deluge of time."¹⁷¹ Karen Newman explains the "complex pun" in Bacon's image of the *tabula naufragii*:

Though *tabula* is usually translated in modern editions as 'board' or 'plank,' thus 'like the planks of a shipwreck,' *tabula* also means an offering against shipwreck.... But there is an additional network of meanings: *tabula* also denotes a writing tablet or slate, a list or schedule, an account book or ledger, a formal accusation, a statute, public records, state papers - in other words, all those historical antiquities Bacon enumerates."¹⁷²

Bacon uses the sea to stand for the passage of time that engulfs the material record of the past, but it is also the material record itself, a confused and changeable mass out of which historical understanding is plucked, partially and at random. No matter how heroically Bacon and Platina try to piece together a history from what they find lying around, they are surrounded by evidence of loss and decay: a sea of unreadable manuscripts and drowned books.

Between Bacon and Platina, over the eventful course of the sixteenth century, a version of natural history emerges that is also, necessarily and self-consciously, book history: a study of the world in which material texts are both the means and the obstacles to understanding. Within this emerging discipline, the ocean and its creatures are repeatedly invoked as metaphors for the wreckage of history and for the cunning attempt to salvage knowledge from it. In Desiderius Erasmus's popular collection of *Adagia*, republished and expanded in multiple editions over the first few decades of the sixteenth

¹⁷¹ Quoted in Karen Newman, *Cultural Capitals: Early Modern London and Paris*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007, 122.

¹⁷² Newman 122.

century, the ocean is a potent figure for the unplumbed corpus of ancient manuscripts and the swelling archive of print. In relation to the adage "festina lente," or "hurry slowly," Erasmus explains that the "faculties and nature of the dolphin" by which the "festina" part of the adage is represented, are such that it is one of the "leaders among fishes" (14).¹⁷³ "No prey... can escape the dolphin's speed," and when speed alone does not do the trick, it will hold its breath for long periods of time (14). For Erasmus, the dolphin's indefatigable desire to catch what it sets its sights on makes it a "symbol" for "the sharp and indefatigable impulse of the mind" (14). Aldus Manutius, the Venetian printer, rightly inherits the figure of the dolphin as part of his printer's mark, Erasmus claims, because

Aldus was as it were born on purpose and, I might say, formed and fashioned by the Fates themselves for learning's benefit, so ardently he desires this one thing only, with such tireless zeal he toils and shirks no labor or hardship so that he might restore the whole of literature entire, unblemished, and pure back to the possession and the hearts of good people. (15)

This attempt to make literature whole takes the form of bibliographic effort:

If some god, a friend to literature, were to look kindly on these beautiful and kingly wishes of our Aldus — and if malevolent spirits let him be — within a few years I could promise there would be available to scholars in all fields of study whatever good authors are extant in four languages, Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and Chaldean, and that students would have each one of these works in full and correct text, and no one would lack for the least crumb of the feast of literature. At the same time the true number of good manuscripts still hidden would come to light, codices so far either oppressed by the neglect or suppressed by the ambition of certain people, whose only desire is that they alone may seem to know anything. Then at last it will be known just how many horrendous mistakes pullulate in the texts of the classics, even those which we now think sufficiently emended. (15)

¹⁷³ All quotations and translations are from Desiderius Erasmus, "*Festina Lente*," (*Adagia II.1.1, 1525*): *A hypertext edition by Otto Steinmayer*, <http://www.philological.bham.ac.uk/speude/trans.html>, 2001, accessed 06/10/20.

The dolphin and anchor emblem itself is one example of a piece of the past saved from obscurity. As Erasmus explains, it is based in Roman antiquity:

Aldus has taken as his own this same device which once so pleased Vespasian. He has multiplied it and made it not only famous, but also most beloved by everyone everywhere in the world who understands and loves literature. I do not believe that this symbol was so illustrious when it was stamped on the imperial money and carried around to be rubbed by the fingers of merchants, than now when it has been printed on the title-pages of books of all sorts, in both languages, among all nations, even those beyond the borders of Christendom. (15)

In this optimistic vision of the relationship between past and present, the dolphin emblem takes on meaning and momentum by being reproduced and circulated. It comes to stand for the slow piecing together of antiquity by the study of ancient manuscripts, and the rapid transmission of new knowledge by means of the printing press.

Vox Piscis

The *Adagia* was one of the most famous and widely read books in early modern Europe: the first blockbuster success of the age of print. The same is emphatically not true of an anonymous 1627 pamphlet called *Vox Piscis*, "The Voice of the Fish," which was itself a reproduction a yet more obscure text: a collection of three religious tracts found in the stomach of a codfish supposed to be sold at the Cambridge Market. But *Vox Piscis* and the bizarre textual object it was based on both testify to the potency of the association Erasmus makes between fish and books, oceanic expanses and the sea of human understanding. The "book-fish" was, for a brief time, the object of zoological and book-historical enquiry, absorbed for study into the Cambridge colleges and never seen again. But its reproduction, in print, with illustrations and a graphic description, kept it in

circulation, in whatever unrecognizable new form—a fact on which the pamphlet itself muses. *Vox Piscis* delves deeply into the complexities of historical reconstruction, the ways in which the past thrusts itself upon the attention of the present and the ways that it eludes our grasp. Even the recent past can be slippery, as the pamphlet reveals in its effort to compile from damaged sources a reliable and coherent account of the chain of events that brought these religious pamphlets to this fish, and this fish to Cambridge—touching along the way upon the English educational system, religious persecution, and the feeding habits of cod.

Vox Piscis foregrounds the evolving identity of print as technology, commodity, and bait, turning an anecdote about a miraculous fish into a site of inquiry into what can be known from the study of history, what harm history might do to the careless inquirer, and how to market books to a public that really wants fish. It is also persistently conscious of its own status and responsibilities as a representation of the past. Although it was printed in London (for James Boler and Robert Milbourne) in 1627, the pamphlet relates an incident that took place in Cambridge a year before, including detailed descriptions of local geography and Cambridge Market regulars. The religious pamphlets found in the body of the miraculous fish are themselves reprinted in full, but only following a lengthy introduction by an anonymous editor (now usually assumed to be the Cambridge divine Thomas Goad) enumerating the peculiar circumstances of their discovery. According to Goad, a cod was brought to the fish market in the university town of Cambridge on Midsummer's Eve 1626.¹⁷⁴ It was cut up "as usually others are for

¹⁷⁴ Anonymous, *Vox Piscis or the Book-Fish*, Beinecke Me45 F916 V9, 13. All quotations are from this copy. Midsummer's Eve is traditionally celebrated in Britain on

sale" by "*Iacomy Brand* (the wife of *William Brand* one of those partners)," who, without examining the contents closely, threw its guts onto a pile of garbage. At this point "another woman, casually standing by," caught sight of a canvas wrapping inside the fish which, when unwrapped, was found to contain "a book *in decimo sexto*, containing in it three treatises bound vp in one." At this point, "*Benjamin Prime* the Bachelors Beadle (who also was present at the opening of the fish)" took control of the book and brought it to "the Vice-chancellor of the Vniuersity" who arranged for "*Daniel Boys* a Book-binder" to clean the pages and restore them to legibility. Both before and after it was restored, Goad notes, it was "shewed vnto many" at the university.

The discovery of the book-fish was a minor sensation in Cambridge and elsewhere: Goad claims that "diuers letters were written by Scholars of the Vniuersitie to their friends abroad, relating the particulars of this accident whereof themselves were eye-witnesses." One such letter was sent by Professor Samuel Ward to Archbishop Ussher in the context of their ongoing correspondence about collecting unusual books. Ussher was helping Ward to purchase some books from Leiden for the university, and in his letter of June 27th, 1626, Ward first congratulates Ussher on acquiring "an old Manuscript of that *Syrian* Translation, of the *Pentateuch* out of the *Hebrew*" and thanks him for his efforts on the library's behalf.¹⁷⁵ Then he turns to a less valuable, but perhaps more astonishing bibliographic find:

the 23rd, St John's Eve. *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. "Midsummer's Eve", accessed December 08, 2015, <http://www.britannica.com/topic/Midsummers-Eve>.

¹⁷⁵"Letter C" in James Ussher, ed. Richard Parr, *The life of the Most Reverend Father in God, James Usher, late Lord Arch-Bishop of Armagh, ... collected and published from original copies under their own hands, by Richard Parr*, London: for Nathanael Ranew, 1686, Wing P 548. Also excerpted as "Letter CXI" in James Ussher and Charles Richard Elrington, *The Whole Works of the Most Rev. James Ussher, D.D., Lord Archbishop of*

There was the last week a Cod-fish brought from *Colchester* to our Market to be sold; in the cutting up which, there was found in the Maw of the Fish, a thing which was hard; which proved to be a Book of a large 16°, which had been bound in Parchment, the Leaves were glewed together with a Gelly. And being taken out, did smell much at the first; but after washing of it, Mr. *Mead* did look into it. It was printed; and he found a Table of the Contents. The Book was intituled, *A preparation to the Cross*, (it may be a special admonition to us at *Cambridg*). Mr. *Mead*, upon *Saturday*, read to me the Heads of the Chapters, which I very well liked of. Now it is found to have been made by *Rich. Tracy*, of whom *Bale* maketh mention, *Cent. 9. p. 719*. He is said to flourish then 1550. But, I think, the Book was made in King *Henry* the Eighth's Time, when the six Articles were a-foot. The Book will be printed here shortly.¹⁷⁶

In the context of the correspondence between these men, the discovery of the book-fish is both a bizarre anomaly and a familiar event, a marvel which Ward can reduce to a conventional sequence of scholarly descriptors: size, binding, title, contents, printer, possible date of publication. Indeed, what is most striking about Ward's account is its matter-of-factness: he approaches the book-fish like the bibliographer he was, carefully describing its physical state and offering learned guesses as to the context in which it was produced.

For obvious reasons—he was appealing to a commercial audience, not a scholarly friend—Goad's account of the book-fish is more vividly occupied with the strange circumstances of its incarnation. According to Goad, the condition of the bound

Armagh, and Primate of All Ireland : Now for the First Time Collected, with a Life of the Author, and an Account of His Writings (Dublin : Hodges, Smith, 1864). *Vox Piscis* goes into much the same sort of detail as Ward – although not the same details, because Ward and the author of *Vox Piscis* disagree about some points. While Goad says the fish came from King's Lynn, Ward claims it came from Colchester. Colchester is, like King's Lynn, approximately forty miles from Cambridge (according to Google Mapse). While Ward claims the book was covered in parchment, Goad claims it was wrapped in canvas. Ward says it was cleaned by a Mr. Mead, while Goad claims it was given to a Daniel Boys to clean. And, most importantly, while Ward ascribes its authorship to Richard Tracy, Goad makes much of the authorship of John Frith.

collection of tracts reveals a terrible struggle between book and fish, as they are mutually consumed. First the fish eats the book, and then the book devours the fish:’

the book was much consumed by lying there, the leather couer being melted and dissolued, and much of the edges of the leaues abated away and consumed, and the rest very thin and brittle, hauing beene deepe parboiled by the heat of the fishes maw, which had vndertaken a very hard taske to concoct so tough a morsel, wrapped also in a tougher canuasse coate. By this combate the fish seemeth to haue beene cast into a surfeit or consumption: for his maw being almost eaten thorow by this guest, hee much pined away in his flesh, and abated both in bulke and price, being before the cutting vp, then sold for halfe that which vsually such fish are rated at. (14)

For Goad, the terrible fate of the book-fish echoes the equally lurid fate of the man he identifies as the author of the religious tracts, and the mutual consumption of book and fish provides an allegory for the threats to the survival of truth and the miraculous means of its propagation. Goad attributes the three tracts in the fish—*The Preparation to the Cross*, *A Mirrour or Glasse to know thyself*, and *The Treasure of Knowledge*—to John Frith, who features in Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*. According to Foxe, Frith and his fellow martyrs were subjected to imprisonment inside a cellar full of salt cod, a detail Goad invokes to liken Frith to the biblical figure of Jonah, preserved from drowning in the belly of a great fish. Unlike Jonah, Frith dies in captivity, but God miraculously rights that wrong by the preservation of his condemned writings inside a cod. Frith's books, writes Goad, “haue in some sort runne the fortune of their Author, being held in captiuity in the sea, and kept in *Ionahs* prison, the belly of a Fish, being in danger there to bee consumed, as the Author was like to haue perished in the dungeon at Oxford by the noisome stench of fish” (20).

Goad’s identification of the book-fish with Frith links the strange seventeenth-century occurrence to sixteenth-century religious conflicts and ongoing academic

rivalries: it is a material remnant of battles that have not ended. Goad notes that John Frith was “a member of the Vniuersity of Cambridge” (18) until he was taken to Catholic-leaning Oxford and, because of his Protestant beliefs,

committed prisoner in a dark caue, where salt-fish was then kept: the strong sauour whereof infected them all, so that some died of that distemper; but this Author by Gods especiall prouidence escaped that danger, and was translated from that Vniuersity to another Schoole, namely, to a more settled discipline of affliction, the Tower of London (19)

In *Vox Piscis*, Oxford is a prison and salt-fish repository and the Tower of London is a school. Both are places of education, of storage, and of punishment. Dark equivalents, they are caves full of dead and dying flesh. It is in Cambridge that Frith's books are set free from the belly of the cod, finally liberated from the afflictions of Oxford and the hardship of the Tower. There is in this vision of darkness filled with the stench of improperly preserved flesh a nightmarish rendition of Catholic tyranny and error opposed to the clear light and fresh air of Protestantism.

Goad's source, Foxe's *Actes and Monumentes*, is still more explicit about Frith's institutional affiliations. According to Foxe, Frith "began his study at Cambrydge," where he indulges his "maruelous instinctions and loue unto learning, wherunto he was addict."¹⁷⁷ Frith's brilliant scholarship ends up betraying him. Cardinal Wolsey builds Christ Church College in Oxford and, wishing to furnish the college with the best in material and intellectual brilliance, "appointed unto that company all such men as were founde to excell in any kind of learnyng and knowledge," including Frith. These excellent "young men of graue Judgement and sharpe wittes" quickly start to talk about theology:

[They were] conferryng together upon the abuses of Religion being at that time crept into the Church, and were therefore accused of heresie unto the

¹⁷⁷ All quotations are from Beinecke Mey834F83+1570, 1173.

Cardinall, & cast into a prison, within a deepe caue under the ground, of the same Colledge, where their saltfishe was layde, so that through the filthy stinch therof, they were all infected, and certayne of them takyng theyr death in the same prison, shortlye upon the same being taken out of the prison into theyr chambers, there deceased.¹⁷⁸

The fact that Christ Church was built and decorated by Wolsey is, for Foxe, metaphorized by the idea that it is built over a pestilential cave of salt fish. The place is rotten at its foundation.

The fish, of course, is a Christian symbol, and there may well be an attempt to literalize in the stinking cave of the saltfish the "abuses of Religion," especially of clinging stubbornly to the toxic remnants of the ecclesiastical past, that Foxe and Frith find in Roman Catholicism. In John Frith's friend and contemporary William Tyndale's gloss on the story of Jonah, dead fish are symbols of the enduring power of the past to contaminate the present—and of the need to proceed carefully in excavating truth from a corrupted textual record.¹⁷⁹ More literally, too, the idea of preserved fish as potentially fatal was current in early modern culture. Erasmus, who was known to have a personal dislike of fish, describes salt fish as poisonous to the human body and the environment in

¹⁷⁸ Foxe, 1174.

¹⁷⁹ In the 1573 *The vvhole workes of W. Tyndall, Iohn Frith, and Doct. Barnes*, Tyndale is represented in the "prologue of the Prophete Jonas" that discusses how to interpret the Bible. The scripture has a hard outside, "a barke, a shel." But this shell can be opened by "Gods elect." Tyndale urges the reader to "read Ionas frutefully, and not as a Poetes fable, but as an obligation betwene God and thy soule, as an earnest penny geuen thee of God, that he wyll helpe thee in tyme of nede." Jonas is both a stand-in for Christ and an example of the hidden meaning inside the whale-text, the book-fish. The story of Jonah becomes a metaphor not so much for martyrdom, as right reading.

his 1526 colloquy *A fish diet*.¹⁸⁰ The Butcher, arguing against the strict enforcement of fish days in a position that seems to have the tacit approval of the author, claims that:

the city is polluted and land, rivers, air, fire - and any other element there may be - corrupted by salt fish sellers; that human bodies are diseased, for eating fish fills the body with rotten humours, the source of fevers, consumption, gout, epilepsy, leprosy, and whatnot other maladies.¹⁸¹

Like Platina before him, Erasmus describes fish as an environmental pollutant, oddly indistinct and uncontainable, that causes disease in those who come into contact with it. It disrupts the fragile equilibrium of the environment and the human body.

But the metaphor of preservation resonates differently when applied to the book-fish: it is not only a figure of toxically outmoded Catholicism but also of the miraculous survival of its opposite. As Goad observes, the book part of the Book-Fish is triply bound; it is three pamphlets bound together, wrapped in a canvas container, contained in a fish. (A modern scholar, Kathleen Lynch, calls it "one of the more curious instances of the preservative character of bookbinding.")¹⁸² Because of what it is and what it is about, *Vox Piscis* is both interested and invested in preservation. The preserved fish that threaten Frith's life and make his death so miserable are an emblem of the dangers of holding on too tightly to the past, as is the corrosive action of the book on the living fish's stomach lining, but the fish's unwillingness or inability to vomit up the tracts is also what saves them from being lost altogether. The past threatens the present and the dead struggle with

¹⁸⁰ For Erasmus's personal dislike of fish and its influence on his writings see Lawrence V. Ryan, "Art and Artifice in Erasmus' *Convivium Profanum*," *Renaissance Quarterly*, vol. 31, no. 1, 1978, 12.

¹⁸¹ Erasmus, ed. Craig Thompson, *Colloquies*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997, 678.

¹⁸² Kathleen Lynch, "'Vox Piscis': Dead Men Shall Ryse Agayne," *Shakespeare Studies* 28, 154.

the living, but it is only through this strife that truth is preserved and transmitted. Turning to a new metaphor, Goad describes Frith's teachings as wine,

Which being put in a paper vessell, and formerly miscarrying by wracke in the transporting, is now beyond expectation in a strange liuing vessell brought backe againe to land: no doubt, to the end that it might after long lying hid in store, be anew broached and disperse abroad, for the refreshing of many thirsty soules; to whom it is like to taste, not the worse, but the better, for the long lying in so salt a cellar, as is the bottome of the sea, wherein, by all probability, it hath bene buried for many yeares. (27)

Unlike fish, wine, of course, sometimes improves with age, and the wine that is Frith's text, miraculously preserved in a "paper vessell" within "a strange liuing vessell," keeps implausibly getting better. The book-fish, like the saltfish caves under Christ Church, is a locus of imperfect preservation, both vital and dangerous. As the Oxonian saltfish proves, the past can fester in secret places. Not everything is "the better, for the long lying in so salt a cellar." But sometimes, instead of rot and death, containment fosters survival, and even regeneration: binding changes from a mode of imprisonment to a means of improvement.

The peculiarly pungent material realities of the book-fish made it the occasion for a mode of thinking about printed texts that we now call "book history." That is, the book-fish foregrounds the volatile, potentially illuminating, and potentially antagonistic relation between printed texts and their material modes of production, dissemination, preservation, and decay. This strange phenomenon registers because of its strangeness, a strangeness that Goad emphasizes repeatedly. But as Samuel Ward's letter suggests, that strangeness could be assimilated to an emerging field of scholarship: it is a kind of oddity that early modern readers were learning to parse, name, describe, and categorize. In that sense, the book-fish is no less emblematic than Erasmus's dolphin. The treatises "so

strangely preserved in a living dumb speaking Library in the sea, and now after so long time revived by the ripping vp of a dead fish," as Goad puts it, point by the very absurdity of their mode of preservation to the unlikelihood of anything being preserved. Nothing can be guaranteed to last, just as nothing is necessarily gone for good. The book-fish proves as much: it synthesizes and digests much older associations between fish and language, and regurgitates them in new form. In *Vox Piscis*, the analogy between fish and text has as much to do with the material form of the book as it does with the techne of language.

The book-fish itself is no longer extant. The printed portion disappeared into the Cambridge colleges, while the fish was apparently eaten. But Cambridge University Library still holds at least three copies of *Vox Piscis*. Even in 1627, Goad was aware of playing a part in the partial preservation of the book-fish. He tried in *Vox Piscis* to create a simulacrum of the original, reproducing not only the religious tracts within the fish but the sensory experience of interacting with the composite whole. *Vox Piscis* contains what purport to be exact replicas of the religious tracts, including their original title pages and page numbers. And not only does it attempt to reproduce the book, it also reproduces the fish, opening with a woodcut of the fish swallowing a small book and ending with an illustration of the fish cut open with the book in its stomach. Goad's pamphlet is a knowingly imperfect and approximate attempt at preservation, a "paper vessell" that tries retain a hint of what was one living flesh.

Red Herrings in the Marketplace

Thomas Nashe's 1599 *Lenten Stuff* was neither as widely read as Erasmus's *Adagia* nor as self-consciously ephemeral as *Vox Piscis*, but it offers a similarly illuminating account of why fish figure so potently in both—and why the catching, marketing, and eating of fish might be the perfect analogy to either the perilous publicity or the frustrating obscurity of a life in print. Ostensibly a panegyric-cum-history of the preserved herring of Yarmouth, *Lenten Stuff* was Nashe's final printed work, undertaken after the writer took refuge in Yarmouth from the political repercussions of his banned play *The Ile of Dogs*. That context matters, for Nashe's idiosyncratic history of the herring trade is also a stinging reflection on the vagaries of authorship, the indignities of the book trade, and the gullibility and hypocrisy of those who consume books with as little thought or discrimination as they might pickled fish. If *Vox Piscis* gestures to the emergence of what we now call book history, *Lenten Stuff* hints at a burgeoning sense of literary economy. Ultimately, Nashe's subject is the transformation of printed books, writers, and readers themselves into commodities—commodities with a potentially immense cash value and an unsettlingly short shelf-life.

Throughout *Lenten Stuffe*, Nashe obliquely considers his earlier career as a fiction writer and playwright. After facing accusations of sedition for *The Ile of Dogs*, he left London for the seaside town of Great Yarmouth, and *Lenten Stuffe* represents him as reveling in his welcome. The full title of the book promises to return the gentle treatment: *Lenten Stuffe* contains "*the description and first procreation and increase of the town of Great Yarmouth in Norfolk.*" As it turns out, this procreation and increase is tied to a single commodity, the famous red herring, so Nashe takes as his project the, as he insists, never-before-attempted history and praise of the herring itself, as both creature and

commodity. But the herring trade prompts repeated reflections on Nashe's own career as a peddler to the populace of his own rapidly created, somewhat unappetizing, cheap, and imperfect commercial products: books.

He begins *Lenten Stuffe* by describing his state of mind after the explosive response to the *The Ile of Dogs*: "I was so terrified with my owne encrease (like a woman long trauailing to bee deliuered of a monster) that it was no sooner borne but I was glad to run from it" (154). Nashe's "encrease" with the failed *Isle of Dogs* is therefore immediately put into parallel with the "*first procreation and increase*" of Yarmouth in the title of *Lenten Stuffe*. Literary creation, popular acclaim or disclaim, the accrual of resources from the trade in herrings, and urban sprawl are all varieties of increase. "Increase" or "encrease" are variant spellings of a single word, one that, in the early modern period, can mean either to grow in size or "to grow richer, more prosperous, or more powerful."¹⁸³ The unpredictability of increase, the monsters it may lead to, are encoded within the ambivalent, slippery nature of the preserved herring. Henry S. Turner argues that the red herring in *Lenten Stuffe* "seems calculated to elude our grasp; indeed, perhaps the most salient aspect of *Lenten Stuffe* is the persistent way it renders any simple 'reading' of its object an impossibility."¹⁸⁴ Yet its very slipperiness makes the herring a "historically novel object within early modern intellectual paradigms that conventionally could make no sense of it[:...] the manufactured commodity."¹⁸⁵ In fact, Nashe argues that the herring "is euery mans money, from the King to the Courtier."¹⁸⁶ "Euery mans

¹⁸³ increase, v. 4. OED 06/16/20.

¹⁸⁴ 530

¹⁸⁵ Turner

¹⁸⁶ Nashe, 179 - 80.

money" is a strange and almost contradictory figure for the herring's value. Nashe's meaning is that it is a "standing prouision" in all households, a basic staple. But calling it money highlights its exchange value. The herring is in fact preserved for storage, for transportation, and for exchange. It is current, in that it is in circulation, its value so transparent that it becomes not just any commodity, but the very medium of exchange. Nashe's contemporary Richard Whitbourne highlights the elision between fish, commodity, and money in a tract called *A discourse and discouery of Nevv-found-land* when he claims that "The conuerting of these commodities (gotten by fishing) into money, cannot chuse but be a great benefit to all your Maiesties Kingdomes in many respects."¹⁸⁷ The "commodities (gotten by fishing)" are, of course, fish, but they are also more than fish: they are fish-commodities that are convertible into money.

Yet even as Nashe praises the vast trading networks that make money out of fish, he lingers on the ways on which his book fails to do just that, tying the fish-commodity to the book-commodity. As he concludes his praise of the herring, Nashe asks that:

Fishermen, I hope, will not finde fault with me for fishing before the nette, or making all fish that comes to the net in this history, since, as the Athenians bragged they were the first that inuented wrastling, and one Erichthonius amongst them that he was the first that ioyned horses in collar couples for drawing, so I am the first that euer sette quill to paper in prayse of any fish or fisherman.¹⁸⁸

John Heywood gives, in his 1546 dictionary of proverbs, "It is yll fyshyng before the net."¹⁸⁹ Nashe's encomium of the herring ends with fishing before the net, with the absence of fish. Failed fishing, which is Nashe's empty praise for the herring, is also the

¹⁸⁷ Richard Whitbourne, *A discourse and discouery of Nevv-found-land*, London: William Barrett, 1620, EEBO, accessed 01/01/19, 13.

¹⁸⁸ Nashe, 223-3

¹⁸⁹ "fishing, n.1." 1b, <https://www.oed.com> accessed 01/01/20.

reader's lack of understanding. Kristen Abbott Bennett, untangling some of the metaphors in this passage, writes that:

Thematically, Nashe's "fish" comprise "this history": he has captured them and translated them into his "nette," the text of *Lenten Stuffe*. At the same time, readers have come to Nashe's net and have been - wittingly or no - translated into his school of fish. Nashe's convoluted trajectory of metaphors casts his fish in and out of temporality - before and after history - to ultimately convey a passing through the interstices of his net.¹⁹⁰

Like the love poems of Donne and Spenser, *Lenten Stuffe* links fishing, rhetorical ingenuity, and the capturing of a reader's attention. But for Nashe, books are devices for catching readers *en masse*. Here fish are not a particular reader, but figures for the vast, anonymous sea of consumers that must be tempted and caught by the book as a saleable commodity. In the same way that herrings convert to cash through the alchemy of the fishing economy, the print economy converts both books and readers into commodities. The reader is asked to praise Nashe for catching his attention or to fault him for losing it, dragged headlong into the drama of the marketplace as both a consumer and as a commodity critical of how it is being consumed.

Nashe claims that he might be accused of "making all fish," meaning either "converting everything into fish" or "preserving every fish." The OED defines "making fish" as "To preserve (fish), as for the market, by salting, drying, or packing."¹⁹¹ And in fact, Nashe sees himself as not only fishing for consumers but as being in the somewhat fishy business of trying to make a spectacle out of preserved fish. Archly alluding to his

¹⁹⁰ Kristen Abbott Bennett, "Introduction," *Conversational Exchanges in Early Modern England: 1549 - 1640*, Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015, 3

¹⁹¹ "make, v1," 72, <https://www.oed.com>, accessed 01/01/20.

own role as author of a book on preserved herrings, Nashe relates the "ieast of a Scholler in Cambridge" who

standing angling on the towne bridge there, as the country people on the market day passed by, secretly bayted his hook wyth a red Herring wyth a bell about the necke, and so conueying it into the water that no man perceiued it, all on the sodayn, when he had a competent throng gathered about hym, vp he twicht it agayne, and layd it openly before them; whereat the gaping rurall fooles [...] sware [...] they neyer sawe such a myracle of a red herring taken in the fresh-water before.¹⁹²

In the minds of the "rurall fools," the herring's presence where it should not be is not the sign of the hand of a prankster, but of the hand of God. The herring is a "secret[...] bayte[...]" - secret in the sense that it is bait masquerading as a catch. The herring is placed on the hook as bait for the crowd, making them the credulous fish. The crowd's credulity is presented as a possible image for *Lenten Stuffe's* own reception. The miracle is therefore not really the catching of a red herring but the hooking of a crowd's attention. The herring may be a false miracle, but the crowd is a real, and the creation of a "competent throng" out of nothing makes a stage out of a river, a performance out of a piece of preserved fish and a bell. The scholar's "jest" is the joke at the basis of any artistic endeavor: that the public will exchange money for a good time. This points back to Nashe's traumatic failure with the *Isle of Dogs*, a "iest" taken in the wrong way by the authorities. This jest perpetrated on the marketplace would feel like a vengeful send-up of the theatrical system that gathers people together to marvel at falsehoods were it not in the service of Nashe's central point: that the preserved herring is, in fact, worth marveling at. This jest on the marketplace in fact finally points back to the marketplace itself,

¹⁹² Nashe, 212.

revealing its workings (the exchange of commodities, the accrual of money, and so on) as inherently miraculous.

Describing the "kind entertainment and benigne hospitality" he found at Yarmouth, Nashe says that it,

like the crums in a bushy beard after a greate banquet, will remaine in my papers to bee seene when I am deade and vnder ground; from the bare perusing of which, infinite posterities of hungry Poets shall receiue good refreshing, euen as Homer by Galataeon was pictured vomiting in a bason (in the temple that Ptolomy Philopater erected to him) and the rest of the succeeding Poets after him greedily lapping vp what he disgorged.¹⁹³

This recycling of "entertainment" is at once the memorialization of poetic patronage and the recycling of poetic matter. The lapping up of vomit and the licking up of crumbs are, like the circulating herring, models for the circulation of texts and the books that contain them. The remnant of Nashe's feasts at Yarmouth are to be found in his tract on the red herring, which will both tantalize hungry poets and provide literary material for those coming after him. Nashe conflates literary matter and the material needs of writers in order to comment upon the scarcity, and interdependence, of both food and creativity—like Alexander Barclay in his early sixteenth-century eclogues, he insists that material abundance fosters creative abundance just as material poverty engenders creative poverty. The patronage granted to Homer and Nashe has to be recycled by hungry poets because they have no patronage of their own. With its vision of book history, literary history, and the marketplace as interconnected networks for the circulation, recycling, and preservation of matter, *Lenten Stuffe* destroys any illusions of the writer's

¹⁹³ Nashe, 154.

indifference to money, fame, or success. It argues for the absolute necessity of material sufficiency.

History in *Lenten Stuffe* is vomit in a basin. But it is also the preserved herring, the commodity that somehow keeps circulating, defying corruption. *Lenten Stuffe* is a history of Great Yarmouth and the herring that is both interested in understanding the roots of the herring's success as a commodity and aware of the disastrous consequences of commercial failure if the book is not itself successful as a commodity. Throughout this chapter, fish have stood both for the elusive objects of desire and, in their preserved forms, as both vital sources of food and vectors of disease and death. The book-as-fish-as-commodity is at once an object of consumer demand, a tool of rhetorical persuasion and of inquiry into the secrets of history and nature, and a risky business venture that by failing may affect the livelihoods of those involved in its production. As all of these things, it is uniquely dangerous and uniquely endangered, but it is also an instrument of hope, a sign that some things endure the vicissitudes of history and the marketplace - even if only at random and against all odds. The potential consumers of Nashe's books are fish before the net, victims of the advanced technology of the material book that draws them in like a pleasant and secret bait.

Coda

John Milton's version of the original environmental catastrophe and the beginning of farming and meat-eating in his 1667 *Paradise Lost* encapsulates the idea of seeing the origins of agriculture as a locus for thinking about the history and future of humanity. As in the Bible, the curse cast upon Adam and Eve is that they must labor to bring forth, respectively, crops and children. But Adam is granted a glimpse into the future before his expulsion from Paradise. Told by the angel Michael to "first behold / The effects which thy original crime hath wrought," (XI.423-4) Adam opens his eyes and "beheld a field, / Part arable and tilth, whereon were sheaves / New-reaped, the other part sheepwalks and folds" (XI.429-31). This scene, which seemed at first to be a display of the fruits of the curse of labor, and then of the fruits of childbirth when new humans, a "sweaty reaper" and a "shepherd," come on to the scene, is of course revealed to be the scene of the first murder and the first death. This agricultural field turns into a stage for the playing out of biblical history. It also initiates an agricultural system that, with the exception of the interruption caused by the Flood, will endure throughout history. In fact, it is part of God's covenant with Noah that "day and night, / Seed-time and harvest, heat and hoary frost / Shall hold their course, till fire purge all things new"(XI.898-900).

This cyclical pattern of sowing and harvest matches the cyclicity of the life of humans who, with the introduction of death, "now / Must suffer change" (X.212-3). In Book X, God tells Adam, in words close to Genesis 3:17, that the ground shares his curse:

Cursed is the ground for thy sake, thou in sorrow

Shalt eat thereof all the days of thy life (X.201-2).

In fact, the earth has already felt and responded to the eating of the apple. When Eve eats the apple in Book IX,

Earth felt the wound, and nature from her seat
Sighing through all her works gave signs of woe
That all was lost. (IX.782-4)

The Fall presents as ecological disarray:

At that tasted fruit
The sun, as from Thyestean banquet, turned
His course intended; else how had the world
Inhabited, though sinless, more than now,
Avoided pinching cold and scorching heat?
These changes in the heavens, though slow, produced
Like change on sea and land, sidereal blast,
Vapour, and mist, and exhalation hot,
Corrupt and pestilent. (X.687-95)

A "Thyestean banquet" is, of course, the cannibalistic consumption of one's relatives, and in fact the beginning of meat-eating is one of the changes brought about by the fall:

Beast now with beast gan war, and fowl with fowl,
And fish with fish; to graze the herb all leaving,
Devoured each other; nor stood much in awe
Of man, but fled him, or with countenance grim
Glared on him passing (X.710-4)

As Juliet Cummings writes, synthesizing scholarly consensus, "The Earth's physical responsiveness to human sin has the consequence that the Fall 'clearly includes ecological consequences.'"¹⁹⁴ The beginning of the seasons, strife among the animals,

¹⁹⁴ Juliet Lucy Cummins, "The Ecology of Paradise Lost" in *A Concise Companion to Milton* ed. Angelica Duran, London: Blackwell Publishing, 2007, 173. Cummins is citing Richard DuRocher, "The Wounded Earth in Paradise Lost," *Studies in Philology* 93:1, 1996, 115. For more on ecological readings of Milton, see Diane Kelsey McColley, *Poetry and Ecology in the Age of Milton and Marvell*, London: Ashgate, 2007.

and the loss of the earth's bounty are in Milton's telling "signs of woe" and responses to the fall. They are traditionally signs of the end of the prehistoric Golden Age and the beginning of history.

Ultimately, Adam and Eve embrace their place at the beginning of history and the necessity of labor within a world doomed to change. As Adam says, "Idleness had been worse" (X.1055). The Son promises God the Father a spiritual-cum-agricultural harvest: "Fruits of more pleasing savour from thy seed / Sown with contrition in his heart, than those / Which his own hand manuring all the trees / Of Paradise could have produced, ere fallen / From innocence" (XI.26-30). And the Father grants this future spiritual harvest, with the caveat that humans can no longer live in Paradise:

Those pure immortal elements that know
No gross, no inharmonious mixture foul,
Eject him tainted now, and purge him off
As a distemper, gross to air as gross,
And mortal food, as may dispose him best
For dissolution wrought by sin, that first
Distempered all things, and of incorrupt
Corrupted. (XI. 50-57)

This quotation is from Alastair Fowler's edition of *Paradise Lost*, which mostly retains the original punctuation. There is therefore no knowing who inserted the comma before "And mortal food," but the fact of its placement cuts off those words from the rest of this already elaborate and difficult sentence, highlighting the importance of the question of what to eat. *Paradise Lost* is a poem about eating, although it is obviously much more than that. The initial transgression of the fall and the curse that results from it are both to do with the procuring of food - the forbidden fruit is all too easily tasteable, leading to a situation in which food must be sweated and labored for. Paradise refuses man's fallen nature (even as it changes and becomes corrupted in response to his

transgression) and God dooms him to a life outside Paradise eating mortal food that corrupts him further. This awareness of inescapable grossness and corruptibility is leavened by the promise of the eventual end of time, a spiritual harvest in the form of the second coming. Agriculture is imposed as a punishment, ignites the first murder, teaches humans the value of labor, and alters their nature with the fruits it creates. When Adam and Eve leave Eden at the end of *Paradise Lost*, they are setting out to begin agriculture, and with it the entirety of human existence outside of, and after, Eden.

Milton is perhaps the inescapable endpoint of an interest in how medieval and renaissance readers and writers conceived of the beginning of agriculture. His work is almost too obviously obsessed with vegetarianism, the treatment of animals, and the beginning of agricultural labor. But he is only one example of a widespread fascination with the subject, and I hope that this dissertation has shown that he was responding to hundreds of years of thinking and writing about this very topic.

When I tell people outside the academy that my dissertation is on stories about the invention of agriculture in medieval and early modern England, the reaction I have come to expect is confusion: didn't agriculture originate in Mesopotamia, in the fertile crescent, long before the Renaissance? I have to explain that that is our story about the invention of agriculture, but it was not theirs. The stories we tell about the reasons humans started to grow grain or raise and eat animals or develop technologies for exploiting the earth may well be true, but what we know for sure is that they are stories, with beginnings, middles and projected or feared endings, characters, conflict, and morals implicit and explicit. When I was a child in France, my international school required us to take history classes following both the French and the British curriculum.

Although we studied the same periods, and often the same conflicts between France and Britain, the classes taught us different stories about the past. I've never been able to put my finger on the exact divergences, besides a certain attachment to monarchy on the one side and some disagreement about the extent to which Joan of Arc was betrayed by her own people. Most of the differences though came down to tone, emphasis, and sentiment. The everyday life of the Gauls and their heroism in fighting the Romans on the one hand, the mysteries of Sutton Hoo that point to the undiscovered depths beneath the English countryside on the other. Every nation sees itself as the protagonist of history. The academy rewards insight without always valuing the diversity of experiences and life stories that foster it. I think that anyone who grew up moving between countries and languages understands that such cultural myths function in ways that are often invisible and difficult to track, influencing how people see their own culture and nation and their place in the world. History works provincially; every nation is a minor character in someone else's history, if it isn't the antagonist.

As a child, I would occasionally visit the States and spend some time in American schools, where I was fascinated by the American story of the first Thanksgiving. This story acts at once as an allegory about sharing, as an etiology of the celebration of a particular holiday with particular customs attached to it, and as a moment of paradoxical hope in the narrative of America before peaceful coexistence became painful colonial violence. This story developed from accounts of the first winter in North America in sixteenth-century British travel narratives, which draw on the mythology of ancient Greece and Rome to dramatize European settlement on American shores as a return to a Golden Age ripe for the instauration of agriculture. As I show in chapter one, this story

has its uses in smuggling a certain ambivalence into a narrative of the inevitability of Empire, but it has also been used to justify prejudice and colonial violence.

Understanding the history of stories about history allows us to reconsider the inevitability of certain kinds of change.

And our narratives of the beginning of agriculture themselves are ever-changing, in ways large and small, as scholarship grows and changes. For example, in the recent *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States*, James C. Scott grapples with the common story that the beginning of grain growing in the Middle East led to overall improvements in humans' way of life and to the development of state formation. Scott argues that "the narrative of this process has typically been told as one of progress, of civilization and public order, and of increasing health and leisure."¹⁹⁵ But he claims that the historical evidence does not support a view of agrarian communities as more prosperous or more comfortable than mobile societies. "Once the basic assumption of the superiority and attraction of fixed-field farming over all previous forms of subsistence is questioned, it becomes clear that this assumption itself rests on a deeper and more embedded assumption [...] that sedentary life itself is superior to and more attractive than mobile forms of subsistence."¹⁹⁶ The question of what has been lost in the move from a wandering, scavenging existence to a settled, grain-growing one is still open. It might seem like pre- and early modern arguments about the relative merits of the Golden and subsequent ages are ancient history, long since given over in the pursuit of a more scientific and rigorous historical method. But that too is a story, and if this

¹⁹⁵James C. Scott, *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017, xii

¹⁹⁶ Scott, *Against the Grain*, 8.

dissertation proves one thing, I hope it is that to debate ancient history is to debate the present moment and its values and, of course, the kinds of futures that feel possible.

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