

Peter Remien, *The Concept of Nature in Early Modern English Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019.

Are humans a help or a hindrance to the natural world? Are we an intrinsic part of the biosphere, curbing nature's 'luxuriant' tendencies (as Milton puts it) through our consumption of plants, animals, and other natural resources, or would the planet be better off without us? In *The Concept of Nature in Early Modern English Literature*, Peter Remien shows how these questions, so topical today, were also being asked by poets and natural philosophers in seventeenth-century England. Beginning with an in-depth discussion of Kenelm Digby's *Two Treatises*, first published during Digby's self-imposed royalist exile in Paris in 1644, the study traces the career of Digby's 'protoecological concept of "the oeconomy of nature"'(1) – a by-word for ecological processes operating independently of human society – through five chapters focusing on representations of the natural world in the poetry and prose of Margaret Cavendish, principally *Poems and Fancies* (1653) and *The Blazing World* (1666); Ben Jonson's 'To Penshurst' (1616); Andrew Marvell's 'Upon Appleton House' (c. 1651); George Herbert's *Country Parson* (1652) and *The Temple* (1633); and John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1674).

The Concept of Nature sets poetry side-by-side discussion of the development of Digby's 'concept of nature' in philosophical writing by Samuel Gott, Walter Charleton, Robert Boyle, Samuel Collins (all dealt with in Chapter 1), and Thomas Burnet (discussed alongside *Paradise Lost* in Chapter 5). In so doing, Remien succeeds, not only in shining a light on the seventeenth-century roots of what we today call 'ecology', but also in showing how concepts of the 'oeconomy of nature' can enrich our understanding of 'green' themes in seventeenth-century poetry. Readers of Remien's book will emerge with renewed appreciation of how far country house poems like 'To Penshurst' (Chapter 2) and 'Upon Appleton House' (Chapter 3) wrestle with the questions being asked by Digby and others over the precise relationship between the human and nonhuman spheres: do we need nature more than nature needs us? Are we stewards of our country estates, or parasites preying on a self-contained environment? Chapters 4 and 5 explore the theological implications of the message that emerges from Remien's study of Marvell in particular, that nature is essentially better off without us. In Chapter 4, Remien highlights how far George Herbert's writing is caught between his desire to steward and, on the other hand, to separate himself off from nature – albeit, for Herbert, because of the theological principle that this world describes a spiritual pilgrimage which prompts our turning from the created world to contemplate our true home in the world to come. Finally, in Chapter 5, we hear Milton's answer to Herbert's dilemma: Milton's focus on the divinely-directed need to tame paradise through human hands in *Paradise Lost* helps bridge Herbert's seemingly irreconcilable desire to be at once involved in, and at the same time divorced from, the workings of the natural world.

Remien's is by no means the first study exploring representations of nature in seventeenth-century poetry, and in a crowded eco-critical field readers well versed in work by, for example, Ken Hiltner (*Milton and Ecology* (2003)), Diane McColley (*Poetry and Ecology in the Age of Milton and Marvell* (2007)), and Jennifer Munroe (*Gender and the Garden in Early Modern English Literature* (2008)) may well ask where the originality of this latest study lies. Several chapters here – notably Chapter 3, on Marvell – largely reframe arguments already rehearsed by McColley and others, with Remien himself acknowledging that his approach to Marvell's 'Upon Appleton House' echoes McColley's in its emphasis on how Marvell celebrates the natural world 'as detachable from the human sphere' (85) – a self-sufficiency that McColley labels 'ecology' but which Remien redefines, in light of Digby, as 'the oeconomy of nature' ('ecology' being an anachronism unknown to seventeenth-century discourse). On one level, readers may feel that Remien's avowed emphasis on 'a reconfiguration of terms' (85) looks a little like splitting semantic hairs. Yet on another, Remien is surely right to focus on the rich resonances of 'oeconomy' – a term that looked beyond its primary reference to husbandry and household management in the early modern period to comprehend, among other things, the processes of nature, the workings of providence, and the structures of plays and poems. This emphasis on the full semantic range of 'oeconomy' enables a far richer study of nature poetry than the more restrictive, modern term 'ecology' might otherwise allow. It is the multiple (literary, theological, and cosmographical) meanings of 'oeconomy', for example, that justifies Remien's twinning of poetry with natural philosophy in the first place, and which provides the foundation for his stimulating discussion of Herbert's religious poetry alongside Herbert's views (outlined in *The Country Parson*) on husbandry and household management. Remien's final chapter – which twins Milton's poetical with Thomas Burnet's 'geological' (149) accent on the importance of human intervention in natural processes, both before and

after the Fall – is a *tour de force* of the kind of critical practice that Remien’s focus on the cross-disciplinary resonances of ‘oeconomy’ makes possible. His more sporadic references throughout the work to views on nature shared by writers – both poets and natural philosophers – of very different mid-century political and religious ilks also gesture towards this study’s cross-disciplinary appeal.

Remien ends his study with an Epilogue that looks beyond the seventeenth century to explore how Digby’s ‘oeconomy of nature’ developed in the writing of Carl Linnaeus, Charles Darwin, and Ernst Haeckel to form ‘the set of ideas that we now recognize as ecology’ (154), and this emphasis on the ‘protoecological’ dimensions of ‘oeconomy’ is indeed what drives the study as a whole. But the real value of Remien’s study, for this reader at least, lies, not in what it says about the career of Digby’s ‘oeconomy of nature’ beyond the seventeenth century, interesting though this undoubtedly is, but rather in its focus on the rich semantics of ‘oeconomy’ within the century under investigation. It is this rich semantics, and the cross-disciplinary practice it encourages, that is the real star of this altogether illuminating work.

Stewart Mottram
University of Hull