

Introduction

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‘What can early modern French literature do for ecocriticism?’ This was Louisa Mackenzie’s question during a roundtable discussion at a recent MLA convention. As she noted, it is a much better and more important question than ‘What can ecocriticism do for early modern French literature?’ and it caught the attention of the editors of the present volume.¹ Mackenzie’s point here is that we should be letting early modern French literature interrogate and shape contemporary theory and criticism, rather than *applying* existing ecocritical paradigms *onto* authors such as Rabelais or Ronsard. After many conversations and several follow-up panels (including one at the Renaissance Society of America’s annual conference in Boston, with Mackenzie as chair), this point not only seemed increasingly pertinent, but it had also clearly struck a chord with colleagues who detected a groundswell of interest in re-reading works of early modern French literature from a particular angle. The present volume is the concrete product of this groundswell. Its title (*Early Modern Écologies*) is subtly bilingual, the acute accent (é) on the final word drawing attention to the fact that, in method and in conclusions, the chapters that follow are caught between languages and literary and critical traditions. Whether read from an Anglophone or a Francophone point of view, the book as a whole speaks, intentionally, with an accent.

As a whole, the present volume opens up a number of conversations around Mackenzie’s compelling question. It is not the first collection of writings about French literature and ecocriticism: it arrives *dans le sillage* of a 2012 *FLS* volume on ‘The Environment in French and Francophone Literature and Film’ edited by Jeff Persels, a 2015 special issue of *Dix Neuf* titled ‘Ecopoetics/L’Écopoétique’, edited by Daniel A. Finch-Race and Julien Weber, a 2017 issue of *L’Esprit créateur* titled ‘French Ecocriticism/L’écocritique

1 The vanishing point of Mackenzie’s MLA talk—and, arguably, of the present volume—is her article, ‘It’s a Queer Thing: Early Modern French Ecocriticism’, which makes a resounding and articulate call for putting early modern French literature into dialogue with questions of ecology.

française', also edited by Finch-Race and Weber, and Daniel Finch-Race and Stephanie Posthumus's volume *French Ecocriticism*. It is the first, however, to focus exclusively on the possible connections between *early modern* French literature and contemporary theoretical positions. Within the context of British literatures, of course, scholars have been prolific in asking environmental and ecological questions of early modern literature, as shown by the likes of Bruce Boehrer, Todd A. Borlik, Gabriel Egan, Ken Hiltner, Steve Mentz, Vin Nardizzi, Jeffrey Theis, Robert Watson, Tiffany Worth, and many others.² A number of recent conference panels and roundtables have started to bring scholars—including the editors of this volume—into the same room and have brought traditions into dialogue, and we hope that the present volume will generate further conversations and collaborations. While recognizing ourselves in and building on English early modern ecocriticism, we also felt that our own primary texts and the theoretical habits of French departments pulled us in other directions. The noise created by the friction between these different cultures, disciplines, and languages is precisely what we hope to use as we start imagining new cartographies of early modern ecocriticism.

On a theoretical level, one of this volume's key contributions is to show that the 'texture' of contemporary eco-theory *could* have been otherwise—and could still be. Had contemporary theorists such as Timothy Morton and Bruno Latour developed their thought around French-language sources instead of English-language ones, things might have looked a little different. As the authors of the following studies demonstrate, if Timothy Morton had started with Guillaume de Salluste du Bartas or Pierre de Ronsard instead of John Milton, or if Bruno Latour had begun with Jean Bodin or Olivier de Serres instead of Thomas Hobbes and Robert Boyle, then key works and key *words* for ecocriticism and Anthropocene Studies would not be quite the same. This volume, one might say, imagines some shards of these alternative works. More generally, the chapters that follow knowingly enter into a space of reflection that has been dominated for many reasons by the English language and by English-language traditions. The modern

2 Boehrer, *Environmental Degradation in Jacobean Drama*; Borlik, *Ecocriticism and Early Modern English Literature: Green Pastures*; Egan, *Green Shakespeare: From Ecopolitics to Ecocriticism*; Hiltner, *Milton and Ecology*; Hiltner (ed.), *Renaissance Ecology: Imagining Eden in Milton's England*; Hiltner, *What Else is Pastoral? Renaissance Literature and the Environment*; Mentz, *At the Bottom of Shakespeare's Ocean and Shipwreck Modernity: Ecologies of Globalization, 1550–1719*; Nardizzi, *Wooden Os: Shakespeare's Theatres and England's Trees*; Theis, *Writing the Forest in Early Modern England: A Sylvan Pastoral Nation*; Watson, *Back to Nature: The Green and the Real in the Late Renaissance*; Hallock, Kamps, and Raber (ed.), *Early Modern Ecostudies: From the Florentine Codex to Shakespeare*; Bruckner and Brayton (ed.), *Ecocritical Shakespeare*.

canon of ecology and ecocriticism is largely Anglophone, as are many of their institutional frameworks. The fact that the MLA's Ecocriticism and Environmental Humanities forum defines itself as 'a scholarly practice *within English Studies*', whatever the degree of intentionality of such a definition, is a symptom of the monolingualism of the Environmental Humanities in the United States.³

The collection does not claim to offer a definitive answer about the connection between early modern French literature and ecology—this is why the title is in the plural. Each author asks and explores Mackenzie's original question—'What can early modern French literature do for ecocriticism?'—in relation to texts and specific problems pertinent to their own current research. The volume's scope is wide—but there are a number of voices and topics that return with regularity, and a three-part structure emerged organically over the book's evolution. The path ahead can be summarized as follows. Our authors identified three major theoretical problems that have received much attention. Following this introduction and a 'threshold' article, the book enters its first zone, *Dark(ish) Ecologies*. This section brings together contributions that work through and sometimes challenge ideas related to Timothy Morton's thought, especially his concept of 'dark ecology', in which we humans (as we seek out ecological awareness, get caught up chasing after both ourselves and 'strange strangers': in which we are both detective and criminal. The second section (or laboratory) focuses on the difficulty of negotiating the definitions of—and relationship between—'nature' and 'culture', a huge array of problems most notably formulated by Bruno Latour and Donna Haraway (who speaks of 'naturecultures').⁴ The third and final section is an experimental workroom, somewhat in the mood of the *Animer le paysage* exhibition at the *Musée de la chasse et de la nature* in Paris (in 2017) and of Latour's latest *Où atterrir?* This section comprises chapters that focus on ground and grounding.

Ahead of these three parts, however, this collection opens with Hassan Melehy's chapter, 'Off the Human Track: Montaigne, Deleuze, and the Materialization of Philosophy'. Purposely located at the threshold between the editors' 'Introduction' and the ensuing sections, the chapter reviews the contentious history of the relationship of theory with early modern

3 See <https://thewire.mla.hcommons.org/ecocriticism-environmental-humanities/>. Accessed 19 January 2017. Emphasis added. For a longer discussion of the monolingualism of the Environmental Humanities, see Usher, *Extraneous: Extraction in the Humanist Anthropocene*, 'Introduction'.

4 Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*.

French literature, including flashpoints such as Tom Conley's 1978 article 'Cataparalysis' in *diacritics*, Terence Cave's *The Cornucopian Text* (1979), and Gérard Defaux's career-long attack on theoretical approaches to the early modern period. Offering more than a history, however, Melehy unpacks the terms of the arguments for or against theory, asserting against a staunch historicist position that '[the] very notion of the reconstruction of a past era that is complete enough to determine a text's meaning is as triumphalist as the caricatures of theory that historicists [...] have routinely made'. As Melehy puts it—and such an assertion clearly undergirds the present collection as a whole—'[in] its best version, theory involves a constant suspicion with regard to its own completeness'. French departments might sometimes be thought of as one of the natural homes of what François Cusset calls *French Theory*, but over the last four or five decades they have also been harboured the outright and caricatured rejection of theory—even in 2018, Edwin Duval could stand in front of a room full of scholars and write off theoretical approaches to French literature as 'forgetting the text' and as dealing 'only with race and gender'.⁵ Following on from the Introduction, the first part of Melehy's chapter thus continues the crucial task of situating *Early Modern Écologies* within a specifically French-literature history of criticism, and of pre-empting the criticisms that will likely arise from certain quarters. The second part of 'Off the Human Track' develops and deploys a method for reading early modern French literature and contemporary theory in dialogue, taking up Gilles Deleuze and Michel de Montaigne in particular as two authors who—despite all that separates them, and the former quoting the latter only once—are linked by their anti-Platonism (i.e. the 'rejection of the dominant metaphysics of the West that hierarchizes the relation between thought and reality') and their attempts to re-align perception, thinking, and matter in light of that rejection. The potential of Montaigne's *Essais* as a key text here is that it may be re-inserted into those debates within ecocriticism and new materialism that focus on matter, and which often draw on Deleuze (as Jane Bennett does, for example). Melehy's chapter thus begins this collection with a defence of the volume's theoretical project, a test case of reading in such a way, and a rallying cry for Montaigne's importance for early modern *écologies*.

Turning to Part 1, *Dark(ish) Ecologies* begins with Stephanie Shiflett's study, 'Du Bartas Responding to Morton's Milton: A Bodily Route to the

5 Duval made these comments during a talk at the *Atelier du seizième siècle* held at Tulane University, 21 March 2018. For confirmation of Duval's place in this battle for and against theoretical approaches to the early modern, see Tom Conley, 'Fadaises et dictons', p. 255.

Ecological Thought', which offers a *Frenching* of Timothy Morton's notion of the 'ecological thought' that in turn suggests new coherences and alignments within Morton's lexicon. Shiflett's starting point is Morton's quotation of Raphael's speech to Adam in Book 7 of *Paradise Lost*, a kind of thought journey that articulates and makes possible the 'uber-macrocosmic thinking' central to the 'ecological thought'. Turning to Du Bartas's epic *La Sepmaine*, situated as *Paradise Lost*'s predecessor, Shiflett explores alternative poetic formulations for such thought journeys. She first examines the moment where Du Bartas 'compares God to a painter who steps back to admire his own masterpiece' (after Genesis 2. 2)—whereas Milton's Raphael and Adam stand in the Garden of Eden and look into outer space, Du Bartas's God looks back at Earth from nowhere. This and other passages in Du Bartas produce related moments of scale-shifting that Shiflett argues are essential to the 'ecological thought'. In a final move, Shiflett explores another of Du Bartas's poetic scale-shifting voyages, leading this time into the human body, in another point of connection with Morton: for the ecological thought, 'everything is DNA', whereas for Du Bartas 'everything is [Aristotelian] elements'. Du Bartas's route to the Mortonian 'ecological thought' is not Milton's—but it is precisely their differences that are of interest, as Shiflett re-inscribes Morton's theory into an alternative and French literary history that also recalibrates the theory.

Jennifer Oliver's chapter "'When is a meadow not a meadow?': Dark Ecology and Fields of Conflict in French Renaissance Poetry' opens by quoting one of the most famous of French verses: Agrippa d'Aubigné's statement, 'Je veux peindre la France une mère affligée' ('I want to paint France as a tormented mother'). Fully acknowledging the historical specificity of this and other bodily and visceral images in the poetry of Pierre de Ronsard and Agrippa d'Aubigné—in particular their connection to the political situation of early modern France, and especially to the Wars of Religion that pitted Catholics against Protestants—Oliver studies such images in an attempt to gain 'access to pre-Heideggerian, and indeed pre-Kantian, pre-Cartesian, possibilities for thought'. More specifically, she examines 'uncanny', 'weird', and 'loopy' corporeal poetic images in light of, and with the aim of adding further texture to, the notion of toxic agrilogistic thought that Timothy Morton studies in his *Dark Ecology*.

In her chapter 'Equipment for Living with Hyperobjects: Proverbs in Ronsard's *Franciade*', Kat Addis examines the presence of proverbs in Ronsard's unfinished epic *La Franciade* (1572), which was hugely popular in the early modern period. Addis advances the hypothesis that these short pithy sayings—in their form rather than in their specific content—function

ecologically, and that reading them in such a way can train our ear for listening in the Anthropocene. Putting the early modern commonplace tradition into dialogue with Timothy Morton's notion of the hyperobject (deemed viscous, molten, nonlocal, phased, and interobjective), Addis shows how Ronsard's proverbs, which are marked by punctuation in the text since its first publication, force the reader to step away from the *now* to see that moment's connection to hyperobjects such as Fate, and to timelines that outsize the epic. Pausing to listen to proverbs spoken by the sea goddess Leucothea or the prophetess Hyante reveals how they resound as a call to be heard by the *anthropos* of our times as well. More broadly, Addis's contribution to contemporary theoretical debates is an insistence on form over content: to read and to think ecologically is not—and least *not necessarily*—to read or to think *about* something in particular (global warming, environmental degradation, etc.); rather, it is fundamentally a rhetorically governed process.

Pauline Goul's chapter, 'Is Ecology Absurd: Diogenes and the End of Civilization', turns received notions on their head in a manner that recalls a quip from Timothy Morton: 'You think ecologically tuned life means being all efficient and pure. Wrong. It means you can have a disco in every room of your house'.⁶ Goul's objective is the rehabilitation of the Greek philosopher Diogenes the Cynic as a thinker of ecology, itself seen as a form of absurdity. To this end, Goul offers a careful reading of a number of Diogenic moments in the writings of François Rabelais and Michel de Montaigne. On the one hand, Goul finds that Rabelais 'portrays the Cynic as a moved and moving man, far from the image of a lazy beggar' and as someone who is very keenly *not* outside of the *polis*, but *outside-within* it. Rabelais's Diogenes is thus seen as engaging in 'an urban ecology of homelessness that is also a humanist cosmopolitanism'. Montaigne's direct treatment of Diogenes, on the other hand, is something of a 'missed encounter'. The true Diogenic moments in the *Essais* are elsewhere: Montaigne 'appears to be most Diogenic when not even bringing up Diogenes'. Bringing these and several other early modern treatments of Diogenes into the critical space of new readings of the absurd (via the work of Carl Lavery and Clare Finburgh), Goul offers a rousing call for dark-ecological absurdist survival that echoes and reshapes the conclusions of Roy Scranton's *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene*.

6 I quote Morton's Twitter comment from Alex Blasdel, "A reckoning for our species": the philosopher prophet of the Anthropocene', *The Guardian*, June 15, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/15/timothy-morton-anthropocene-philosopher>. Accessed 27 September 2019.

Part 2, *Nature's Cultures*, opens with Sara Miglietti's chapter 'Between Nature and Culture: The Integrated Ecology of Renaissance Climate Theories'. Miglietti offers a re-evaluation of what are often called early modern 'climate theories', according to which the human body, mind, and character are shaped by place and climate. Opposing received interpretations that frequently write off such ideas as 'pseudo-science' and geographic determinism, Miglietti turns to the writings of Loys le Roy, Jean Bodin, and Nicolas Abraham de la Framboisière in order to demonstrate how such theories develop a sense of reciprocal relationality between culture and nature—'humans are [...] nature embodied'—in ways that anticipate the ideas of contemporary thinkers such as Philippe Descola. As Miglietti shows, Le Roy's *De la vicissitude ou variété des choses en l'univers* (1575) offers a particularly careful formulation of the interconnectedness of humans and the nonhuman universe, and one which puts emphasis on the non-deterministic character thereof. Bodin's *Methodus* (1566) and *République* (1576) provide material for a more in-depth exploration of the tension between influence (of the nonhuman) and autonomy (of the human), while a reading of La Framboisière's *Gouvernement nécessaire à chacun pour vivre longuement en santé* (1600) approaches the nature–culture connection in the context of food and diet. The three early modern French authors studied here call, in Miglietti's reading, for understanding 'climate theory' not as a determinism, but as a form of embeddedness pertinent to our own times.

Phillip John Usher's chapter 'Almost Encountering Ronsard's Roses' takes up the French poet's most famous ode, 'Mignonne, allons voir si la rose...', in order to ask a simple but important question: what are the barriers to close-reading a poem such as this one—a poem made of 'signs'—if we (also) try to access through it the nature or Nature of which it claims to be an imitation? To explore such a question, Usher experiments with three ways of reading the ode. He first explores the cultural/historical approach offered by book history, i.e. by tracing out several steps in the poem's reception in music and in poetic anthologies up to the nineteenth century. A second approach seeks out possible connections between Ronsard's poem and early modern botany's own discussion of roses. A third method, which strives to get beyond the poem as cultural artefact, draws on contemporary plant theory, especially the work of Matthew Hall, Jeffrey Nealon, Michael Marder, and especially Luce Irigaray. Ultimately, Usher strives here to both nudge theoretical discourse away from its zoocentrism and to argue more generally for forms of what Gianni Vattimo calls *pensiero debole*.

Victor Velázquez's 'Renascent Nature in the Ruins: Joachim du Bellay's *Antiquitez de Rome*' looks towards one of the period's most renowned

collections of French vernacular verse to place critical emphasis on new sites. The chapter considers the challenges of conservation and the relationship between nature and culture in times when technology, power, and hubris interact. While *Antiquitez de Rome* is traditionally read as ‘a text about human-made culture’—a text about Roman civilization falling because of human Romans’ hubris—here Velázquez models for us how to be sensitive to its ‘surprising meditation on Nature’. In other words, it is not just that Roman buildings have fallen into rubble, and not just that the imagined, remembered, fantasized Rome of antiquity is different from the Rome that Du Bellay encounters while in Italy working as his uncle’s secretary. Rather, as the Roman ‘palaces lose their shape and meaning’ and as they come to ‘litter the natural landscapes’ the reader must ask whether or not it is possible even to think of anything such as a ‘pristine nature before culture’. With the appearance of a ‘renewed nature’ in the fallen ruins and the ‘re-emergence of the natural landscape’ within the spaces in which capital-*c* Culture fell, categories intermingle. As Velázquez notes at the start of his chapter, such a re-reading serves to remind us of the difference between humanism and anthropocentrism and to refocus our temporal scales.

Part 3, *Groundings*, starts with Oumelbanine Zhiri’s ‘An Inconvenient Bodin: Latour and the Treasure Seekers’. This chapter seeks and tracks points of contact between the thought of Bruno Latour—especially his *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes* (*We Have Never Been Modern*) and *L'Espoir de Pandore* (*Pandora's Hope*)—and the writings of Jean Bodin. The pairing is well made: Bodin, better and more warmly remembered for his work of political philosophy, the *Six Livres de la République* (1576), than for his *Démonomanie des sorciers* (1580)—which attempts to prove the reality of witchcraft—can appear, in Ann Blair’s words, ‘Janus-faced’, divided between modern and superstitious premodern, exactly the divisions and modernizing claims central to Latour’s thought. Zhiri sees in Bodin an exemplar of the premodern who ‘inhabits a nature that, far from being the post-bifurcation realm, is entirely worked through by demons, good or evil, allowed to act by God’. The point, however, is not *only* to claim Bodin as a premodern, but rather to allow Bodin to help us explore ‘the Latourian opposition between modern and pre-modern views of nature’ by foregrounding ‘how deeply contested the pre-bifurcation world was itself’. To explore the Latour-Bodin pairing, Zhiri takes up a number of Bodin’s different and varied narrative accounts of treasure seeking, looking at how these narratives map the networks made up of, *inter alia*, hunters, treasure, spirits, God, and Satan. As Zhiri concludes, drawing on Jean Céard, the *Démonomanie* thus reveals

itself to be a key moment ‘in a heated argument’ over what N/nature is/was at the very moment of modernity’s becoming.

Building on a reading method developed in his *The Graphic Unconscious in Early Modern Writing* (1992) and on his exploration of cartographic literature in *The Self-Made Map* (1996) and *An Errant Eye: Topography and Poetry in Early Modern France* (2011), Tom Conley’s chapter ‘Reading Olivier de Serres circa 1600: Between Economy and Ecology’ draws our attention to one of France’s first soil scientists. Conley reads agricultural engineer Serres as ‘a thinker of human reshaping of the planet’, whose masterpiece, the *Théâtre d’agriculture et mesnage des Champs* (1600), is pertinent in many contexts and has been claimed by various agendas. Though Serres’ modern editor Pierre Lieutaghi specifies that the *Théâtre* in no way anticipates ‘ecological thought’, he ends up also acknowledging how the work ‘transmits knowledge that is still valid’ and capable of challenging the tenets and theoretical frames of industrial agriculture. Acknowledging the complexity of the work’s engagement with ‘science, practical endeavor, and aesthetics’, Conley offers a close reading of certain key programmatic moments of the work in order to break down the frontiers between page and field, and more generally between word and thing, showing that the *mesnage* of the title (a relative of *management*) is indeed somewhere between economy and ecology. Arguing for the proximity of text and land, Conley’s reading might be seen as an early modernist response to Bruno Latour’s recent *Où atterrir?* (2017), where we read: ‘il faut accepter de définir les terrains de vie comme ce dont un terrestre dépend pour sa survie et en se demandant quels sont les autres terrestres qui se trouvent dans sa dépendance’ (‘we must accept the need to define life territories as that on which a terrestrial being depends for its survival while asking what/who are the other terrestrial beings who find themselves in that same dependency’). Of the initial task here, Latour says succinctly: ‘D’abord décrire’ (‘First, describe’).⁷

Finally, Antónia Szabari’s ‘Montaigne’s Plants in Movement’ (whose title plays on Jean Starobinski’s canonical *Montaigne en mouvement*, 1982), offers a careful and nuanced reading of the place of plants in Montaigne’s *Essais*. As Szabari notes, much work in Animal Studies has successfully plotted the essayist’s questioning of human-animal connections—most recently in Bénédicte Boudou’s excellent *Montaigne et les animaux* (2016)—while largely eclipsing the question of plants, a problem signalled and further problematized in Jeffrey Nealon’s *Plant Theory*. Asking, ‘Can we speak of a botany or botanical thought in *The Essays*?’, Szabari maps Montaigne’s

7 Latour, *Où atterrir?* p. 120; p. 119. Our translation.

engagement with vegetality—and specifically with plant movement—in the ‘Apologie’, ‘De la cruauté’, ‘De l’expérience’, and elsewhere. As well as detecting Montaigne’s interest in plants’ ‘aliveness’, Szabari particularly shows that, whereas ‘animals lead Montaigne into an anthropological investigation’, plants ‘are channels into matter, physics, the observable, the intimate, and the cosmic material world’, making the humble plant the ‘exemplary figure of animation’ in the *Essais*. As such, Montaigne both anticipates the naturalism of the seventeenth-century botanist Guy de la Brosse (who would go on to found the *Jardin des plantes*), and offers an alternative genealogy for the kind of unpredictable movement and ‘vibrant matter’ central to the theoretical work of Jane Bennett.

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