



Editorial

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Location, location, location. This refrain echoes most famously in discussions of real estate, but in recent years it has increasingly attracted scholarly attention with reference to early modern writing. *Material Space and Literary Production* reflects this growing interest in analysing the intersections between space, place, and writing – both in where writing occurred and, separately, in how writers conceived of space and place in texts they produced.¹ The material space of which we speak can be both grounded in the experience of the writer or, in some cases, within the text itself. Space is occupied and understood by both author and reader and not always by both at once.

The present issue of *JEMS* is inspired by the conference ‘On Location: Material Space and Literary Production, c.1500-1651’ held at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford, in June 2022. Funded by the Centre for Early Modern Studies at the University of Oxford, the conference brought together scholars from the United Kingdom, Europe, and Canada. Amid COVID-19 lockdowns, the relationship between material space and personal and professional ‘work’ – in this case, writing – became increasingly apparent. Like so many others, our own appreciation for and frustrations with the spaces we inhabited reframed our interest in the experiences and writings of early modern people. Conference contributions ranged from analyses of drama, landscapes and literary coteries, Jesuit epistolarity, chorography, marginalia, sheepskin and the law, and beyond.

The conference contributions, as well as those we received and accepted following the publication of our call for papers, show that the possibilities that the study of writing and space and place present are endless, so we have limited the discussion in this special issue to a representative selection of case studies

¹ For a small sampling of recent work on the subject, see for example, Yonemoto 2003; Peters 2004; Burlinson 2006; Dustagheer 2013; Vanhaelen and Ward 2013; Marcocci *et al.* 2014; Munroe 2008; Presciutti 2017; Stage 2018; Bozio 2020.

that bridge the divide between literary analysis and historical study. The selections necessarily exclude wide swathes of potential angles, areas, and periods within the early modern world. By limiting the discussion in this way, however, the issue raises a variety of questions for scholars to explore further in the future. In fact, the lacunae themselves suggest where this analysis might turn next. Rather than conforming to the usual categories of urban versus rural space, these essays consider spaces gendered and religious, elite and accessible, familiar and ‘foreign’. The contributors here are both historians and literary scholars, and this distinction – and the possibilities it opens up – is evident in their articles.

In his 2019 collection *Literature and Nature in the English Renaissance: An Ecocritical Anthology*, the American ecocritic Todd Borlik identifies two longstanding and equally reductive shibboleths of environmental history: Ovidian ‘soft primitivism’ – that is, the tendency to idealise a mythological golden age between the natural world and its inhabitants – and the neo-Hobbesian reduction of the past as a backward age (2019, 4). Borlik pinpoints time as a key issue and point of discrepancy between the present and the past study of humanity’s relationship to the natural world, but the binary he identifies between Ovidian and neo-Hobbesian approaches to environmental history is equally invested in questions of space and place. Following Borlik’s call to tread a more nuanced middle ground between presentist idealisations or stereotypes of the past, the articles in the present volume engage with spatial and material history on their own terms, foregrounding and interrogating what Mary Floyd Wilson and Garrett Sullivan call the ‘shared materiality of body and world’ (2020, 4).

The study of space and place has come a long way since the French philosophers Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau unleashed a reimagining of definitions and confines of space in the late twentieth century. It is now widely understood that space is not fixed, but is a social product, and that there is a gulf between space and place, the imagined and the tangible, the fixed and the fluid (Lefebvre 1991, 362-363). Even so, both ‘space’ and ‘place’ remain flexible, complex, and even slippery concepts, and it would add little to produce limiting definitions here. Since Lefebvre’s and de Certeau’s interventions (and those of their successors), the ‘spatial turn’ has significantly influenced the study of early modern history and literature.² Early modern historians and literary critics have taken up the baton from Lefebvre, de Certeau, Edward Soja, Pierre Bourdieu, and (inevitably) Michel Foucault to consider constructions of space in early modern literature, cartography, religious life, cities, households, and beyond. Julie Sanders, for instance, combines ‘literary criticism, theatre history, and cultural geography in an early modern context’ to extend her analysis to the environment (2011, 9). In doing so, she shows that ‘landscape and environment have come to be viewed not simply as static texts to be “read” but as dynamic sites of enactment, re-enactment, and performance’ (10). In their edited volume on German medieval and early modern space, Markus Stock and Nicola Vöhringer suggest that ‘the study of spatial practices interrogates human action in different spaces, human agency in the production of space, and space in its capacity to prompt human action’ (2014, 23-24). By linking these possibilities to literary production – whether spoken or written, public or private, in manuscript or print – there is opportunity to think about the ways in which early modern writers perceived their environments, regardless of whether those environments corresponded to physical surroundings.

The materiality of texts and of writing also offers valuable avenues through which to consider the contexts and contents of these texts through attention to media, instruments, and

² See, for example, Kümin and Osborne 2013, and Boone and Howell 2013.

ornamentation. The 2025 *Journal of Early Modern Studies* issue on *The Politics of Book History: Then and Now* signalled just how relevant a focus on texts as material objects – or what some might call ‘textual materiality’ – is to our understanding of texts as both vestiges of a time past and continued objects of interpretation in the present (Wilson and Lesser 2025, 8 and 12-13). In turn, this volume seeks to extend that focus into what we might call a textual spatiality; that is, the ways in which texts create and are shaped by the material environments of their composition. Work by Amanda Flather, Bernhard Klein, Helen Smith, Paul Stock, Jessica Malay, Will Coster, Andrew Spicer, and others has established a foundation for evaluating the rich and multi-layered interplay between materiality and spatiality. Klein, for instance, shows that early modern maps were ‘turning land into paper’, emphasising the cross-directional relationship between space and writing (2001, 67).³ We hope that the present volume serves as a similar kind of map as it traces the embedded relationship between literary texts and the material spaces of their composition.

Paul Stock has recently reminded us of the need to evaluate texts (and, particularly, travel accounts) as more than just ‘discursively constructed’ or purely descriptive of the ‘physically concrete’ (2025, 597-598). Instead, he argues for the ‘real-and-imagined’, that is, the idea that ‘concrete materiality and discursive constructions are interrelated in any spatial experience’ (592). Smith’s analysis of women and the printed book shows ‘that writing is an embodied act, structured by the physical environment of writing, and that writing as practice undermines any easy distinction between literary content and material form, the working of the intellect and the situation of inscription’ (2012, 20). No act of writing is ever completely divorced from the environment in which it takes place. For Flather, investigation of space shows the way it shaped the early modern world: ‘Far from being simply the structure that determined how gender relations developed, space was the basis for the formation of gender identities, which were constantly contested and reconstructed. Where people lived, worked and worshipped in early modern England are all questions rich in symbolism and social meanings’ (2007, 1). The (in some cases long-term) political consequences of this relationship are manifest in Lorna Hutson’s recent *England’s Insular Imagining*, which reveals ‘the dazzling achievements of the English literary imagination’ that ‘created the strange conceptual space in which the idea of England-as-island’ might allow for what amounted to the ‘erasure of the idea of Scotland as a sovereign historic kingdom’ (2023, 2, 4, and 279). As each of these scholars and their colleagues have shown in turn, analysis of space has implications for understanding early modern travel writing, gender dynamics, geopolitics, confessional identities, theatre, and the boundaries between private and public life. In fact, Sanders argues that texts (in this case, ‘play-texts’) ‘not only represent but alter, foster, and enable practices of space, place, and landscape’ in a way that sheds light on both the early modern past and the texts (of all sorts) that define it (2011, 235).

Many approaches have focused on humans and their conceptions and experiences of the spaces around them. From the early 2000s, however, Gaston Bachelard began to influence a new materialist approach to spatial thinking which considers, as Emily Naish does in this volume, the agency of the non-human material environment (see also Stock 2025). Following Stock, it is clearly possible for ‘material environments and cultural discourses [to] interact to create not only lived experiences in the moment but also texts which document that interaction’ (2025, 605). What the present volume seeks to do, then, is to explore the ways in which early modern writers experienced and conceived of the space they inhabited or imagined and how those spaces influenced and were represented in the texts produced.

³ See also Daybell 2006 and 2012; Orlin 2008; Hannan 2012; Sawday 2023, and the various contributions in Pender and Smith 2014, and Clarke *et al.* 2022.

The present issue of *JEMS* builds upon the valuable work highlighted above, broadening the scope of this burgeoning field of research, and invites readers to consider how studying the relationship between literary production broadly understood and space can help scholars develop fresh perspectives on the influence of the lived environment. Tellingly, much of the work cited in this Editorial focuses only on conceptions of space in and related to texts written in English. While these studies provide excellent grounding on the wider issues, the aim of the present volume is to consider space and writing in a wider cultural and linguistic context, and to do so within one body of text. While much recent work on space and writing has drawn on developments in geography, a significant portion has largely remained within conventional disciplinary and/or geographical boundaries. Inspired by the interdisciplinary work on this subject led by Markus Stock, Vöhringer, and others, the present volume is an attempt to step across the invisible but palpable boundary separating historical study and literary analysis, beginning with the mixed disciplinary attachments within the editorial collaboration.

In doing so, this issue takes up questions including how the material conditions of writing inform the finished text, how early moderns conceived of their relationship to their environment (natural and manmade), and how this was or was not expressed in – and influenced by – the different spaces and mediums in which they wrote and lived. In their recent collection *Reading the Road, from Shakespeare's Crossways to Bunyan's Highways*, Lisa Hopkins and Bill Angus note that cultural geography is inextricably intertwined with mobility studies in their shared interest in 'how people move through particular kinds of landscapes' (2020, 2). The present volume is interested in the imaginative dimensions of that movement. How did the ways early modern people move through and within given spaces shape the way they wrote, both from and about those spaces?

The articles that follow offer case studies exploring different ways in which the relationship between writing and space can be conceived. The literary production here ranges from epistolary prison writing to epic to drama to travel writing to didactic poetry to a liturgical manual and commonplace book. The essays vary dramatically across time and space. Five of the articles consider English writing, though one examines European travel writing about visits to Safavid Iran and the broader region that early modern Europeans called 'Persia'. Three articles study continental European writing: two are on Italian texts, one on a German manuscript. The articles in this issue primarily focus on the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, though Lena Vosding's study pulls us back as far as the first half of the fifteenth century to remind us that the sixteenth century did not represent a complete transformation in conceptions of space and place.

Despite the differences in subject matter, links between the articles emerge. There are a number of recurring themes, including women's writing, the land, differentiation of spaces, and the (de)colonial. Given the myriad directions in which a study of writing and material space might take, we have organised the volume broadly thematically, pairing articles into distinct sections. At first glance, the pairings may seem dubious – can one really consider prison writing and travel writing in the same section? – and yet threads of connection do emerge. But these are merely case studies curated to allow readers to begin to sew together the pieces of scholarship here that form the core of the quilt of studies of material space and writing that may follow.

The volume opens with a review article ('New Directions in Material Space and Literary Production') in which four respondents reflect on the ways the contributors to this issue of *JEMS* engage with the relationships between early modern place, space, and literary production, teasing out moments of connection and offering suggestions for further avenues of exploration. The second part of the volume moves to the series of paired articles which offer different ways of approaching the texts. This organisation is reflected in the review article, which asks each scholar to think about a pair of two articles, what they contribute to the field, and where research on this subject might turn next.

The first case-study section ('Working With/On the Land') comprises two articles which consider how poetic texts negotiate and frame the relationship between early moderns and the natural world, with particular attention to the environmental concerns arising from the Little Ice Age and the effects of coastal erosion. Felicity Sheehy offers a timely re-evaluation of the sixteenth-century farmer-poet Thomas Tusser's bestselling *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* (1573). Sheehy makes a strong and eloquent case that longstanding critical assessments of Tusser as an unskilled poet whose work has value primarily as mnemonic rhymes rather than literature are both flawed and incomplete. Complementing recent work on the poetic and historical value of practical texts by Scott Oldenburg and Jessica Rosenberg, Sheehy demonstrates that Tusser's complex and contradictory poetics are a deliberate formal strategy designed to mimic the vicissitudes of agrarian labour amidst the environmental degradation of the late sixteenth century. Reconsidering Tusser's craft through comparison to a wider range of texts, Sheehy deftly reframes calendar poems as 'a core structural principle for *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie*' (*infra*, 40). Where critics might read Tusser's debt to a genre widely considered simplistic for simple readers, Sheehy shows that the poet plays with a variety of forms in order to produce a poetic agricultural manual which 'becomes didactic in part through its literary choices' (*infra*, 54). Tusser prioritises reader experience – and reading as experience – in order to produce a practice-based poetic almanac that relies on direct experience rather than astrological prediction, and thus better fits the environmental instability of early modern life.

Next, Emily Naish turns from the farmlands of southern England to its coastline, offering a nuanced and persuasive exploration of the role of non-human agents in creating early modern space in Michael Drayton's chorographic poem *Poly-Olbion* (1612 and 1622). Naish takes 'seriously the role' and material impact 'of the non-human environment in the poem's conception of space', with particular focus on the Devon and Cornwall coastlines in light of early modern anxieties about coastal change and erosion (*infra*, 58). Advocating for a Bachelardian rather than de Certeauian approach to the spatial poetics of Drayton's poem, Naish reads Draytonian space as a more than merely human phenomenon. The article begins by exploring the non-human as a co-creator of space in the poem before compellingly demonstrating how the spatial agency of the non-human has a profound material impact. Drayton's poem, in this reading, celebrates not only the natural world, but poetry's potential to shape and memorialise that world in the face of coastal change. In doing so, Naish offers a fresh and original approach to Draytonian conservatism that engages productively with recent scholarship on both the poet and broader questions in the spatial and blue humanities. Taken together, Sheehy's and Naish's articles offer a valuable and timely reminder of the interconnectedness of the human and non-human, and our duty of care towards the land during a time of climate crisis.

The next section ('Women and Faith') turns to women and faith, highlighting the ways in which early modern women used their physical surroundings to assert their own religious 'voice' and agency. Lena Vosding's article draws us to late medieval Nuremberg in her study of the links between sound and space, the everyday and the sacred, and even the symbolic and the functional in the Dominican convent of St Katharina in the fifteenth century. Vosding examines a manuscript handbook of liturgical practices largely in a single hand but clearly laid out on the page to allow space for future additions, which appear at various points throughout the manuscript (*infra*, 76). In doing so, this article calls to mind existing work on co-authorship or even 'textual co-presence', albeit in a very different context, 'as a series of relationships over time' (Smith 2012, 21 and 52).

Vosding argues that analysis of space, the so-called 'monastic landscape', must extend across the senses and that sound is fundamental to the ways in which early modern people

experienced the spaces they inhabited or demarcated spaces within wider communities (*infra*, 74-75). Sound – whether oral or aural – both ‘shaped and defined’ sacred space and, in this case, women’s sacred space (*infra*, 75). Here and elsewhere, nuns used sound to organise and worship, but also as a method of resistance to reforms, both before and after the Reformation (*infra*, 83-85). It was one thing to decree liturgical norms. It was another to implement them. Prescribed practices were not always aligned with how the liturgy functioned in practice or the ways in which religious worship was subject to local accommodations, often allowing these nuns to assert authority over their own space (*infra*, 76).⁴ Vosding reminds readers that the people’s experience of the liturgy existed within the physical and transcended the texts through which we read about it now. It was not simply seen, but heard, smelled, spoken, sung, and felt (*infra*, 87). The noise of a knock or strike on wood or the toll or reverberation of a bell from within the enclosed space of the convent or from across the city had the potential to ‘transform’ physical space into sacred space or to render the convent distinct from or related to other religious institutions or parts of the urban landscape (*infra*, 79, 82, and 85). In a time when these nuns were sequestered from the outside world through ‘both physical and symbolic boundaries’, their use of sound asserted their place within localised and wider acoustic and material space, even where their presence was only heard but not seen (*infra*, 82-85).

Sarah Bansbach Valles moves across more than a century, the Reformation, and the English Channel in her examination of Aemilia Lanyer’s ‘The Description of Cooke-Ham’. Unlike the prescriptive and practical working document that was the Nuremberg handbook, the text here is a poem familiar to many scholars of early modern women’s writing. Yet Valles shows that there is more to the story than a ‘country house’ poem (*infra*, 92). Her consideration of space and place operates on two levels. By attempting to locate ‘The Description of Cookeham’ and Lanyer’s other poetry in the physical environment of Cookham in Berkshire, Valles emphasises the topopoetics of Lanyer’s poetry as Cookham becomes ‘the touchstone place in Lanyer’s literal and spiritual dramas featuring the rituals of female communities’ (*infra*, 96). At the same time, she argues for reading ‘The Description of Cookeham’ within Lanyer’s *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, not as a departure from Lanyer’s more overtly religious focus in ‘Salve Deus’. The poems, she says, must be located within the context in which they were written, but also within the published volume, too. Like Vosding, she shows that these texts are themselves material ‘spatial container[s]’ (*infra*, 86-100).

Valles’ study is unrelated to sound, but it is no less sensory. As she shows, Lanyer’s poetry was directly related to her mystical experience of the landscape, the ‘sweet Place’ that was Cookham (*infra*, 93). In doing so, she uses careful cartographic comparison to decentre the domestic space (or as Valles labels it, ‘a domestic centerpiece’) of the home in favour of the natural environment (*infra*, 95). The landscape is not just the object of description and prosody, it generates ‘the situation and setting for productive meditation’ (*infra*, 99).

The third section (‘Changing Places/Spaces’) tracks the materiality of writing and the ‘real and imagined’ places that different sorts of texts can create or reflect. Framing her study around Bourdieu’s concept of ‘habitus’, Jackie Watson informs us that letters related to Thomas Overbury’s incarceration in the seventeenth-century Tower of London reflect and amplify a ‘courtly habitus’ composed of spaces and elite administrative sites (*infra*, 114). The familiar world of Jacobean court culture and scandal is suddenly refreshed as Watson shows the ways in which the imprisoned Overbury’s carceral correspondence both comments upon the conditions of the space he inhabits and also recalls spaces he has left behind (*infra*, 124-127). Here, space evolves,

⁴ For more on this, see Cassidy-Welch 2010.

as does the writer's experience of a space. One of the various sites of government business, the Tower shapeshifts into a purely carceral enclosure, a physical place operating as a number of different spaces. Yet Overbury, who had previously frequented courtly spaces, 'still mentally inhabits his court environment and retains his court habitus' (*infra*, 127). This extends beyond typical prison writing. As Watson shows, Overbury's correspondence from the Tower relies on 'the use of real places as *loci argumentorum*, where the rhetorical circumstances used by Overbury provoke *enargeia* and aim to conjure a particular emotional effect in their reader' (*infra*, 124).

If Watson locates her study within the epistolarity of the Overbury case, Chloë Houston's article considers broader cultures of writing, both in manuscript and print, as she moves from the confined space of the prison to the 'exotic' of the unknown in seventeenth-century European accounts of travel to 'Persia' to analyse the comparative lack of print culture amid a booming literary manuscript culture. These texts, including those by John Ogilby and Adam Olearius, 'contributed to a developing sense of Persia as a material space' (*infra*, 130-132). Far from the localised space of the court, the texts Houston studies transport readers to the broader space of a faraway land, at least in the eyes of European readers. In doing so, Houston argues for the decentring of Europe in favour of a more global (or at least less Eurocentric) approach to early modern literary culture and book history in a way that limits 'reliance on the European experience as a way of understanding the adoption of print and the printed book' and instead allows for consideration of culturally-specific patterns, including the 'richness' of both manuscript and oral culture (*infra*, 130, 134, and 138). Taken together, Houston's and Watson's essays make clear that early modern writers often conceived of and defined space in contrasts. Whether the courtly versus the carceral, the familiar versus the 'exotic', so much about what people wrote reflected what was familiar to them and where they placed themselves within wider literary, cultural, or even hierarchical landscapes.

As the cultural geographer Tim Cresswell has suggested, culture can be understood as more 'about routes than roots' (2006, 1). Our next two contributors pick up this thread, surveying the depiction and/or recollection of international travel in early modern writing about colonial ventures. This final section ('Imagery, Centre, Periphery') uses the work of Italian and Portuguese writers to move beyond Europe, exploring how written, visual, and geographic depictions of non-European women unsettle masculine colonial endeavours in West Central Africa and the 'New World'. Positioning himself within the tradition of a well-established critique of colonial writing for colonial situations, Marcelo José Cabarcas Ortega interrogates the treatment of Njinga of Ndongo in seventeenth-century European sources, suggesting that missionary observations do not merely record, but rather map Njinga and her territory – and that the way they do so codifies difference but without entirely disregarding local agency. These maps act at the 'intersection of belief, geography, and power', using spatial theory to examine how these texts construct both Africa and Njinga 'as a legible geography for Christian spectatorship' (*infra*, 146). In attempting to render West Central Africa knowable to Europeans, however, these chroniclers also reveal the limits of that knowledge.

Kate Driscoll is similarly interested in the way written and visual depictions of powerful, non-European women interrogate and undermine colonial endeavours, offering a fresh and bold reading of Tasso's epic which challenges traditional readings of Tasso as a Counter-Reformation loyalist and propagandist for Catholic imperialism. Driscoll repositions *Gerusalemme liberata* as both a pre- and de-colonial text: 'one that operates through the rhetorical logic of the historically impossible yet poetically thinkable' (*infra*, 171). In this reading, Armida's island in Canto XV serves as a heterotopia, producing what Driscoll refers to as the 'decolonizing doubts' that inevitably arise when one colonial context assesses another (*infra*, 174). As such,

the tensions generated by the island test both the poem's depiction of conquest and liberation and that of its time, and, in doing so, present a critique of European men's colonial ambitions.

The articles in this volume of *Journal of Early Modern Studies* address a wide range of methods through which scholars may engage with the interweaving of writing and material space, regardless of whether that space reflected material realities or imaginative landscapes. Together, they exemplify the richness of the field of study of writing and space, no longer 'new' decades after the spatial turn. More importantly, though, the present volume helps to shape the next generation of analysis of space and place and writing. Through the diverse range of approaches interrogating the connection between space, place, and writing in the early modern literary landscape, *Material Space and Literary Production* invites readers to reflect on how scholars might reach across genres and even across disciplines to usher in and propel forward new ways of thinking about writing and space. Gone are the days when scholars were forced to justify their interests in real and imagined space. Now, we have nothing but space (as it were) to explore these questions.

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