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... thanks to all at once and to each one... (*Macbeth*, V. 8).

Donatella Pallotti and Paola Pugliatti



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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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Part One

Reflections



New Directions in Material Space and Literary Production

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Abstract

The present introductory article presents comparative readings of each of the four pairs of case study articles. In it, four respondents each offer an in-depth analysis of the connections between a pair of articles and their resonance for the volume as a whole. Each respondent also gestures towards productive avenues for further research which are opened up by the articles in their pair, offering up new directions for the ever-expanding field of space and place studies.

Keywords: Colonial Histories, Female Community, Landscape, New Directions, Spatial Distance

1. *Introduction*

Our work is highly specialised. We exist within departments separated by disciplinary boundaries between history, English, or modern languages. We are early modernists or medievalists. We are cultural, political, social, intellectual, book, economic, or literary historians, but rarely all at once. We write about institutions or phenomena, events or long-term trends, specific texts or literary movements, drama or poetry, England or France, Europe or the wider world, and so on. Even within the specialised boundaries of studies of space and literary production, our expertise differs. One of the four of us knows a great deal about landscapes. Another studies women's mysticism. Still another is interested in buildings and carceral spaces. The final contributor is an expert in travel writing and cross-cultural encounters. How, then, might any one of us purport to give shape to a wider study of the links between material space and literary production?

With this sense of wonder in mind, the guest editors decided to use this introduction to comment upon what is included in the present volume and where scholars might turn in the future. To do so, the articles here have been grouped and divided into four thematic sections, as outlined in the preceding editorial. From a certain perspective, this organisation is artificial and arbitrary. All of the articles here direct their attention to a single theme. However, the opposite is also true. Despite being linked by a common overarching question about the relationship between material space and writing, each article explores this through very different case studies ranging across the late-fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries and between the British Isles and Africa and continental Europe and the Near East. Yet there is something to be gained by approaching these articles comparatively. To read the articles separately or all together is enlightening, but to read an article in conversation with another article, even when it seems to explore a markedly different topic under the wider umbrella of the issue's theme, allows a sort of tectonic collision from which new questions and approaches emerge. In other words, to read these articles in relation to each other does not simply invite comparison or search for common threads; it creates new space for new questions altogether.

In light of the chronological, geographic, and thematic scope of the contributions to this special issue, the volume's guest editors enlisted colleagues to interrogate these articles and to suggest how the questions they raise might form the basis for the continued development of work on the subject of space and writing. Each of us has focused on a single section of the volume and has produced a short critical response that outlines the contributions each section makes to the field and the new lines of enquiry it raises. First, Chloe Fairbanks responds to Emily Naish's and Felicity Sheehy's articles on human engagement with the land. Olena Danylovyh addresses Lena Vosding's and Sarah Bansbach Valles' analysis of women's religious spaces and the writing that these spaces are informed by or produce. Catherine Jenkinson reflects on the themes of spatial difference that Chloë Houston and Jackie Watson raise in their articles about writing that engages with spaces past and present. Finally, Natalya Din-Kariuki offers a reading of Kate Driscoll's and Marcelo José Cabarcas Ortega's analysis of (de)colonial thought in two very different sorts of texts. The result is what follows.

2. *Working With/On the Land*

Simon Estok famously diagnosed the early modern period with a 'generalised fear or contempt for the natural world and its inhabitants' which he termed 'ecophobia' (2011, 4). For Estok, this contempt is inextricably linked to man's biblically ordained domination over both the natural world and other animals. While neither Felicity Sheehy nor Emily Naish takes a technically ecophobic approach to the study of early modern literature, the environmental and climatic uncertainty and unpredictability in which Estok locates ecophobia are central to both of their articles – and, increasingly, to any environmental or agricultural study of the period. Their work builds upon recent advances in agrarian and environmental history to demonstrate the more nuanced, practical ways in which early moderns worked with the volatile environment in which they lived.

Both articles share an interest in and emphasis on the agential force of the non-human in shaping human experience, reminding us to remain attuned to the ways in which humans were not the only – or indeed the primary – actants in early modern space and place. Both Tusser and Drayton are, they show, keenly aware of the powerful unpredictability of the natural world. Rather than resist or attempt to dominate that world, they seek ways to work with and around it. Drayton's poem may be rife with concern about excessive human intervention, but

Naish notes that it nevertheless allows for some degree of human intercession, treading a middle ground between the idealisation of the natural world and the ecophobia Estok associates with the period. Similarly, Sheehy makes a persuasive case that Tusser deliberately mimics the unpredictability of the natural world through his unconventional formal choices, offering a bracing counter to a critical tradition which has viewed agrarian poetry like Tusser's as mere 'agrarian book[s] of jingles' or 'collection[s] of doggerel' (2006, 160; 1996, 146). Sheehy's interest in the ways we may have misunderstood Tusser's poetic craft is reflected in Naish's identification of an underexplored crossover in early modern studies between the spatial and the ecocritical. What both articles implicitly reject, then, is a binary approach to questions of value and agency, whether literary or environmental.

As such, Sheehy and Naish represent a vital new wave of early modern scholarship which attends seriously to the respective values of the non-human (e.g. Erica Fudge, Karen Raber, Holly Dugan) and non-literary (e.g. Scott Oldenburg, Jessica Rosenberg, Carrie Griffin) worlds. Literary criticism has historically downplayed the importance of the non-human and the non-literary, treating both animals and practical texts such as Tusser's as little more than contextual sources for canonical texts by poets and dramatists such as Shakespeare and Spenser. In recent decades, however, the scholars mentioned above have spearheaded an effort to re-centre both the non-human and the non-canonical in our study of the period, alongside advances in the blue humanities by Steve Mentz, Dan Brayton, and Laurence Publicover which remind us, as Naish does here, that ecocriticism is more than just a myopic focus on the 'green' humanities. In many ways, then, the articles in this section are only the tip of the iceberg – much remains to be explored in, around, and above the natural world in and about which early moderns wrote.

Taken together, Sheehy and Naish offer a valuable blueprint for expanding the ways in which we read these texts, both alongside each other and in the context of the material and environmental conditions in which they were produced. In highlighting the contingency of the human, both Sheehy and Naish and the early modern poets they discuss encourage us to continue moving beyond a strictly anthropocentric view of the natural world in both our personal and professional practice. Now that the value of attending to the essential embeddedness of the human, non-human, and textual worlds is becoming steadily more apparent, our hope is that the articles in this section will stimulate further critical research into these previously disregarded but now burgeoning fields. Further work on the poetic and literary value of practical texts is one obvious avenue for future research; although significant valuable work exists on genres and topics including cookery books, or the practical poetry of the self-styled Water Poet John Taylor, many other genres remain underexplored. What literary merit might we find in midwifery texts, for example? In farrier's manuals? Fencing guides? Likewise ripe for further study is a wider swathe of the colour spectrum of the environmental humanities, from the depths of the early modern ocean to the storm clouds in its sky. Finally, as Gabriel Egan suggests in *Green Shakespeare*, early modern texts which engage with humanity's relationship with, attitudes about, or obligations toward that natural world enable us to 'interrogat[e] ... our ideas about our relations to one another and to the world around us. As such they help us think clearly about what is at stake in those relations' (2006, 4). The capaciousness of – and debate surrounding – ecocriticism and related critical terms reminds us that the study of human-nonhuman relations is both presentist and historicist. It is to be hoped that Sheehy's and Naish's work will encourage further scholarship which engages both seriously and responsibly with that mutual entanglement, offering both a historical and an ethical approach to environmental questions.

Nor were such questions limited to the human realm. As Alexandra Walsham (2011) has noted, the landscape was both indelibly connected to and profoundly shaped by the religious

changes that swept Europe throughout the late medieval and early modern periods. The landscape was a key site of attempts to negotiate humanity's shifting relationship to the divine during and after the Reformation. Where Sheehy and Naish consider the ways in which the practical manual labour of (frequently male) actors affected and was shaped by the natural world, then, Lena Vosding and Sarah Banschbach Valles take a leaf from Walsham's book in their consideration of the role material spaces played in the religious lives of early modern women.

3. *The Spaces and Places of Religious Women's Communities*

True to their name, reformation movements brought sweeping changes to the devotional landscape of late medieval and early modern Europe. However, these changes were not absolute, as shown by Lena Vosding and Sarah Banschbach Valles, who shed light on the lives and devotional practices of women in religious communities in England and continental Europe across the Reformation threshold. Vosding delineates the soundscape of the reformed Dominican nuns' convent of St Katharina in late medieval Nürnberg, demonstrating how sound shaped convent life and connected the cloistered nuns to the city. Valles, for her part, offers a re-appraisal of Aemilia Lanyer's 'The Description of Cooke-ham' that casts the entirety of her oeuvre, *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* (1611), as the creation and enactment of a female religious community. Both analyses are grounded in the geographies of Nürnberg and Cookham, highlighting the importance of spatiality for constructing and maintaining community identity. Working within the 'spatial turn' that has shaped literary and historical studies over the past several decades, they reveal how generative this approach continues to be.¹ Though Vosding and Valles focus on different times and places, their papers are highly resonant, emphasising women's agency in shifting social and religious contexts.

Lena Vosding's sensitive analysis of the Nürnberg *Notel*, or sacristan's notebook, provides insight into the activity and organisation of the nuns' lives at the Dominican convent of St Katharina following the Observant reform. Vosding shows how sounds such as songs, knocks, and especially the ringing of different bells, accompanied rituals and routines, modulated behaviour, and created the possibility of interaction with communities beyond the convent's walls. Moreover, the sounds of the *Notel* suggest the nuns' independence from male clerical authority, as they are described to determine their own schedule and liturgical practices, retaining regional customs alongside adherence to the ideals of the Observant reform. Taken together, the convent's sounds served as an important marker of community, as they not only helped structure the Dominican nuns' lives, but allowed them to stake an aural claim in Nürnberg's soundscape, asserting and defining their community within this urban space. Their influence travelled further still, with their way of life serving as a successful model for other reformed convents to follow. Despite the strict enclosure and discipline imposed by the reform, the *Notel* reveals the margins of agency exercised by the St Katharina community, both within and beyond its walls.

The depth of detail gleaned from descriptions of the daily running of the convent is impressive, demonstrating the import of sound analysis within medieval literature, an approach that has been growing in popularity in recent years. Though similar forays within medieval literary studies have tended to focus on the implications of mystical sounds, Vosding's approach

¹ A non-exhaustive list of recent studies includes Hanawalt and Kobialka 2000; Raguin and Stanbury 2005; Davies *et al.* 2006; Boulton *et al.* 2018; Blud *et al.* 2019.

shows how much can be gained from analysing material sounds.² Indeed, her painstaking analyses vividly reconstruct a convent that, in the wake of the Protestant Reformation, underwent profound transformation and, following the Second World War, disappeared altogether. The unassuming and pragmatic *Notel* is thus shown to be a veritable treasure trove of information, and Vosding's forthcoming critical edition will be a valuable resource for further research into this remarkable community.

Moving from sound to space, from late medieval Nürnberg to early modern Cookham, and from an enclosed religious community to a textual community, we now turn to Aemilia Lanyer's *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*. In her article, Sarah Banschbach Valles examines the multi-layered implications of space in Lanyer's poetry collection, and in so doing, overturns several pre-conceived ideas about her writing. The geographical location of Cookham is shown to be more ambiguous and indeterminate than previously thought, emphasising its metaphorical significance over the actual physical location. Indeed, for Lanyer and the Cliffords, the grounds of Cookham are particularly evocative because they invited meditation on Christ's Passion and motivated the writing of the poems. Valles suggests that, when considered in its entirety, the *Salve Deus* invites readers to engage in affective meditation on the Passion, and in so doing, to enter a spiritual community of religious women. Physical space inspires written space, which in turn inspires spiritual space.

Throughout Valles' analyses, one cannot help but notice the distinctly medieval flavour of some key features of Lanyer's poetry. While it has previously been noted by Cristina Malcolmson that Aemilia Lanyer would likely have had access to Christine de Pizan's *Book of the City of Ladies* (Malcolmson 2002, 21), this potential influence is lent more weight by Valles' identification of Lanyer's community-building impulse. Indeed, Valles' remark that Lanyer's book 'can also be read as a commentary on how ritually and spatially constructed community is essential to unraveling detrimental narratives about gender' can very well apply to Pizan's famous work (*infra*, 101). Conversely, Lanyer's invocation of various patrons in the *Salve Deus* dedication poems might be seen as the construction of a different sort of city of ladies. On another note, Lanyer's detailed, affective descriptions of Christ's Passion appear to be inspired by the medieval tradition of affective meditation, one example of which is *The Orchard of Syon*, translated from Catherine of Siena's *Dialogo della divina provvidenza*.³ As much is argued by Nancy Bradley Warren, who identifies a continuity between Lanyer and Catherine of Siena through their emphasis on incarnational piety (Warren 2010, 19-59).⁴ Furthermore, by conceptualising Cookham as an environment that induces meditation, one is reminded of the English translator's prologue to *The Orchard*, which encourages the reader to perceive the text as a vineyard among whose rows one may roam at their leisure, stopping to savour its various fruits.⁵ The walks described in Lanyer's poems evoke a similar meditative journey, albeit one inspired by physical reality.

The medieval resonances of Lanyer's poetry, as well as her emphasis on female communities, suggests the possibility of reading Lanyer as part of a broader community of progressive women

² A detailed overview of recent developments in pre-modern and modern sound studies is provided in Boynton, Kay, Cornish, and Albin (2016), with case-studies of varieties of sound in medieval literature. In an elaboration on this theme, Denis Renevey and Tamás Karáth are preparing an edited volume on sound and mysticism in late medieval England (forthcoming).

³ A detailed study of the life and afterlives of Catherine of Siena is provided in Brown 2019.

⁴ Similarly to Valles, Warren identifies Lanyer's creation of a textual female community in *Salve Deus*.

⁵ For a detailed analysis of the translator's prologue, see Alakas 2002.

writers of the late medieval-early modern period. Christine de Pizan and Catherine of Siena were not only influential, but radical and politicised, challenging social and religious norms, and exercising a high degree of agency in a patriarchal world. It is easy to see how Lanyer might fit into this category as well. Though Valles rightly warns against reading Lanyer in comparison with other poets, particularly male poets, considering her in dialogue with other influential women may further broaden our understanding of her writing.

Whether we consider them as part of broader networks or not, the women in Lanyer's poetry and in the medieval convent of St Katharina were inextricably linked to, and found meaning in, their immediate environments. By grounding their analyses in the geographies of Nürnberg and Cookham, Vosding and Valles demonstrate how considerations of space add further dimension to our understanding of historical reality. Their detailed case-studies highlight women's agency, self-determination and community-building despite the rigid ideals imposed upon them in the wake of different reformation movements. Though produced in distinct historical and cultural contexts, the sacristan's *Notel* and Aemilia Lanyer's poetry attest to the enduring role of place in shaping writing – and to the reciprocal power of writing to shape communities, forging connections across space and time.

Connections across space take centre stage in the third section of the present volume, in which Jackie Watson and Chloë Houston move from the spaces that shaped the written word to the way that writing brought certain spaces vividly to life for its readers. The letter writers Watson considers seek, like those addressed by Vosding and Valles, to build and articulate communities shaped by or taking place within particular spaces – albeit to differing degrees of success. Houston looks further afield, exploring the ways in which writing shaped early modern understandings of different countries and cultures. The spatial spectrum of early modern writing was broad, indeed.

4. *Changing Places/Spaces*

Upon first look, it is not quite clear where the overlap might be between studies of epistolarity in Jacobean court scandal on one hand and mid- to late-seventeenth century European travel writing about Safavid Iran and its wider region on the other. But closer inspection shows that the pairing is meaningful. At their core, the subjects of both Jackie Watson's article 'Real and Imagined Space: The Rhetoric of Thomas Overbury's Imprisonment' and Chloë Houston's '“Printers they know none”: The Material Text and Textual Culture in Seventeenth-Century European Travel Writing About Persia' are fundamentally found in Watson's title: both are explorations of places 'real and imagined'.⁶ Both address texts that simultaneously describe and manufacture physical place and space for their readers, primarily through the communication of spatial difference. Watson and Houston are examining the ways early modern writers wrote about places they experienced or heard about, but they are also considering the ways these texts brought real places to their readers, sometimes in ways that transformed them into imagined spaces.⁷

The history of the public scandal surrounding the Overbury murder is by now well covered, but Watson's article shifts attention to the creation and consumption of letters related to Overbury's fall as dramatic inventions that require literary analysis, not just historical examination as 'evidence' of Overbury's prison experience.⁸ This is not really an article about prison writing. It is less about the material conditions of writing than about letters' capacity to embody and

⁶ See Stock 2013 and 2025; Hannan 2012.

⁷ See Matthee 2009.

⁸ See Bellany 2002; Lindley 1993; Watson 2024.

create space through emphasis on contrasting spaces and manipulating their readers' emotions.⁹ Textual spaces linked to physical spaces. If, however, as Milton's Satan suggested, 'The mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a Heaven of hell, a hell of Heaven', the letters Watson studies are their 'own place', too (1.254-255).

Through their letters, Overbury, his interlocutors, and those reporting on his incarceration created a separation between courtly and carceral spaces and between power and subjugation that at once corresponded to physical and political realities and was more distinct in its literary creation than it was in its corporeal reality. As Watson points out, the Tower was both a prison and an administrative centre of government, 'a site of royal power, just as other court spaces were' (*infra*, 119). Though it is true that Overbury was kept away from the business at the Tower during his incarceration, the choice of the Tower as the place of his imprisonment is itself exceptional. Rather than being sent to live with 'common criminals' in Newgate or the Fleet, he continued to occupy space within, yet just beyond access to, the spaces of power he had formerly inhabited.¹⁰ Though James Daybell has recently argued that 'viewed spatially the early modern built environment – monasteries, prisons, hospitals, schools, or universities, even domestic dwellings – facilitated or enforced separation, removing individuals from the rest of society in order to purify, punish, cure, contain, and educate', the gulf between the courtly spaces of Westminster, Greenwich, and Royston versus the Tower prison was neither as wide nor as glaring as it seems (2025, 29-30).

Houston's survey of the relationship between forms of literary production and place and space similarly examines the ways in which writers moved between spaces. In exploring what European travellers and cartographers wrote about the areas that now make up parts of Iran, Turkey, and Central Asia – broadly conceived as 'Persia' by early modern European writers –, Houston considers European understandings of the 'material space' of what many scholars refer to as Safavid Iran and especially its 'literary space' and culture as she reminds us that the culture of print was not universal (*infra*, 130-131). Less interested in the travel narratives than in broader conceptions of Persian literary culture, Houston argues for decentring Europe from the history of early modern literature to reassess the ways in which the materialities of textual production differed across time and space (*infra*, 130, 134, and 136).¹¹ Her wide-ranging study shows how travellers used discussions of Persian literary culture and its differences from European print culture to describe and define the material space of early modern 'Persia' for European readers. Both Houston and Watson study texts that construct stark contrasts between the places they describe and the places their authors have left, between the familiar and the unfamiliar. In doing so, these texts blur and complicate the line between what is real and what is imagined.

Print was far less revolutionary in early modern Islamic cultures than it was in western Europe, yet anglophone studies of early modern literature rarely step beyond the confines of the world of print (Blair 2010, 26-28; MacLean 2019, 62). Resisting earlier scholars' tendencies to associate differing cultures of print with 'backwardness', Houston calls for the examination of Persian book culture on its own terms, not merely in relation to contemporary western European models (*infra*, 134 and 140). Watson's writers mostly discuss spaces within the urban landscape of wider London, yet those local courtly spaces were no more accessible to the public than 'Persia' was, thousands of miles away.

⁹ On early modern English prison writing and space and place, see Ahnert 2013, esp. chapter 2.

¹⁰ See Ahnert 2013, 18.

¹¹ See Brancaforte 2018.

Both scholars establish themselves as literary historians, and together they are more interested in the contents of these texts than in their materiality, pushing readers to consider the ways writers construct space, even when ostensibly writing about ‘real’ places. Historians (in the narrower sense of the term) might have different questions here beginning with textual provenance and the practicalities of both travel to and communication in Safavid Iran and Tower incarceration. Most of the letters Watson studies survive in scribal copies rather than in the original hands (Bellany 2002, 90; Watson 2024, 112).¹² The letters’ contents are in themselves informative, not least about the rhetorical strategies, training, and emotional manipulations Watson identifies, though they might also be understood as pages within a copied scribal text. These codical spaces within commonplace books and miscellanies are at least as important as the spaces and places that appear within the margins of the letters themselves.¹³ The same is true for Houston’s travel accounts, which existed within a wider European culture of print and, specifically, travel writing. Overbury’s supplications to Robert Carr about his ill health are relatively standard fare for prison letters, though Overbury’s subsequent murder makes them particularly intriguing. Overbury’s foreshadowing of his own death is remarkable, so much so that additional investigation into the history of these letter copies might be useful. Watson’s arguments about the letters’ linguistic strategies raise questions that extend beyond the Overbury case. Indeed, one wonders how much prison letters like these reflect actual experience or were primarily rhetorical tools. The same is true for newsletter accounts in which writers claimed to be eyewitnesses, even as it remains unclear whether their texts reflect presence in various court spaces or if they were writing themselves into the spaces where the action was occurring (Watson p. 114; see also Watson 2018, 51). Houston’s travellers’ accounts present the same problem, since she notes that not all reflect actual visits to ‘Persia’ (Houston p. 132).¹⁴ Where, then, is the line between literary construction and historical evidence?¹⁵

Watson and Houston lay the groundwork for future study that might extend in various directions, including incorporation of other perspectives, contemporary reception of the texts in consideration, and material form. Overbury and others were writing to specific people, but they were also speaking in the form of copied letters to a wider public eager for gossip and news.¹⁶ Houston’s travel accounts also speak to a distinctly European audience, and even amid Houston’s work in reframing Persian book culture, it remains true that we are studying this through a European lens, through accounts of outsiders looking in, rather than through texts written from a more local or ‘insider’ perspective.¹⁷ Scholars may now wish to use this study as a basis for considering how these representations manifested themselves in imaginative literature and wider cultural understandings of ‘Persia’.¹⁸ Studying the reception of these texts both immediately after their creation and in subsequent decades might allow us to think about how readers conceived space as much as writers did, too.

Both Watson and Houston are thinking about the ways in which place and space affect culturally derived forms of writing – letters that use cultural knowledge and codes to elicit

¹² See Daybell 2012, 2014 and 2025.

¹³ See Daybell 2014, 60-61, 68; Daybell 2012, chapter 7.

¹⁴ See also Brancaforte 2018, 131; Brentjes 2009, 179; Matthee 2009, 169.

¹⁵ On the tension between representation and ‘material experience’, see Stock 2013, 525-526; 2015, 7-8; 2025, 590-592.

¹⁶ See Bellany 2002, 133; Schneider 2005, 23; Bellany 2007, 1140, 1152-1153; Daybell 2012, 192-193, 202-204, 210; 2014, 58, 67-68; Watson 2024, 31-32.

¹⁷ On these travel accounts, see Matthee 2012.

¹⁸ Brentjes 2009 studies the production of travel accounts of Safavid Iran.

emotional responses in readers and travel accounts considering deviation from the European model of print. The focus on writers' experience of space and the ways in which texts reflect the places and spaces writers inhabit and the places and spaces from which they had previously come connects the two articles. They call for continued examination of the communication of spatial difference. Together, they push us to ponder how space and culture affect textual form – whether in the process of production or the codes of understanding – and the ways in which textual forms frame, describe, and even create space.

In many ways, the two essays which comprise the present volume's final section take up Watson's and Houston's call for further attention to how spatial difference functions and is articulated in early modern writing. Marcelo José Cabarcas Ortega and Kate Driscoll are both interested in the political dimensions of spatial and cultural difference, and how textual and visual forms can be used to think more broadly – and with greater nuance – about colonial and decolonial histories. In our consideration of the material spaces of early modern writing, Cabarcas Ortega and Driscoll remind us that we cannot ignore the politicisation of those spaces.

5. *Imagery, Centre, and Periphery*

Questions of space, place, and writing are bound up with those of power. This is particularly true in contexts of colonial domination, in which the mobilities of those living under colonial rule are tightly limited and controlled. For that reason, travel and other forms of mobility, when undertaken by colonised peoples, can constitute a kind of anti-colonial resistance: an insistence on moving through spaces and occupying places from which they have been excluded. Yet recovering these alternative histories of travel and mobility is far from a straightforward task. The archive, broadly conceived, has largely centred the triumphalist narratives of European colonial travellers, while scholarship has conceptualised travel and mobility in terms which, inadvertently or otherwise, reinforce this triumphalism and erase the agencies of non-Europeans (Din-Kariuki and van Meersbergen 2024). By bringing theories of space and place into dialogue with colonial and decolonial histories and a range of textual, visual, oral, and statutory sources, the articles by Marcelo José Cabarcas Ortega and Kate Driscoll offer exemplary models of how to think about space, and the politics and poetics of human movement through space, differently. While the authors focus on diverse geographies and materials – Cabarcas Ortega examining contested and conflicting representations of Queen Njinga of Matamba in late seventeenth-century Capuchin chronicles, and Driscoll analysing articulations of utopian and decolonial thought in Torquato Tasso's sixteenth-century epic *Gerusalemme liberata* – the approaches they take are complementary and mutually illuminating. Together, they map the theoretical and methodological directions in which scholarship on material space could go next.

Both authors take an expansive approach to their choice and use of sources. Differing disciplinary priorities and paradigms mean that scholars often focus on certain kinds of sources at the expense of others. For example, there can be a tendency for mainstream scholarship on histories of diplomacy to focus primarily on sources drawn from institutional contexts and produced by a specific set of actors – such as reports and correspondence kept by diplomats and government officials – while marginalising other accounts or depictions of transcultural contact, particularly those of the more imaginative or speculative sort. Scholars of literature and art, on the other hand, are often not as attentive as they could be to the connections between their objects of study and, say, diplomatic and mercantile accounts, including texts which do not conform to conventional definitions of literature or literariness at all. Yet as Cabarcas Ortega's study of Njinga shows, diplomatic and military engagements between Central West Africa and

European imperial authority involved extensive negotiations of both material and symbolic power, as illustrated by the competing interpretations of Njinga's baptism and by her postcolonial reception in Angola and Brazil. Driscoll's discussion of Tasso, similarly, reveals the extent to which poetic forms and epistemologies inflected, and were inflected by, accounts of global navigation, including travelogues and diplomatic reports relating to Christopher Columbus' voyage. Relatedly, the authors demonstrate the importance of aesthetics, and questions of form and genre, to the study of space. Driscoll explains why the genre of epic, and to some extent romance, are so central to Tasso's undertaking to reimagine New World 'discovery' as well as his efforts to envision a world before or without colonisation, while Cabarcas Ortega argues that devices such as narrative and plot are key to both the operations of imperial projects and to acts of resistance. Finally, Cabarcas Ortega and Driscoll highlight the roles played by women, fictional and real, in literatures and histories of mobility and material space. In so doing, they offer a necessary corrective to the marginalisation of women's mobility in early modern studies (Fuller 2019) while also prompting scholarly inquiry on space to interrogate more closely the relationships between space and constructions of gender, race, and nationhood.

These articles, and the entire volume, thus make it clear that the study of material space and literary production in the early modern period necessitates a rethinking of the hierarchical frameworks through which space has traditionally been organised and understood. It is a project which demands capacious and creative thinking: collaborations between scholars working in different disciplines; a broader, even eclectic, selection of sources; a negotiation of the local and the global; an acknowledgement of the entanglement of aesthetics and politics; and a commitment to foregrounding the people, places, and perspectives historically excluded from the archive. This issue has, in other words, expanded and enriched the conceptual spaces in which we can collectively move.

6. Conclusion

The wide-ranging studies here show the extent to which scholars can and should continue to ponder, pursue, and push the boundaries of analysis of space and place in early modern writing. From the Berkshire countryside to the Tower of London's prison, from late medieval Nürnberg to Tasso's poetic Jerusalem and what are now Iran and Angola, the articles in the present volume of *JEMS* show that spatial analysis continues to bear fruit for both historical and literary study and opens up the possibility of interdisciplinary collaboration between the two. Rich and nuanced exploration of the local and everyday alongside the exceptional and 'faraway' produces new ways of thinking about writers like Tasso, Lanyer, and Tusser whom scholars of early modern history and literature know well. Crucially, though, these articles also show how much there is to be learned about writers we know less well and for texts so often excluded from the early modern literary canon on the basis of their presumed lack of literary merit. The early modern world produced plays and poems, but it also produced ethnographical description and epistolary texts, among other forms of writing. A sacristan's handbook like the one Vosding studies was more palpable both in its materiality and in its constant use as a guide and negotiation of prescriptions and local realities than even the best known 'literary' texts of the following two centuries. Though widely denigrated by literary scholars for decades, Thomas Tusser's *Five Hundred Points of Good Husbandrie* was 'a Tudor best-seller', outselling poetry by now canonical writers such as Sidney, Shakespeare, and Spenser (see Grigson 1984, xviii). Together, these articles challenge us to be at once more precise and yet more inclusive of what exactly we mean by 'material space' or even 'literary production'. In a period responding to the eruption of print and burgeoning long-distance travel, the early modern world continues to

offer seemingly endless opportunities for interpretation and reinterpretation. As we continue to think about the tension and complementation of print and scribal production, real and imagined space, spaces occupied and spaces left behind, places familiar and unknown, and even of space, place, and writing, we can only conclude that the articles which appear in the present volume raise more questions than answers. Attempting to respond to our own curiosity about the relationship between material space and literary production has failed to provide definitive answers. Instead, the present issue of *JEMS* offers something much more exciting. Far from declaring that the investigation into space and writing can be marked as complete or that these queries have been asked and answered, the present issue of *JEMS* suggests that the spatial turn remains in its infancy even after decades. The contributions published in the present volume have opened up a host of questions and widen the lens of spatial analysis instead of focusing it more tightly. So, where will we go next?

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Part Two

Case Studies

Working with/on the Land



Thomas Tusser's Counter-Almanac Poetics

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Abstract

The essay argues that Thomas Tusser's *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* amends and enhances the kind of simplified instructions found in early modern almanacs. Through his unusual formal choices, such as his digressions and contractions, Tusser registers the difficulties and inconsistencies of farming in southern England, in turn preparing his readers for what he believes is the 'slippery' nature of his readers' own environments.

Keywords: Agriculture, Almanac, Environment, Tusser

1. Introduction

Near the beginning of *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* (1573), Thomas Tusser coins a curious term for his poetic style. As he proclaims in 'The Author's Epistle to the late Lord William Paget', a dedicatory poem which appears in every edition of the text, his book sings 'another' kind of 'song': 'a music strange' (1984, 1). Tusser recalls

Since being once, at Cambridge taught,
Of Court ten yeeres I made assaie,
No Musicke then was left unsaught,
Such care I had to serve that waie.
When joie gan slake, then made I change,
Expulsed mirth, for Musick strange.

My Musicke since hath bene the plough,
Entangled with some care among,
The gaine not great, the paine ynough,
Hath made me sing another song.
Which song, if well I may avow,
I crave it judged be by yow. (ll. 19-30)

In part, these stanzas are a declaration of independence: professional, aesthetic, and otherwise. Tusser dedicates much of his dedicatory poem to disentangling himself from the court (Oldenburg 2019, 279).¹ If he was once a court musician, who ‘left’ ‘no music’ ‘unsaught’, Tusser realizes that his current practice – his work as a farmer – demands a different music altogether: ‘another song’, shaped by the ‘care’ and ‘payne’ of agricultural labor (Skura 2008, 132).² Even his verse registers a sonic shift. At the very moment Tusser announces his departure from the court, his rhyme scheme changes, devolving into a series of eye rhymes: ‘plough’ and ‘ynough’, ‘among’ and ‘song’. Part of what distinguishes these rhymes, in fact, is that they may not be eye rhymes: depending upon the reader’s dialect, ‘plow’ and ‘ynough’ – in free variance with ‘enow’ – may or may not seem jarring.³ This is indeed a ‘music strange’: subtle, off-kilter, distinct. Early in his text, Tusser establishes his willingness to experiment with form: to write something ‘strange’ – even something bad – in response to his ‘strange’ experiences.

Yet few critics have been sympathetic to his attempt. To many, in fact, Tusser’s verse is not a ‘music strange’, but no music at all: a mere ‘haphazard rhyming of rural life’ (Oldenburg 2019, 277). As Scott Oldenburg has summarized, ‘the emphasis on Tusser’s status as a farmer has led some modern readers to presume a lack of craft’ (*ibid.*). With its ‘range of miscellaneous material’, *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* once held ‘wide appeal’ (Skura 2008, 126): the text – primarily a series of monthly husbandry poems, with many ‘digressions’ – was one of the most popular books in early modern England, acclaimed for its valuable advice, even its deft verse (Tusser 1984, v-ix; Skura 2008, 176; Oldenburg 2019, 276).⁴ From 1557 to 1573, when the book grew from its first to its final edition, it was reprinted multiple times; after 1573, ‘it was ... reprinted at least ten more times’, with favorable reception into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Oldenburg 2019, 276). No such acclaim exists today. Instead, and to a near myopic extent, critics have focused upon the poor quality of Tusser’s verse: its ‘carelessness and wilfulness in rime’, its ‘broken rhythms, bad grammar, and abominable syntax’ (Child 1934, 185; Grigson 1984, xix). According to Amy Erickson, Tusser offers ‘the most execrable extant example of Elizabethan verse’ (1993, 54). ‘No one has ever pretended’, Geoffrey Grigson even claims, ‘that this farmer-musician or musician-farmer could write other than abominably’ (1984, xvii).

More subtle – though still dismissive – arguments have emphasized the text’s mnemonic qualities. As G.E. Fussell declares, *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* is ‘written in doggerel verse, probably with the idea that rhyme would be of assistance to the supposedly sluggish brains of the rural community’ (1978, 8). This claim often appears in criticism on Tusser. To C.S. Lewis, *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* is a series of ‘mnemonic jingles’ (1944, 262); to Wendy Wall, it is a series of ‘agrarian ... jingles’ (2006, 160). What these critics suggest is that Tusser writes effective didactic verse, if not exactly great literature. Even more recent critics – who have argued for the wider literary significance of Tusser – have assumed that his verse is primarily mnemonic. In 2022, Jessica Rosenberg argued that the ‘small forms’ of Tusser’s poetry, particularly the couplet, inspired Shakespeare’s approach to the sonnet (221). Her reading updates the typical dismissal of Tusser’s work, while maintaining the basic suppositions of the argument: by her account, Tusser is once again a poet mainly interested in small, extractable forms, which his readers could collect and put to use (221-254). Though these critics do not

¹ Oldenburg notes that ‘Tusser engages in a poetics subtly counter to that of the Elizabethan court’ (2019, 279).

² As Skura observes, Tusser writes a kind of ‘reverse pastoral’ (2008, 132).

³ Though these words may indeed rhyme depending upon pronunciation, several critics have identified these particular rhymes as eye rhyme, as well as Tusser’s general tendency towards this kind of rhyme. See Payne and Herbage 1878, xxii; Child 1934, 185.

⁴ I am indebted to Oldenburg for this summary of Tusser’s early publication and reception history.

‘presume’ a complete ‘lack of craft’, their respect for Tusser’s craft is limited (Oldenburg 2019, 277). Tusser’s work is memorable, if not much else: another misleading characterization of this multivalent text.

This article will listen more closely to Tusser’s ‘music strange’. As I will argue, neither of these previous assessments – Tusser as an inept poet, or Tusser as a mnemonic rhymers – is entirely accurate. Rather than dismissing Tusser’s poetry as bad, or focusing only on his rhyming couplets, I will attend to the full range of Tusser’s text: the many poems that, like ‘The Author’s Epistle to the Late Lord William Paget’, explore a different poetics.⁵ Part of what I would like to stress, quite simply, is that *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* is more than a series of mnemonic couplets. Alongside these poems – even within them – are less biddable forms. Tusser’s poems omit important information. They elide words, phrases, and verbs. They experiment with different kinds of rhyme, or with unusual syntax: knotty, dense, and eclectic. In fact, many of these poems are not all that easy to remember. At times, they seem to resist comprehension itself.

As I will argue, the difficulty of Tusser’s poetry is by design: the product of careful – not shoddy – craftsmanship. Tusser is more than an inept poet, who has bungled even his attempt at mnemonic couplets: rather, the primary qualities of his work – its memorability and its roughness – exist in compelling tension with one another. In this way, my argument aligns with the work of other recent critics, who have likewise argued that Tusser writes ‘not non-poetry but a different kind of poetry’ (Oldenburg 2019, 280). Scott Oldenburg, in particular, has claimed that Tusser’s work counters a courtly ‘poetry increasingly modeled on Continental trends’ (277). As he argues, Tusser’s verse is deliberately unartful, ‘focused on agricultural labor in an intentional contrast with courtly leisure’ (280). What Oldenburg describes is not a husbandry manual in verse, but a literature ‘of soil [and] toil’ (281), which ‘found in ‘the everyday language of the farmer ... a kind of poetry’ (282). Likewise, Anders Greene-Crow has argued that Tusser approaches ‘poetry as a practical tool’ for husbandmen, which could ‘help his readers grapple with the kinds of strain they faced due to the changing agricultural economy’ (2025, 16). For Tusser, Greene-Crow writes, ‘lyric form’ (47) does not ‘simply ... help his readers remember his principles’ (28): rather, it ‘can guide the farmer in devising ordered structures that will lead to prosperity’ (47).

This article will build upon these approaches to Tusser. Instead of situating *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* amidst the ‘aesthetic ... developments in early Elizabethan England’, I would like to reconsider its debts to the practical literature of its day (Oldenburg 2019, 277). This is not to contradict either argument. Part of what makes Tusser’s verse ‘strange’, as Oldenburg himself admits, is its variety of influences, ‘courtly aesthetics’ (Oldenburg 2019, 278), ‘georgic writing’ (Skura 2008, 135), ‘classical literature’ (*ibid.*), and ‘sixteenth-century theology’ (Stevenson 2002, 140). Yet to better understand the poetic ‘intricacies’ of the text (Greene-Crow 2025, 28), I would like to reconsider the relationship between *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* and early modern almanacs: a relationship often noted, if often oversimplified. *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* has much in common with these popular, portable texts, which combined ‘a detailed monthly calendar’ with ‘astrological, medical, and agricultural’ information (Smyth 2008, 201). Even its earliest version – the comparably slight *A hundreth good pointes of husbandry* (1557) – shows their influence: unlike earlier English husbandry guides, but like an almanac, the text is organized by season, not by topic (Fussell 1978, 4-9; Skura 2008, 138). In fact, Tusser made his book of poetry more and more like an

⁵ Greene-Crow has also recently stressed the poetic ‘intricacies of the *Points*’ (2025, 28).

almanac over time. As almanacs included ‘ancillary material’, Tusser included ‘ancillary material’; as almanacs gave autobiographical details, Tusser gave autobiographical details (Smyth 2008, 203; Skura 2008, 126-148; Jensen 2021, 2). If Tusser drew upon classical georgic, he also drew upon these disposable texts: *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* can even be understood as an expanded version of their calendar poems.⁶ The form is encoded into his text’s very DNA: a core structural principle for *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie*.

For many critics, the poem’s similarity to such practical texts – to these ‘vulgar little publications’ – is a major weakness (Curth 2007, 2). Most have described *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* as an almanac in an attempt to ‘deny [it] the status of poetry’ (Oldenburg 2019, 275). Part of the problem is that Tusser’s text and early modern almanacs appear to share the same set of flaws. Both are didactic, popular, and (seemingly) unsophisticated; more to the point, both contain famously bad poetry. Amongst other poetic sins, both are full of mnemonic couplets, which appear to function as mere containers for information. As Bernard Capp has detailed, such almanac poetry was widely mocked, even – or especially – by early modern contemporaries: by the Restoration, one could be deemed ‘as bad a rhymers as an almanac maker’ (1979, 225). Even more worryingly, almanacs were thought to cultivate a naïve and trusting readership, who found themselves unable to act independently, even to think critically (Walker 2018a). Almanacs were simple texts for simple minds, suited to ‘a world correspondingly defined by mundane, manageable problems’ (Doloff 1991, 228).

Yet Tusser avoids this approach. *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* is no straightforward almanac. Rather, Tusser consistently mixes simple and complex forms: at times reproducing the almanac’s mnemonic couplets; at other times offering a more opaque poetics. This confusing interplay, I argue, is part of Tusser’s didactic strategy. In other words, the curious, contradictory qualities of Tusser’s text – its memorability and its roughness – are part of his measured attempt to write a different type of almanac: one which prepares its readers for the complex work of husbandry itself. For Tusser, didactic poetry need not only be mnemonic: rather, it can challenge and confuse its readership. His ‘small forms’ are indeed extractable, as previous critics have argued (Rosenberg 2022, 221), but they are also thematic: forms which resist the almanac’s tendency towards a ‘totality of scope’ (Smyth 2008, 201).⁷ What Tusser creates is a poem that teaches about uncertainty – the uncertainty of farming itself – through its own uncertain poetics.

This article will proceed in three parts. First, I will read early modern almanacs as didactic texts. As I will suggest, their emphasis on clarity, accessibility, and ease is strikingly different from *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie*. I will then consider Tusser’s unique approach to instruction. In his prefatory poems, Tusser weighs the merits of direct guidance – the kind of assistance provided by an almanac – with his own experiences. As Tusser makes clear, he did not benefit from any outside instruction, instead learning to farm through a trial-and-error process: a method which, despite its difficulties, ultimately leads to superior results. As I will finally argue, this complex relationship with learning shapes Tusser’s own text. *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie*, I suggest, is a book that does not want to coddle its readers. Tusser’s understanding of the importance of practice leads him to turn his own text into a kind of practice: to give his readers not simply a list of mnemonic precepts but to actively prepare them for the complexities of rural life.

⁶ Critics have debated the extent of this influence. Though some see a strong connection between Tusser’s work and classical georgic, others see relatively minor classical influence. See Stevenson 2002, 140-142; Goodman 2004, 154; Skura 2008, 135.

⁷ As Smyth writes, though ‘almanacs were diminutive volumes’, ‘they made claims to a kind of totality of scope’ (2008, 201).

2. *Almanacs and Mock Almanacs*

Most early modern almanacs were not read. Rather, these texts were consulted and checked, valued by their audience for their collection of useful information. More than poems, or even instructions, almanacs were full of data: astronomical calculations, ecclesiastical anniversaries, lunar charts, tide tables, shire catalogues, even lists of good days and bad days (Jensen 2021, 98-115).⁸ Most presented this information in a set order. Before the twelve-month calendar, almanacs included a declaration, or a list of ‘the basic calendar data for that particular year’ (106); a zodiac man, or a ‘visual reminder ... of which zodiac sign ruled which part of the body’ (109); and a list of ‘elections’, or calculations of ‘the best time to carry out some given action based on astrological considerations’ (Curth 2007, 107). The calendar itself portrayed the twelve months as a series of charts, with one month per page (Jensen 2021, 112-115). These charts were highly visual, often rubricated, arranged in careful columns and rows (98 and 112-115). Most ‘note[d] the number of days in the month and the time for sunrise and sunset on the first day of the month’, as well as ‘more precise data, including the exact time for sunrise, in some cases for every day of the year’ (113-114).

What these texts prioritized was accessibility. Almanac writers did not claim to offer special insights: rather, they stressed that their texts contained useful information. In the opening pages of *An almanacke and prognostication* (1570), Philip Moore emphasizes that its ‘contents’ are ‘plain’, ‘briefe’, and ‘easie’ (Early English Books Online, frame 6, left side). Within this text, Moore writes, are ‘Certaine playne and briefe notes concernyng the yere, and the partes thereof, with generall rules, right necessarie and profitable to knowen of all men’, as well as ‘A verie plain and easie table, by whiche you maie forthwith finde any moueable feast’ (frame 6, left side). These values – comprehensiveness and comprehensibility – were fundamental to the form. Even as almanacs expanded in the seventeenth century, coming to include a wider range of ‘ancillary material’, their basic priorities did not change (Jensen 2021, 2). In his 1628 *A new Almanacke and Prognostication for the yeere of our Lord God*, John White claims to consider ‘the state of the whole year; the disposition of each Quarter; the inclination of the Weather for euery quarter of the Moone’ along ‘With the rising and setting of the Planets, Husbandry aduertisemnets, and other things fit to bee knowne, both pleasant and profitable’ (Early English Books Online, frame 9, right side). Once again, the almanac stresses the sheer breadth of its contents – the ‘state of the whole year’ – as well as its usefulness. This information might be extensive, but it is also ‘pleasant and profitable’: accessible to many kinds of readers (*ibid.*).

The written sections of almanacs were likewise straightforward. Though I have thus far stressed their charts and tables, almanacs were more than just collections of data. Rather like *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie*, most almanacs included a ‘series of dedicatory letters’, ‘some addressed to readers, some to patrons’, which often ‘offered a defense of astrology’ (Jensen 2021, 118-119). Otherwise, the prose in early modern almanacs was not argumentative but directive: the elections, which gave instructions for specific activities; and the prognostication, located after the calendar, which ‘predicted the year to come’ (109). The elections, in particular, were written to be clear, authoritative, and unambiguous. Take George Osborne’s ‘Husbandicall Elections’ (1622): ‘Sheare sheepe ... fell Copice, and lop trees the Moon encreasing. ... Set or sow Onyons, Garlick, Parsneps, Carrets, Beanes, Pease, and such like, after the full moone’ (B4v). Here, Osborne sets clear timelines for particular tasks. Certain tasks – sheep-shearing, hedge-planting, and tree-logging – should be completed as the moon waxes; other tasks – sowing

⁸ I am grateful to Phebe Jensen for her summary.

onions, parsnips, beans, and peas – should be completed after the full moon. These instructions leave no room for misinterpretation, nor indeed for differentiation. As Osborne makes clear, they apply to all readers, regardless of their circumstances.

This guidance was often reinforced over the body of the almanac. Many writers elaborated upon the shorter versions of their instructions in later sections of the text. In his *An almanack and prognostication* (1570), for example, Philip Moore first lists ‘certaine necessarie and profitable rules alwaies to bee obserued’ (Early English Books Online, frame 7, left side). As Moore writes, drawing upon astrology:

To set, sowe, plant ... or cut vines, the best tymes be in Taurus, Virgo, and Capricorn, the Moone beyng in the encrease.

To cut or geld cattaill, in Aries, Libra, and Sagittarius, the Moone being in the Wane. (*Ibid.*)

Moore then expands list form – these short infinitive phrases – into full, month-by-month instructions. As he states in the Prognostication, certain tasks must be completed in January:

In Januarie, cutte downe your timber, wood ... Stubbe ... your Meadowes, and earable groundes, so doing your stubble shall not [growe] again. And these thynges are moste conueniently dooen, within fower daies of the latter ende of the Moone. (Frame 26, left side)

Moore offers such set instructions for each month: mole-killing in April, mowing in July, and so on. What the text offers is thus a kind of checklist: a ‘remembraunce’ (*ibid.*), as Moore puts it, of the exact steps to success (42). Even the switch from infinitives to imperatives reinforces his authority.

What grants these texts such confidence – such a clear sense of the optimal times for each activity – is their basis in astrology. Almanacs, critics have long noted, ‘were predominantly astrological publications’, whose writers were no husbandmen (Curth 2007, 58). Rather than drawing upon any experience in the field, these texts considered ‘the general character of planetary influences on the weather, agriculture, and husbandry’ in order to ‘[offer] advice on the correct times for carrying out planting, tending, and harvesting’ (40). Hence their characteristic straightforwardness. Almanacs countered the uncertainty of agricultural labor with the certainty of astrological prediction. To succeed, these texts promised, a reader need only follow their guidance. From month to month, even from day to day, almanac readers would have had a plan: knowing, for example, that they would sow when the moon was in Pisces during fair weather in March.

Almanac poetry likewise offered clear direction. As Bernard Capp has noted, these poems were ‘functional’ poems, often found at the top of each monthly chart: simple, straightforward, and accessible (1979, 225). Rather than offering new insights – or engaging in literary experimentation – these poems created a coherent line of guidance through the almanac. Most were mnemonic couplets, which tailored medical and husbandry advice to each month.⁹ In his 1571 *A newe Almanacke and Prognostication*, for example, George Gosse provides the following advice for February:

Sow Peasen, Beanes, and ... likewise,
Pul Mosse from trees that frute do beare,
Plant trees and Roses with such like,

When this is done, lesse neede it thou care. (Early English Books Online, frame 4, left side)

⁹ Jensen notes that it was usual for an almanac to include short ‘poems on weather or physic’ (2021, 228).

Once again, the form enhances the almanac's clarity and cohesion: these couplets repeat the same advice found in Gossene's earlier prose elections. In John White's 1628 calendar, meanwhile, each month is prefaced by a couplet offering medical guidance: in July, White advises readers to 'Eat Sallads fresh to coole the Blood, / And bathe in Riuers free from Mud' (frame 6, right side), while in January, 'Warme Meates and Clothes this Month are good / Take heed of Bathes and letting Blood' (frame 3, right side). Like the rest of the almanac, these couplets are clear and uncomplicated: crafted, in fact, to avoid ambiguity.

For certain writers, this very pose of certainty was the most problematic aspect of these texts. As Bernard Capp has noted, 'the ubiquity of the almanac stimulated the development of a ... sub-literary genre of satirical works': the mock almanac (1979, 231). These satirical texts targeted the spurious claims found in early modern almanacs: as Capp has detailed, many mock almanacs included a set of parodic prognostications, absurd for their obviousness, such as the 'very aged [will] die' (231). Yet satirists were often even more troubled by the effect of such predictions upon their audience.¹⁰ Again and again, these texts portrayed almanac readers as 'hopelessly' passive, 'uneducated', and 'gullible' (Smyth 2008, 206). As Thomas Browne laments, almanac readers come to 'assent unto any prognostication' and 'daily swallow the predictions of men' (1981, 20).¹¹ In his play *The Masque of Heroes* (1619), Thomas Middleton describes a farmer who finds himself unable to carry out basic tasks without his almanac:

This farmer will not cast his seed i'th'ground
 Before he look in Bretnor; there he find
 Some word which he hugs happily, as "Ply the box",
 "Make hay betimes", "It falls into thy month". (Quoted in Walker 2018a, 137)¹²

The almanac, in other words, has disconnected the farmer from his farm. Rather than relying upon his own judgment – his direct experience of natural conditions – this farmer relies upon his text. Middleton even appears to condemn the almanac's kind of simplified, extractable advice: the farmer 'happily hugs' the anodyne phrases of 'Make hay betimes', or 'It falls into thy month'. What almanacs have created is a population out of touch with their environment: so dependent upon a text as to be unable to act – even to think – independently.

As a result, many mock almanacs worked to startle readers out of this stupor. In his 1609 mock almanac *The Ravens' Almanac*, Thomas Dekker specifically critiques the genre's tendency to offer unnecessary instruction and information.¹³ As he suggests, almanacs need not instruct their readers on skills any 'gull ... can doe without a Kalendar', such as 'when to eat hot meates' (1609, B2r-B2v; Walker 2018a, 147). Likewise, Dekker disdains the almanac's excessively precise description of the seasons (Walker 2018a, 148). To determine the arrival of spring, he declares, readers need only 'cast up [their] eies and behold, for by these marks shal you know her when she comes' (Dekker 1609, C2r; Walker 2018a, 148). Dekker, in other words, urges his readers to think for themselves: to break out of the patterns set by their almanacs.

Thomas Tusser wrote his own almanac decades before these particular mock texts. Yet as I will argue in the following sections, *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* anticipates some of

¹⁰ As Adam Smyth has detailed, almanacs inspired a variety of responses: many readers approached 'these books in ways not always explicitly endorsed in texts themselves' (2008, 228). See Smyth 2008, esp. 221-229.

¹¹ Walker also discusses this text (2018a, 135).

¹² As Walker glosses this moment, Middleton 'scoffs at the folly of positioning any human-authored text as unimpeachable and thus as a law by which to shape one's decisions' (2018a, 137).

¹³ I am indebted to Walker for her analysis of this text. See Walker 2018a, 131-132 and 144-149.

their criticisms of the genre. Tusser mimicks the almanac to correct it: not through exaggeration, nor even through mockery, but through a careful reorientation of the very relationship between reader and writer. Rather than presenting himself as an uncontested authority, Tusser pulls back the veil upon his practice. To adopt Dekker's phrase, Tusser has 'cast up [his] eies' (Dekker 1609, C2r): as he makes clear, his text is the product of his own experiences with farming, which were often fraught and often difficult. His prefatory poems record this vexed relationship with learning: one that in turn shapes his approach to his audience. *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* is that most unusual of texts: an almanac that embraces uncertainty itself.

3. 'His Owne Long Practise': Thomas Tusser's Poetry of Practice

At the core of *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* is an argument about practice. The very 'occasion ... of his booke', Tusser declares in the extended title of his prefatory poem 'The Authors Epistle to the Late Lord William Paget', is 'his owne long practise'. As Tusser (1984) continues,

Time trieth the troth, in everie thing,
Herewith let men content their minde,
Of works, which best may profit bring,
Most rash to judge, most often blinde.
As therefore troth in time shall crave,
So let this booke just favor have. (ll. 1-6)

Put simply, this book has stood the test of 'time'. As Tusser argues, his readers can 'content their minde[s]' because time has already 'trie[d] the truth' of his advice. Even the phrase 'time trieth the troth, in euerie thing' was itself a popular maxim, whose 'truth' had itself been 'tried'.¹⁴

Unsurprisingly, parts of this 'epistle' recall an almanac. As Jensen has noted, many almanacs also included opening letters to their readers and patrons, which offered a defense of their astrological approach (Jensen 2021, 118-119). Even Tusser's promise to 'discourse of his own bringing up' (1984, 1) is in keeping with other almanac writers, who likewise believed that 'many' of their readers 'desire[d] to know' their autobiographies (quoted in Smyth 2008, 203; Skura 2008, 126-148).¹⁵ Yet Tusser echoes this form only to advance a different argument. Nowhere to be found is any defense of astrology. Rather, Tusser identifies 'practice' as essential to his project. No astrological text, *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* is rooted in Tusser's own intimate experience of farming: an emphasis that was already evident to his early modern readers. As Francis Meres commented in 1634, Tusser wrote 'very wittily and experimentally' (632), or, following the sixteenth-century meaning of 'experiment', from 'experience' (Williams 1976, 116). From the first stanza of his very first poem, that is, Tusser announces that he is writing a different kind of book, which draws upon a different method. This is an almanac that looks backwards, not forwards. It inhabits a different tense.

These differences are obvious. For all its debts to the genre, *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* is not quite an almanac. It provides no precise calendrical data; it is intended to last longer than one year; and, most strikingly of all, it is based upon practical experience, not astrology. What I would like to pinpoint is a more subtle – but perhaps even more crucial – difference:

¹⁴ On this phrase, see Payne and Herrtage 1878, 235.

¹⁵ Smyth is here discussing and quoting from William Lilly's almanac *Anglicus, Peace or No Peace*, which 'included a brief autobiography' (2008, 203).

not only in *what* Tusser wrote but in *how* he wrote it. *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* changes in register: it is less confident, less certain, less simplified than an almanac. Even its early statement of total confidence – this assertion that readers should simply ‘content their minde[s]’ and trust in the text – is ultimately misleading (‘The Authors Epistle to the late Lord William Paget’, l. 2, Tusser 1984). Rather than urging his readers to follow his advice without question – much as they might predictions in an almanac – Tusser in fact explores his vexed relationship with what he calls, in the title of the poem, ‘his own longe practise’: his sense of the costs – but ultimate benefits – of learning without a guide. What these prefatory poems emphasize are not his discoveries – the end product of his practice – but the fraught and difficult process of learning itself.

This dynamic explains many of the text’s quirks. Indeed, much of what Tusser writes would not exactly – as he claims in ‘The Authors Epistle to the late Lord William Paget’ – ‘content [his readers] minde[s]’ (l. 2). Tusser does not present himself as a master farmer, nor even a model one. Again and again, *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* recounts his bitter experiences: his suffering, his failures, his various ‘losses past’ (‘To the Reader’, l. 31). As he elaborates in ‘To The Right Honorable ... The Lord Thomas Paget of Beaudesert’,

Loiterers I kept so meanie,
both Philip, Hob, and Cheanie,
that, that waie nothing geanie,
was thought to make me thrive:

...

Great fines so neere did pare me,
great rent so much did skare me,
great charge so long did dare me,
that made me at length crie creak: (ll. 41-52)

These stanzas are a veritable litany of the financial woes which plagued sixteenth-century tenants: increasing rents, expiring leases, loitering servants (Oldenburg 2019, 299). Even the poem’s repetitive forms – the concentrated anaphora and rhyme – contribute to this sense of accumulating pain.

In part, this approach establishes a connection with Tusser’s likely readership. If his emphasis on practice is striking, it is not unique: earlier husbandry writers had also stressed the importance of ‘experience’ (Segar 2022, 40), basing their advice upon their own husbandry (18), as opposed to ‘gather[ing]” [information] from ancient and continental authorities’ (7). As John Fitzherbert writes in his *Boke of Husbandry* (1523), ‘there is nothing touching husbandry ... contained in this present book, but I have had the experience thereof, and proved the same’ (quoted in Segar 2022, 41). What makes Tusser’s book unusual is its apparent audience. If Fitzherbert wrote for ‘gentlemen in charge of a sizeable estate’ who would ‘supervise rather than perform manual labor’ (McRae 1996, 137-138), Tusser appeared to write for the laborers themselves. As McRae has argued, *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* is characteristic of ‘a newer ... style of husbandry manual’, which were ‘increasingly designed to encourage the diffusion of their information, either directly or indirectly, to the middle and lower classes’ (1996, 145).¹⁶ According to several critics, Tusser wrote for those who had suffered as he had suffered: for a group, in fact, who were typically ‘unaccustomed to books’ (147).

As Tusser (1984) makes clear, he himself received no guidance. Tusser did not fail simply – or only – because of bad luck, nor even because of bad choices: rather, he suffered from a lack of formal instruction. As he recalls in ‘The Author’s Life’, he had to teach himself how to farm:

¹⁶ Not every critic agrees with this assessment of Tusser’s intended readership. See Stevenson 2002, 141.

Then tooke I wife, and led my life
 in Suffolke soile.
 There was I faine my self to traine,
 To learne too long the fermers song,
 For hope of pelfe, like worldly elfe,
 to moile and toile. (ll. 107-112)

Without a useful text – without something like *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* – Tusser was ‘faine [him]selfe to traine / To learne too long the fermers song’. As he elsewhere writes in ‘To The Right Honorable ... The Lord Thomas Paget of Beaudesert’, he especially regrets this ‘want of teaching’ (l. 81), which resulted in so much ‘toil’ (l. 85) and ‘pain’ (l. 93).

Yet Tusser’s relationship with such instruction is complex. If Tusser suffered from a lack of teaching, he also stresses that his current lack of instruction – how he was forced ‘[him]self to traine’ – has led directly to his particular expertise (l. 109). As he explains in another prefatory poem, ‘To The Right Honorable ... The Lord Thomas Paget of Beaudesert’, his ‘paines ... [have] helpe[d] to gaine him’ (l. 94) ‘new lessons mo to tell’ (l. 96):

New lessons then I noted,
 and some of them I coted,
 ...
 Though Pallas hath denide me,
 hir learned pen to guide me,
 for that she dailie spide me,
 with countrie how I stood:
 Yet Ceres so did bold me,
 with hir good lessons told me,
 that rudenes cannot hold me,
 from dooing countrie good.

By practise and ill speeding,
 these lessons had their breeding,
 and not by hearesaie, or reeding,
 as some abroad have blowne. (ll. 61-76)

As Tusser makes clear, he has forged ahead, devising his own, independent farming practice: unlike almanac readers – unlike the farmer ‘happily hugg[ing]’ his Bretnor – he has never simply clung to another man’s text (quoted in Walker 2018a, 137). The stanza directly contrasts ‘reeding’ with ‘practise’, ultimately favoring ‘practise’. Without a formal education – without the guidance of Pallas, the goddess of wisdom and scholarship – Tusser has been able to ‘note’ ‘new lessons’ from Ceres, the goddess of agriculture herself. What Tusser stresses, it seems, is the value of struggle, even the value of failure. These ‘lessons’, obtained through ‘practise and ill speeding’, not ‘hearesaie or reeding’, are of ‘right [his] owne’: unique and uniquely valuable. Tusser has cultivated a set of insights – a very skillset – that cannot be found in any mere book.

This resistance to standardized knowledge reemerges throughout the text. Nowhere does Tusser simply regurgitate advice from another source. Indeed, unlike the standard almanac, which simply rehearsed the same unchanging guidance, Tusser attends to recent developments, ‘recomend[ing]’, for example, ‘a three-crop fallow rotation as more economical than the prevalent two-crop fallow’ (Curth 2007, 110-111; Fussell 1978, 9). In certain poems, he explicitly emphasizes his independence. As Tusser (1984) writes, he has learned about the planets much as housewives learn about ‘winter nights’: through direct experience. As he explains in ‘Of the Planets’:

As huswives are teached, in stead of a clock,
 how winter nights passeth, by crowing of cock;
 So here by the Planets, as far as I dare,
 some lessons I leave for the husbandmans share.
 ...
 If great [the Moon] appereth, it showreth out,
 If small she appereth, it signifieth drouth.
 At change or at full, come it late or else soone,
 maine sea is at highest, at midnight and noone: (ll. 1-12)

Rather than turning to some standardized form of knowledge – a clock, or perhaps a Bretnor – Tusser has learned through directly engaging with his environment. His observations may seem modest, perhaps even spurious, but, as he writes in ‘To The Right Honorable ... The Lord Thomas Paget of Beaudesert’, they ‘are of right [his] owne’ (l. 80): he knows that a ‘small’ moon ‘signifieth drouth’ because he has observed this phenomenon himself. What Tusser presents is a kind of homespun, folk knowledge, forged in the countryside: an epistemology of husbandman and housewives.

What this emphasis creates, however, is a curious tension between Tusser and his readers: between his experience and their book study. Given the value of experience, the very project of *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* is potentially problematic. On the one hand, Tusser has created the very kind text he himself would have desired: something, he tells his readers in ‘To The Reader’, that could have ‘[taught] him how / As this doth yow’ (ll. 38-39). As he suggests, he has failed so his readers don’t have to: ‘My paine is past’ (l. 106), he advises later in the same poem, here ‘thou warning hast / th’experience mine / the vantage thine’ (ll. 107-109). Yet by sparing his readers such failures, he also spares them the ‘lessons’ (l. 96) he describes in ‘To The Right Honorable ... The Lord Thomas Paget of Beaudesert’: the ‘lessons’ (l. 96) ‘gain[ed]’ through ‘paines’ (ll. 94-96). His readers will never develop their own practice. By publishing his knowledge, Tusser converts it into something like the clock, or, of course, the Bretnor: something passively consumed. Tusser’s ‘experience past’ – his ‘consideration, reflection, and analysis’ – comes to oppose the ‘experience present’ of his readers (Williams 1976, 128). *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* is a text with a paradoxical mission: a husbandry book which does not believe that husbandry is best learned through books.

As I will next suggest, these contradictory impulses account for the poem’s contradictory poetics. At no point does Tusser imagine a dependent audience. Rather, Tusser encourages his readers to actively harvest his advice: to seek out, to test, and even to disregard some of his precepts. In his new kind of almanac, Tusser encourages a significantly different kind of reading: active, individuated, engaged. Even as Tusser draws upon other aspects of the almanac, he fails to reproduce its simplified, straightforward instructions: its very ‘obfuscation of reading and writing’, to quote Katherine Walker (2018a, 131). *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* approaches reading itself as a kind of experience: a means of shaping the individual reader – in an individuated way – into a successful husbandman.

4. ‘For worldly things are slippery’: Tusser’s Poetics of Difficulty

In the final version of *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandry*, Tusser offers a curious metaphor for the growth of his text. If, in ‘The Authors Epistle to the late Lord William Paget’, Tusser originally imagines his book as a ‘song’ (l. 28) – distinct from the music of the court – he lands upon an even stranger comparison. As he now tells his readers in ‘To The Right Honorable ... The Lord Thomas Paget of Beaudesert’, *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* is a kind of ‘tree or booke’:

I have no labour wanted
 to prune this tree thus planted,
 whose fruite to none is scanted,
 in house or yet in feeld:
 Which fruite, the more ye taste of,
 the more to eate, ye haste of,
 the lesse this fruite ye waste of,
 such fruite this tree doth yeeld.

My tree or booke thus framed,
 with title alreadie named,
 I trust goes forth vnblamed, (ll. 105-115)

The stanza intertwines three different kinds of work: reading, writing, and farming.¹⁷ As Tusser suggests, growing a fruit tree is an excellent model for revising a book of poetry: both involve iterative, long-term labors; both require an initial ‘plant[ing]’, followed by ‘prun[ing]’; both hopefully yield ‘fruit’. Yet Tusser confuses the comparison. Page and field elide, as the fruits which appear to be in the field – ‘in feeld/ which fruite’ – turn out to be the metaphorical fruits of the text. In turn, these metaphorical ‘fruite[s]’ may eventually yield literal fruits. As Tusser makes clear, his readers learn to avoid ‘waste’ by reading his advice: by rapidly and eagerly consuming his ‘fruits’, following the metaphor. Even the rhymes demonstrate a kind of thriftiness, as Tusser conserves his sounds, repeating the rhymes of ‘wanted’, ‘planted’, and ‘scanted’; ‘taste of’, ‘waste of’, and ‘haste of’; and ‘feeld’ and ‘yeeld’.¹⁸ One of the many ‘fruits’ his ‘tree doth yield’, it seems, is a frugal attitude towards fruit itself. The poem establishes its own ecosystem, its form modeling the frugality that in turn leads to fruit.

As I would like to suggest, this stanza encapsulates the work of the text in miniature. *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* is a practical book deeply interested in practice. By this, I do not mean – or do not only mean – that the text is designed for use. This story has already been told: most critics have described Tusser’s poems as purposefully simple, straightforward, and accessible, easy for a farmer to remember and to apply in the field. Yet Tusser does not always prioritize ease.¹⁹ If some of his poems are indeed simple couplets, others pose a distinct challenge: ambiguous, knotty, and opaque. Even his mnemonic couplets can thwart readers in unexpected ways. What Tusser creates, I suggest, is a kind of ‘experience book’, more than a simple set of instructions: a text which actively reshapes its readership (Rayner 2003, 28; O’Leary 2008, 6-11).²⁰ Rather than simply – or only – giving directions, Tusser presents his readers with choices, even with challenges. Through its poetic form, *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* encourages its readers to cultivate their own practice.

Above all else, Tusser prioritizes active, even physical engagement with his poetry. Instead of moving from cover to cover – or from month to month – Tusser urges his readers to flip through the text, seeking what they need.²¹ In *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie*, he explains,

¹⁷ Skura notes ‘how close the two forms of labor, planting and writing, were for [Tusser]’ (2008, 135).

¹⁸ In a similar reading, Greene-Crow has argued that Tusser ‘models the creation of plenty out of little’ often through the repetition of ‘key terms’ (2025, 39).

¹⁹ As Greene-Crow also notes, ‘ease of understanding and memorization are often in no way his object’ (2025, 41).

²⁰ Rayner and O’Leary are both discussing Foucault’s concept of the ‘experience book’.

²¹ As Greene-Crow also notes, Tusser ‘creat[ed] a book designed to be taken in hand regularly and read in a thoughtful, interactive mode’ (2025, 21).

The figure of abstract and month doo agree,
 Which one to another relations bee.
 These verses so short, without figure that stand,
 Be points of themselues, to be taken in hand.

In husbandrie matters, where Pilcrowe ye finde,
 That verse appertaineth to huswiferie kinde.
 So haue ye mo lessons, (if there ye looke well),
 Than huswiferie booke doth vtter or tell. (ll. 5-12)

As Tusser suggests, in this poem 'A lesson how to confer euery abstract with his month, & how to finde out huswiferie verses by the Pilcrowe, and Champion from Woodland', his poetry has a palpable physical existence. It can be pointed out by a 'pilcrow'; it can even 'be taken in hand'. In other words, it is a kind of tool, ready to be put to use. Several of the surviving copies of *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* in the Folger Shakespeare Library appear to testify to this approach. One reader has gone through and underlined the sections in the text relevant to growing hops (Tusser 1586). Another has checked the individual stanzas which stress the importance of housewifery (Tusser 1672). These readers appear to have done as Tusser asked, noting what was most relevant to them: the 'points', to adopt Tusser's phrase in 'A Preface to the Buyer of this Booke', 'needfull and meete to be knowne' (l. 18). Each has adapted the book and its contents to their individual needs.

What *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* offers is thus useful information that is not universally useful. Unlike early modern almanacs, which supplied guidance to all their readers, irrespective of their particular circumstances, Tusser encourages his readers to follow only some of his precepts. Not all advice, he realizes, will apply to everyone. As he writes (1984) in 'To the Reader',

Nor looke thou here
 that everie shere
 of everie verse
 I thus reherse
 may profit take
 or vantage make
 by lessons such:
 For here we see
 things severall bee,
 and there no dike,
 but champion like,
 and sandie soile,
 and claiey toile,
 doe suffer much.
 This being waid,
 be not afraid
 to buie to prove,
 to reade with love,
 to followe some,
 and so to come
 by practise true. (ll. 85-105)

These lessons, in other words, should not be accepted without question. As Tusser here admits, his readers need only 'follow some' of his advice. Because 'things severall bee', his own experiences, however valuable, may not apply to everyone. What is important is to 'give [his readers]

choice' (l. 110). Not 'every shere of everie verse' will be 'profit[able]', but the reader can exercise his own judgment, coming to a 'practise true'.

These comments continue throughout the book. As Tusser explicitly writes in 'The Author's Epistle', and later echoes in the prefatory poem to 'The Points of Huswifery', he has '[made] [his readers] [his] judge' ('To the right Honorable and my especiall good Ladie and Maistres, the Ladie Paget', l. 56): his readers in turn exercise an unusual degree of agency, even authority, over his text. Throughout, Tusser stresses the importance of their individual circumstances, in particular the influence of unique weather patterns, climate, and landscape. 'Each soile hath no liking of everie graine' (l. 1), writes Tusser in 'A digression to the usage of divers countries, concerning tillage', noting that 'gravell and sand is for rie and wheat' (l. 13) just as 'peason and barlie delight not in sand / but rather in claie or in rottener land' (ll. 15-16). Or, as he summarizes in 'Aprils Abstract', 'som cuntries lack plowmeat / and some doe want cowmeat' (ll. 23-24): readers should prepare accordingly. Central to Tusser's text is his sense of the vulnerability of agricultural work: as he advises in 'The Ladder to Thrift', 'bear thy crosses patiently / for wordly things are slippery' (ll. 61-62). As Meredith Skura has argued, this statement 'encapsulates the tone' of the text: its 'quiet resignation', its increasing exhaustion at Tusser's repeated failures (2008, 143). Yet this phrase also registers Tusser's sensitivity to the 'slipperiness' of the environment itself. Tusser, who had farmed in Suffolk, Norfolk, and Essex, understood the importance of nuance. Across *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie*, Tusser attends to the specifics of soil and county, the influence of luck and timing, the small changes that can distinguish success from disaster.

This awareness lends a curious flexibility to his advice. Of course, Tusser is in many moments prescriptive: the text in no way only offers multiple options to its readers. Yet even these directions are sensitively phrased. In 'Octobers Husbandrie', Tusser (1984) advises his readers to closely attend to precise weather conditions:

Greene rie in September when timely thou hast,
 October for wheat sowing calleth as fast.
 If weather will suffer, this counsell I give,
 Leauw sowing of wheat before Hallomas eve. (ll. 9-12)

Here, Tusser does give pointed advice – readers should 'leauw sowing of wheat before Hallomas eve' – but he makes this advice conditional: readers should follow his 'counsell' 'if weather will suffer'. Likewise, in 'Aprils Husbandrie', Tusser gives separate advice to those who are particularly struggling:

If April be dripping, then doo I not hate,
 (for him that hath little) his fallowing late,
 Else otherwise fallowing timelie is best,
 for saving of cattel, of plough and the rest. (ll. 5-8)

Once again, the reader can follow only the parts of this guidance that are relevant to his circumstances. The reader's own choice – his agency, his decision-making – remains essential to the text. Elsewhere, in 'Marches Husbandrie', Tusser even provides a variety of methods for setting hops:

Some laieth them croswise, along in the ground,
 as high as the knee they doo cover up round.
 Some prick up a stick in the mids of the same,
 that little round hillock the better to frame.

Some maketh a hollownes, halfe a foot deepe,
 with fower sets in it, set slant wise a steepe:
 One foot from another, in order to lie,
 and thereon a hillock, as round as a pie. (ll. 17-24)

Here, Tusser does ultimately suggest a superior method: ‘let everie hillock be fower foot wide’ (l. 27). Yet these alternative options lurk in the text, still available to the reader.

Tusser does more than simply provide his readers with choices. Rather, he reproduces this ‘slipperiness’ formally, challenging his readers even as he offers clear instruction. This interplay between difficulty and ease is exemplified by the text’s organization. By his own account, Tusser attempts to make an orderly, accessible text. Each successive edition of *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* boasts anew of its improved organization. Take the title page of the 1580 edition:

Fiue hundred pointes of
 good Husbandrie, as well for
 the Champion, or open countrie,
 as also for the woodland, Seuerall,
 mixed in euerie Month with Huswiferie,
 ouer and besides the booke of Huswiferie,
 corrected, better ordered, and newly augmented
 to a fourth part more, with diuers other lessons,
 as a diet for the fermer, of the properties of
 winds, planets, hops, herbes, bees, and approoued
 remedies for sheepe & cattle, with many other
 matters both profitable, and not vnpleasant for
 the Reader.²²

As Tusser stresses, this version is ‘corrected, better ordered, and newly augmented’. Motivating these changes, it seems, is a desire to make the relevant information ‘easier’ to find (Tusser 1878, 1). In this new edition, Tusser states, he has even included ‘a table of husbandrie at the beginning of this booke ... for the better and easier finding of any matter contained’ (*ibid.*).

Yet the book is not so neat. Even the relative messiness of the title page – the tumbling accumulation of ‘diuers other lessons, as a diet for the fermer, of the properties of winds, planets, hops, herbes, bees, and approoued remedies for sheepe & cattle, with many other matters both profitable, and not vnpleasant for the Reader’ – suggests the problem. Tusser’s text is organized, except that it is not. Much of its first half is a long series of prefatory poems: some which clearly introduce the book – ‘To the reader’, ‘An introduction to the book of husbandry’, or ‘A preface to the buyer’ – and others which offer less immediately introductory information, such as ‘The fermers dailie diet’ or ‘Of the planets’. These ‘descriptions’ and ‘digressions’ punctuate the text. Though Tusser orders his poems by season, unseasonal interruptions predominate. The December poems, for example, include ‘December’s Husbandrie’ and ‘A description of the feast and birth of Christ’, but also ‘A Description of life and riches’ and ‘A description of housekeeping’.²³ Even Tusser’s organizational tools offer limited help. All the new table provides is a list of the poems in the order in which they appear. The larger problem – that there is no rationale to this order in the first place – remains unaddressed.

²² See Tusser 1878, 1.

²³ See Tusser 1984, 53-67.

This is not to say that the placement of these poems is meaningless. Rather, this disorder – these very digressions – serve a purpose: by writing in such a digressionary, interruptive fashion, Tusser deepens his reader's engagement with husbandry. Though Tusser structures his text seasonally, he does not make his text neat: rather, he retains some wildness, some unpredictability, some of the 'slippery' nature of 'worldly things' (Tusser 1984, 14). If, as Greene-Crow argues, these 'digression[s]' '[draw] a parallel between moving through ... fields and moving through the *Points*' (2025, 41), I would suggest that Tusser also evokes the variable nature of the seasons themselves, which, despite human efforts, cannot be pinned down in a calendar. As Katherine Walker has noted, many mock almanacs likewise destabilized their seasonal structure: in *The Raven's Almanac*, Thomas Dekker 'disrupts the chronological order of the contemporary almanac [by] inserting a tale ... between the description of the diseases in the spring and the summer' (2018a, 148). Much like Dekker, Tusser also startles his reader out of easy patterns. Tusser's organization is in fact a feint at organization: an uncertain structure which mimics the uncertain nature of nature itself.

Even the text's smaller-scale organizational choices contribute to this disorientation. Many of Tusser's poems proceed in two parts: a series of short, axiomatic couplets, followed by an elaboration upon the same topic. 'The Commodities of Husbandrie', one of Tusser's prefatory poems (1984), embodies this form in miniature:

No labor no bread,
 No host we be dead.
 No husbandry used, how soone shall we sterve?
 House keeping neglected, what comfort to serve? (ll. 5-8)

Here, Tusser fleshes out the first couplet in the second couplet. 'No labor no bread', for example, is parsed by 'No husbandry used, how soone shall we sterve?' Other poems appear to establish this contraction and expansion across wider swaths of text. 'The Farmers Dailie Diet', coming at the beginning of the text, prefaces much of the poetry that follows in short, memorable couplets. Here, the elaborate guidance found in 'December's Abstract' and 'December's Husbandrie' becomes two striking lines: 'At Christmas play and make good cheere / for Christmas comes but once a year' (ll. 19-20). These formal choices create a sense of *déjà vu*. Other critics have noted how Tusser explores both 'cyclical' and 'linear' models of time: in particular, Oldenburg argues, his sonnets set 'cyclical calendar time and the changing seasons' against humanity's 'limited experience of seasonal renewal' (2019, 282-283). Yet these repetitive structures populate the text, acting as a countervailing wind to the poetry's seasonal unfolding. The poems turn in upon themselves: line to line, poem to poem.

In fact, this formal pattern is especially evident in Tusser's calendar poems. Each pairs an 'Abstract' – a list of short, axiomatic couplets – with a longer 'Husbandrie' poem, itself preceded by a motto. 'Septembers Abstract', for example, includes such short maxims as 'mix rie aright / with wheat that is whight' (1984, ll. 27-28) or 'with sling or bowe / keepe corne from Crowe' (ll. 33-34). Tusser then expands these couplets in 'Septembers Husbandrie':

Sowe timely thy whitewheat, sowe rie in the dust,
 let seede have his longing, let soile have hir lust:
 Let rie be partaker of Mihelmas spring,
 to beare out the hardnes that winter doth bring.

Some mixeth to miller the rie with the wheat,
 Temmes lofe on his table to have for to eate:
 But sowe it not mixed, to growe so on land,

...

No sooner a sowing, but out by and by,
 with mother or boy that Alarum can cry:
 And let them be armed with sling or with bowe,
 to skare away piggen, the rooke and the crowe. (ll. 37-56)

Here, the clipped couplets unfold into more imaginative – and elaborate – conceits. What these poems recall, of course, are almanac poems: as in almanacs, this repetition again reinforces Tusser's guidance over time. As McRae has argued, the addition of these abstracts to the 1573 edition 'is surely consistent with an attempt to fix information in the minds of the literate or semi-literate' (1996, 147). Yet Tusser at once adopts and corrects this approach. In the 'Abstract', Tusser writes short, easy-to-remember couplets; in the 'Husbandrie', Tusser offers another set of couplets, which give a more complicated, detailed account. In other words, Tusser at once has his cake and eats it too, drawing upon almanac poetry's simple couplets without simplifying his subject.²⁴

Such contractions, however, do not always serve a mnemonic purpose. Each of these husbandry poems themselves begin with another structural element that clearly echoes calendar poetry: a motto. These short quatrains are not – or are not only – easily memorizable advice. In many ways, in fact, these mottos resist easy comprehension. Take the motto that begins 'Aprils Husbandrie'. Here, as in all of Tusser's mottos (1984), the first half of the quatrain changes according to the month, while the latter half repeats:

Swéete April showers,
 Doo spring Maie flowers.
 Forgotten month past,
 Doe now at the last. (ll. 1-4)

The motto manifests the major tensions of the text in miniature. Here, Tusser pairs one of his most memorable and extractable couplets – 'Sweete April showers/ Doo spring Maie flowers' – with something decidedly more difficult to parse. According to Payne and Herrtage, this latter phrase is missing several key words: 'Forgotten month past / Doe now at the last' means '[Work] forgotten [in the month past] / Doe now at the last' (1878, xxii). What these omissions establish is a strange dynamic. Rather than clearly stating his instructions – as a typical manual might – Tusser challenges his reader's comprehension, withholding rather than elaborating his meaning. The reader must work to uncover the 'work' 'forgotten' in the line.

These omissions populate the text. As Payne and Herrtage note, this tendency is one of Tusser's 'principal peculiarities': again and again, Tusser cuts or condenses words essential to understanding his poetry (xxi).²⁵ In 'Dinner Matters', Tusser writes 'plough cattle a-baiting' (1984, l. 5) for '[while] plough cattle [are] a- baiting'; in 'Works After Harvest', Tusser writes 'thy market despatched' (l. 65) for 'thy market [having been] despatched'.²⁶ The poem 'Comparing good husbandrie, with unthrift his brother' – itself a series of epigrams – takes this contractive impulse even further. As Tusser (1984) writes,

²⁴ For a different reading of the relationship between these 'Abstract' and 'Husbandry' poems, see Greene-Crow, who argues that 'in every pairing of monthly dimeter abstracts with the tetrameter points that follow them', Tusser 'display[s]' 'the transformation of scarceness into plenty' (2025, 45).

²⁵ Child likewise notes Tusser's frequent 'compressions and elisions' (1934, 185).

²⁶ See Payne and Herrtage 1878, xxii.

Ill husbandrie liveth,
 by that and by this:
 Good husbandrie giveth
 to erie man his.

Ill husbandrie taketh,
 and spendeth up all:
 Good husbandrie maketh
 good shift with a small. (ll. 37-44)

The poem operates through a kind of corrective rhyme. Again and again, Tusser sets ‘ill husbandrie’s’ faults against ‘good husbandrie’s’ virtues, repairing them over the course of each quatrain. Yet the details remain vague. Pronouns predominate: as Tusser writes, ‘Ill husbandrie liveth/ by *this* and *that*’, while ‘good husbandrie giveth / to everie man *his*’ (my italics). Indeed, Tusser even leaves out an essential word: ‘Good husbandrie maketh / good shift with a small’ means ‘Good husbandrie maketh / good shift with a small *income*’ (Payne and Herrtage 1878, xxii; my italics). Once again, these omissions create a challenge for the reader. Rather than simply acting as an aid to memory, that is, Tusser’s contractions contribute to an uncertain reading process. What Payne and Herrtage suggest, after all, need not be the only way to read the poem: the lines remain unfixed, and thus open to different interpretation. If, as Greene-Crow has argued, Tusser is ‘using verse to teach farmers to be astute readers who consider all interpretive possibilities’ (2025, 42), these interpretive possibilities are at times not even indicated by the text. Rather, the reader can individualize the poem, parsing its contractions according to his own judgment.

In fact, this contractive approach may reflect a particular worldview. Give that, as Tusser writes in ‘The Ladder to Thrift’, ‘worldly things are slippery’ (1984, l. 64), he can state few things with absolute certainty. As such, he condenses his advice into short, manageable statements. Take, for example, this stanza from ‘Of the Planets’:

If day star appeareth, day comfort is ny,
 If sunne be at south, it is noone by and by:
 If sunne be at westward, it setteth anon,
 If sunne be at setting, the day is soone gon. (ll. 5-8)

None of these statements are great revelations. The text approaches the kind of ‘obvious’ guidance that was parodied in ‘burlesque’ almanacs (i.e. Capp 1979, 231).²⁷ Yet here, Tusser appears to be responding to the fundamental uncertainty of the world. His rhyming couplets do not limit knowledge so much as reflect the limits of knowledge. The poetry forms to an uncertain world: so uncertain it can only be seen and understood in snippets.

What Tusser creates is thus more than a versified almanac, which treats poetry as a mere aid to memory. Rather than simply packaging information into mnemonic forms, his poems challenge their readers, imbuing some of the uncertainty of the environment itself. In this ‘loose style’, based upon the primacy of experience, Tusser’s work may even seem to anticipate George Wither’s, which also embraced a series of ‘digressions’ to ‘bring his art closer and closer to the conditions of actual or lived experience’ (Calhoun 1974, 267, 265). What Tusser creates is a text that is at once literary and didactic: a text that becomes didactic in part through its literary choices. *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* creates an experience in itself.

²⁷ On these predictions, see Capp 1979, 231.

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An Environmental ‘poetics of space’* in *Poly-Olbion* (1612 and 1622)

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Abstract

The article examines the mechanism by which space is created and disrupted in Michael Drayton’s chorographic poem, *Poly-Olbion* (1612 and 1622). Gaston Bachelard propounds that ‘Inhabited space transcends geometrical space’: once space is inhabited, it develops the agency to co-create with its inhabitants. Applying this theory of domesticity to Drayton’s representation of water, the article argues that the poem similarly presents the non-human with agency to shape and disrupt space alongside people and their histories. Attending to the spatial agency of the non-human in this way allows for a new ecocritical reading of space in *Poly-Olbion*, aiming to address what it means to read space in the face of environmental change.

Keywords: Chorography, Ecocriticism, Erosion, *Poly-Olbion*, Spatial Studies

1. Introduction

At the centre of *Poly-Olbion*’s frontispiece sits Albion, the feminised vision of the nation, as indicated by the words ‘GREAT BRITAINE’ engraved upon her rocky throne.¹ William Hole’s etching clearly associates Albion with the nation’s land: she holds a cornucopia, filled with fruits and flowers, both symbols of agricultural abundance, and she wears a garment that is embellished with inland cartographic iconography, including trees, rivers, and hilltops. The sea is spread out behind her, providing a backdrop for this powerful female representation of the land of Britain. However, the maritime also encroaches on the foreground: the archway framing Albion is decorated with crabs and shells, a counter to the cornucopia in her left hand, and her cartographic gown

* Bachelard 2014.

¹ See Drayton (1931-1941). The poem (including all etchings and illustrative notes) appears in vol. 4. All references in the present essay are to Hebel’s edition (1933).

is complemented with a string of ocean pearls.² This creeping maritime presence is verbalised in the accompanying poem ‘Upon the *Frontispice*’, which asks the reader to ‘see *Albion* plaʹt, / ... in *Neptunes* armes embrasʹt’ (Drayton 1933, ‘Upon the *Frontispice*’, ll. 1-2). This metaphor – a metaphor that recurs in the body of the poem, as well as in John Selden’s Illustrations – recognises the importance of the sea in shaping the land that makes up the nation (*The fifth Song*, l. 328 and Selden’s note in Drayton 1933, 43). As Neptune wraps his arms around Albion, so he ‘encloses’ her, physically demarcating where the land (and as such, the nation) comes to an end (OED, ‘Embrace’, v.2.3.a). Thus, by using the metaphor of embrace, *Poly-Olbion* acknowledges the role that the sea plays in shaping cartographic place: the sea is written with the power to dictate what appears on the map. The ‘embrace’, of course, is not static. The ebb and flow of tides continually reshapes the edge of the land throughout the day, whilst over time, the erosive force of those waves accumulates, redefining the coastline more permanently. These changes are not registered through Hole’s cartographic etchings; Drayton’s poetry, however, alludes to the impact of Neptune’s watery embrace. At the coastline of North Wales, for example, the ‘robustious shocks’ of Neptune’s tides ‘shoulder up against the griesly Rocks’ of the coastline (*The tenth Song*, ll. 77-78). The emphasis that Drayton gives to the force of the waves leaves the encircled land seeming fragile in their wake: as such, Neptune’s embrace becomes more a threat than a sign of his friendship.

This early reference to Neptune’s watery embrace of Albion is representative of the agency to shape and disrupt cartographic place that Drayton extends to the non-human environment throughout the poetry of *Poly-Olbion*. Since the ‘spatial turn’ in the humanities, the study of early modern chorography – Drayton’s generic forebear – has been invigorated.³ Much of this criticism has focussed on the politics of the genre, unsurprisingly considering the influence of Henri Lefebvre’s theory of space as socially produced (1991; see, in particular, Helgerson 1992; McRae 1996; Klein 2001a). Studies of the representation of space in *Poly-Olbion* have been similarly politically orientated, drawing on the theoretical frameworks offered by both Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau to focus on people and mobility (de Certeau 1984; see also McRae 1999; Klein 2001b). There is, however, an apparent crossover between the study of space and ecocritical studies (as highlighted by Lynn Robson’s review of the two fields) that remains underexplored in the early modern (2010). Indeed, the two seem so closely connected that in a recent essay, Bernhard Klein provides a footnote referring to literature ‘on space and/or natural environment’ (2020, 147). Alongside the interest in the poem through a spatial lens, over the past decade *Poly-Olbion* has increasingly been the subject of ecocritical attention for its poetic representation of environmental change, such as deforestation and the drainage of the fens (see, in particular, Dasgupta 2010; Borlik 2011; McRae 2011 and 2020). These two fields – both of which have been significantly influential in *Poly-Olbion* studies – have recently been examined together by Todd Borlik, which puts ‘a green spin on Helgerson’s argument’ to read the poem as ‘an early intimation of bioregional thinking’ (2020, 90). Borlik thus builds on previous criticism of the poem, highlighting that natural history (as much as human history) is important to Drayton in defining place.

The present essay aims to similarly take seriously the role of the non-human environment in the poem’s conception of space; however, I am additionally interested in tracing the material impact of non-human spatial agency, particularly on the coast.⁴ Devon and Cornwall provide

² Here, I draw on Bernhard Klein’s discussion of the frontispiece (2020, 148-151).

³ For an overview of the genre of chorography, see McRae 2013 and Vine 2017.

⁴ There is precedent to this environmental approach to spatial studies that can be found in other disciplines. See, for example, Steinberg and Peters 2015.

a geographic focal point for the present essay, a region selected because of the sheer volume of contemporary chorographic material available, but also because of the extensive coastline: the first song of *Poly-Olbion* (which focusses on these two counties) sees Drayton paying significant attention to the impact of the sea. The first part of the present essay examines the chorographic representation of the apparently stable natural boundary between these two counties, the River Tamar. Despite the decisiveness of river as boundary, chorographers from both sides acknowledge its permeability: in particular, there are several Devonian parishes situated on the Cornish side of the river. People and mobility can thus be understood as vital in the production of space in these local chorographies. In contrast, Drayton extends spatial agency to the Tamar and her tributaries through his use of prosopopoeia, attributing to the non-human environment the capacity to choose whether or not to commit to the boundary. Drawing on Gaston Bachelard's theory of domestic space as discussed in his *The Poetics of Space*, I argue that the non-human in *Poly-Olbion* becomes a co-creator of space alongside the human inhabitants. In the second part of the present essay, I turn my attention to the material impact of this spatial agency attributed to the non-human environment, arguing that the physicality of the sea in shaping the land is presented as both a spatial and environmental threat, especially given the heightened anxieties about coastal change during the period in which Drayton was writing, provoked by visions of lost lands and the massive flooding along the Bristol Channel in 1607. As such, I aim to offer a new reading of the spatial-environmental implications of non-human agency in *Poly-Olbion*. Crucially, I suggest that the absence of the human at these coastal sites allows the non-human waves excessive agency, and whilst the poetry might not offer any pragmatic solutions, I argue that it encourages preservation of the fragile land through memory. In doing so, Drayton invites the human reader to be a protective participant at the coastline, to once again co-create with the non-human.

2. *Producing Space with the Non-Human*

Devon and Cornwall, the two most southwestern counties in England, were once united as part of the same kingdom, Dumnonia. This kingdom was divided into two counties at the River Tamar during the reign of King Athelstan in the tenth century, at least according to the twelfth-century historian William of Malmesbury (1847, 134). Malmesbury's account is now generally disputed, but regardless of the veracity of the story, it was the tale of division that chorographers from both sides of the river recounted.⁵ Richard Carew, for example, opens his *Survey of Cornwall* (1602) with reference to the Saxon invasion and subsequent settlement, which drove the Britons 'to seek their safeguard in the waste moors, craggy mountains, and wild forests of Wales and Cornwall' (2000, 11). He later returns to this historical moment with greater geographic specificity, describing how Athelstan 'drave [the Britons] out of Excester [in Devon], where, till then, they bare equal sway with the Saxons, and left only the narrow angle on the west of Tamer River, for their inhabitancy, which hath ever since been their fatal bound' (109-110). Writing from the other side of the river, Thomas Westcote's account of the split in *A View of Devonshire* (completed in 1630) is very similar: following Carew, Westcote also describes how Athelstan 'chased the Britons ... out of these parts, now called Denshire' and drove them 'beyond the river now called Taw-meer; making that river the bounds, limits, or meer between the two counties' (1845, 28). The affinity between these two accounts of the

⁵ T.M. Charles, for example, concludes that this version of Devon and Cornish history is an 'improbable story' (2013, 432).

division gives Malmesbury's version of history greater credence through the act of telling and retelling, which aids the writers in constructing a stable understanding of their own counties. In evoking the Athelstan myth, they acknowledge the history shared between Devon and Cornwall but remind the reader of the present-day natural boundary that clearly demarcates each county. Further, they both describe the river in decisive terms. For Carew, it becomes the 'fatal bound' (2000, 110), suggesting the inevitability of Dumnonia's division. Meanwhile Westcote provides an etymology of 'Taw-meer', with 'meer' signifying 'a bound or limit: so Taw-meer, Taw the bounds' (1845, 28). This is reaffirmed by contemporary county maps of Devon and Cornwall, which visualise (and perhaps overemphasise) the decisiveness of the Tamar as a boundary from an elevated perspective: in John Speed's map of Devon, for example, the eastern edge peters out into Somerset and Dorset, whereas the western divide appears clearer because of the river's role as a natural boundary (1614, 19-21). Whatever history might have to say about the region, these writers make firm its division through the assertiveness of the river, a stable boundary between Devon and Cornwall that has remained in place ever since.

This stable boundary, however, is disrupted by movement and exchange across the river. Carew makes note that the 'commendable' physician 'Mr Atwel' is 'sometimes Parson of Calverly in Devon, and now of St Tue [St Ewe] in Cornwall', highlighting his migration from one county to the other (2000, 70). Inversely, Carew recalls the mass movement during the Cornish rebellion of 1497, when an army of around 6,000 'marched into Devon, besieged and assaulted Excester, and gave the Lord Russell ... more than one hot encounter' (111). Non-human inhabitants, of course, display little regard for the boundary, and Carew notes the red deer that 'range thither out of Devon' and the trout-like 'shoat' that is 'peculiar to Devon and Cornwall' (39, 43). Grazing practices similarly encourage movement, since the 'Devon and Somersetshire graziers feed yearly great droves of cattle in the north corner of Cornwall' (39). The exchange of property represents another kind of disruption: the Boconnock Estate is situated firmly within Cornwall, but 'appertained to the Earls of Devon', along with his 'sisters and heirs' (74). Further examples can be found along the Tamar itself, such as Milbrook, which is described as 'severed from Devon by the general bound, yet upon some of the foreremembered considerations have been annexed thereunto' (116). Westcote, on the other hand, is firmer in describing Milbrook as 'belonging unto us' (that is, Devonians) (1845, 375). Each time the boundary is breached, it creates an 'iland' of Devon within Cornwall, disrupting the illusion of the firm line between one county and the other and highlighting the permeability of the river as boundary.⁶ This permeability allows the chorographic description to stray over the river. For example, as Westcote reaches the River Tamar, he looks over the onto the 'Cornish side' to include 'Saltash, Villa de Esse, Essas-town', the 'ruined castle of [Trematon]', as well as (naturally) the Devonian villages (*ibid.*). Westcote does not linger long in describing these 'transmarine places': there is, he suggests, no need to 'enlarge one word, being already well performed by a far more judicious and learned pen in the Survey of Cornwall' (376). By citing Carew, Westcote establishes the complementary nature of the two chorographies, as if they are meant to read alongside one another. The chorographies become rather like the counties they describe: two separate texts with one description that permeates the other, nonetheless.

The practices of living beings thus transmute the separate geographic places of Devon and Cornwall into less static, socially produced spaces. Drawing on Michel de Certeau's famous image of looking down on New York City from the World Trade Centre, when consulting

⁶ I borrow this phrase from William Pole, who describes the Devonian parish of Thorncomb as an 'iland compassed about w[ith] Dorsetshire & Somersetshir' (1791, 112).

Speed's map, the River Tamar might appear to provide a solid bound; however, the people on the ground in reality continually unnerve its apparent certainty (1984, 91-92). The cartographic perspective is an example of place, which 'is transformed into a space by walkers' (117). Despite the acknowledged disruptions, I suggest that Carew and Westcote are ultimately concerned with replicating the county maps and maintaining the boundary, that is with upholding a stable sense of place. Westcote assures his reader that he strayed into Cornwall 'briefly, only for a remembrance that they are members of this county', that is to say, to reaffirm the more ambiguous parts of his county as Devonian, a literary act of beating the bounds (1845, 376). Carew, in contrast, creates some uncertainty about Milbrook's county, suggesting it is only 'some of the foreremembered considerations' that include it in Devon (2000, 116; my italics). The formal context for this reasserted boundary is that they are ultimately writing chorographies of the separate counties, not a description of Dumnonia. Michael Drayton's chorographical poem, on the other hand, is not bound by the same formal constraints. The literary organisation of *Poly-Olbion* has been traced to William Camden's *Britannia* (first published in Latin 1587), in part because the Muse and narrator who bring forth the poem move (more or less) from county to county, emphasising individual units of land (Moore 1968; McRae and Schwyzer 2020, 4). However, the description is divided into songs which do not follow the county-by-county model, but rather bring together multiple counties into one unit of poetry, as well as one corresponding cartographic etching by William Hole. Through this boundary-crossing method of organisation, Devon and Cornwall are united poetically and visually as 'The first Song' (Drayton 1933).

This is not to suggest that Drayton completely disregards the division along the Tamar, which is succinctly described through a couplet in the opening argument to that song: '*Then takes in Tamer, as shee bounds / the Cornish and Devonian grounds*' (*The first Song, Argument*, ll. 7-8). In the body of the poem, the Tamar is reintroduced, 'swoop[ing] along, with such a lustie traine / As fits so brave a flood two Countries that divides' (*The first Song*, ll. 205-206). This both reiterates her role as boundary between Devon and Cornwall and suggests that her effectiveness lies in the reality of her physical form, her 'lustie traine', recalling the language used by both Carew and Westcote to stress the Tamar's firmness. This 'lustie traine' is formed and strengthened by the united efforts of tributaries from both counties: 'to increase her strength, shee from her equall sides / Receive their several rills' (ll. 207-208). What follows is a catalogue of Cornish tributaries to the Tamar, acknowledging also the 'proud aspiring hills' that contribute to the streams (l. 216). The description pivots on a rhyming couplet (Tamar is proud that she is 'by *Carewes* Muse, the river most renound, / Associate should her grace to the *Devonian* ground', ll. 217-218), creating a sonic connection between the two counties, even at the moment the poem crosses over the river from one side to another (ll. 218-219). A catalogue of Devonian tributaries into Tamar follows, reflecting the poetic description on the Cornish side, before the passage closes with reference to the region's united past:

But *Tamer* takes the place, and all attend her here,
 A faithfull bound to both; and two that be so neare
 For likeliness of soile, and quantitie they hold,
 Before the Roman came; whose people were of old
 Knowne by one generall name. (ll. 235-239)

The description here of Tamar as 'a faithfull bound' is overwhelmed by the points of similarity that Drayton is keen to note: the soil, the geographic proximity, and the pre-Roman past. Notably, the allusion to Dumnonia is not countered by the Athelstan myth, either in the poem or in Selden's illustrative notes on the passage, which simply gives name to the old kingdom (Drayton 1933, 20).

Drayton's poetic description along the Tamar oscillates between a commitment to upholding the cartographic units of place and allusion to a more mutable space defined by cross-county movement. The affirmation of the river as a 'faithfull bound' decisively upholds the border, recalling Westcote's assurance that he does not descriptively stray too far into Cornwall and hewing strikingly close to Carew's description of Tamar as a 'fatal bound'. On the other hand, the repeated references to sameness allude to the shared past, unnerving the stable sense of place. The sameness is reflected in the poetics: the Devonian passage seems to mimic the Cornish, similarly producing a catalogue of tributaries, with the transition from one county to another occurring over a rhyming couplet. Turning to the cartographic etching, the tributaries are over-emphasised by Hole's technique, creating cross-cutting channels which allude to movement over the river, even as the poetry describes the rills contributing to and strengthening the boundary.⁷ In the present essay, however, I am less interested in tracing in more depth the intricacies of the poem's portrayal of Dumnonian place/space than I am in thinking through the mechanism by which the oscillation from one to another occurs. For de Certeau, place becomes space through human practices; hence, '*space is a practiced place*' (1984, 117). The boundary-crossing migration and networks of property laid out in the county chorographies provide a clear example of the disruption of place into space. Disruptive human practices are also evident in *Poly-Olbion* through Drayton's allusion to the shared history of Devon and Cornwall, which Selden strengthens in the Illustrations. Further, Drayton follows Carew in suggesting that the inhabitants of both counties are particularly skilled at wrestling, acknowledging a boundary-crossing culture through a sport that (as the poet's description highlights) relies on the invasion of the opponent's space (Drayton 1933, *The first Song*, ll. 239-247). The various throws that Drayton names ('The forward, backward, falx, the mare, the turne, the trip') all reflect the movement to and fro over the Tamar, whilst the aggression of the sport (the opponents are likened to 'Bulls set head to head') equally works to reassert the division (ll. 242-244). The Tamar and her tributaries, however, emerge as spatial agents alongside the human inhabitants. That Drayton extends agency to the non-human environment is evident in the use of prosopopoeia throughout the poem, allowing the land and waters to express their desires and emotions through song. In this passage, the Tamar is pleased by the 'plentious tribute' offered by one tributary: 'This honours *Tamer* much' (ll. 214-215). She is introduced as 'Proud', alluding to her attitude towards her role, and later is given the epithet of 'faithfull bound', highlighting her sense of commitment to both counties. Equally, the tributaries are sometimes eager to contribute – such as Kensey, who comes 'not much behind' Atre – and sometimes hesitant, like the creeping Lid (ll. 208-209, l. 221). They might even, as Thrushel, shirk their duties altogether, flowing underground 'To bellowe under earth' (l. 224). As these streams of water enact their agency, they do so in spatial terms: some mimic the writing and mapping of place that affirms what appears on paper; others, the boundary-crossing human practices that disrupt stable understandings of place.

Because human practices in *Poly-Olbion* are not solely responsible for the disruption of place into space, Gaston Bachelard's theory of domestic space seems to offer a clearer lens through which to read the poem. In Bachelard's study of the house, 'Inhabited space transcends geometrical space': the house becomes both 'its prime reality ... made of well hewn solids and well fitted framework' and part of the 'human plane' (2014, 67-68). Human practices are still critical – the house transcends because it is inhabited – but these practices imbue

⁷ See cartographic etching, included in Drayton prior to the first song. The exaggeration of the tributaries is particularly apparent when contrasted with Speed's depiction of the Tamar (1614, 19-21).

the structure of the house itself with agency. Through Drayton's poetic handling, the Tamar and her tributaries similarly become both their 'prime reality' (that is, water flowing through channels in the earth) and part of 'the human plane'. The rivers, driven by the human qualities bestowed upon them, thus decide to contribute (or withhold) the physical weight of their water, thereby practising place alongside the human inhabitants. That is to say, in *Poly-Olbion*, space is not just a human phenomenon.

3. *The Materiality of Spacial Agency*

By writing the non-human with agency, Drayton makes literal the fluidity of social space, much like he makes literal the weight of history: as Shannon Garner argues, 'The volume of gathering rivers literally gives weight to their arguments' about the past (2020, 137). Thus, the agency that Drayton attributes to the Tamar and her tributaries does not only contribute to the production of space; rather, their spatial agency has a material impact on the environment. As Kensey eagerly joins the Tamar thus strengthening the boundary, she does so by adding physical weight to her flow and width to her channel. Inversely, the Thrushel chooses to avoid the mainstream, and both current and boundary are consequently weaker than their potential. Since Drayton extends to the rivers the capacity to choose their course, there also lies latent within the poetry the possibility of change that could impact the boundary (either weakening or strengthening it) by affecting the environment. Indeed, just prior to the description of the Tamar, this possibility of material change becomes reality: the Camel (a river in Cornwall) is so affected by her misery over Arthur's death that she forges a new path for herself. She now – 'ever since her British *Arthurs* blood, / By *Mordreds* murtherous hand was mingled with her flood' – meanders in such a way that disregards 'her proper course' (Drayton 1933, *The first Song*, ll. 183-184). Here, the Camel's reaction to Arthur's demise results in a material change to the environment. What Drayton's description of her diverted course does not include, however, is the impact on the soil that forms her banks. As the river steers a new and 'carelesse' course through Cornwall, 'mutter[ing] to her selfe, in wandring here and there', the reader is left to imagine whether the river's banks spontaneously follow suit, moving to make way for the meandering Camel, or whether she forces her way through, creating her new path over time through the slow process of erosion (ll. 192-193). Thrushel's act of 'throw[ing] / Her selfe amongst the rocks' and going underground is similarly described through a sole focus on the river, and not its earthy channel. This aligns with Drayton's depiction of rivers throughout the poem, which, as I have previously argued, is broadly celebratory about the opportunities they offer in terms of connectivity and rural productivity, largely ignoring the threat rivers could (and did) pose, most particularly flooding (Naish 2024, 219-224).⁸ The ocean, however, by continually shaping and reshaping the land, is presented as a far greater threat to the coast, both spatially and environmentally. The encircling sea is endowed with the capacity to dictate the edges of the nation, and it does so through a process suggestive of erosion. Whilst the words 'erode' and 'erosion' do not appear to have been used in relation to the environmental phenomenon until the nineteenth century, contemporary sources demonstrate an awareness of the

⁸ It is worth noting that Drayton alludes to the threat posed by rivers via a prophecy concerning 'fatall Welland': '(Which to this ominous flood much feare and reverance wan) / That she alone should drowne all Holland' (1933, *The foure and twentieth Song, Argument*, l. 1 and ll. 6-7). This is, however, a brief mention, and the poem quickly moves on, in line with the more generally optimistic presentation of rivers.

impact of waves on the shore over time: writing in 1596, for example, John Norden describes ‘the force of the water’ as working away at the coastline in Kent (26).⁹ Indeed, *Poly-Olbion* was written and published during a period, as per Borlik, of heightened environmental anxiety about coastal change (2023, 80). The publication in 1590 of John Twyne’s *De rebus Albionis, Britannicis atque Anglicis, Commentariorum libri duo* by his son Thomas popularised the ‘isthmus hypothesis’, the theory that Britain ‘had at one time been actually joined to the mainland by a neck of land which, in the long processes of time and tide, had been gradually worn away’ (Ferguson 1969, 30). The credibility of this theory, as Borlik notes, would have been bolstered by the catastrophic flooding along the Bristol Channel in 1607 (2023, 80), just five years prior to the first publication of *Poly-Olbion*.

The threat of the waves in *Poly-Olbion* is augmented by the repeated reference to Neptune. In evoking the figure of Neptune, Drayton’s representation of the sea draws upon a great variety of allusions from classical texts and in early modern English writing, as Bernhard Klein demonstrates. As such, Neptune (and by extension the sea) is presented in *Poly-Olbion* as both ‘a political operator and a dreaded natural force’ (Klein 2020, 160-162). His political prowess, however, is not evident until after the first song, whereas the troublesome nature of the sea is present from the outset. For example, the assurance that the sea nymphs offer the Channel Islands – that they ‘never need to feare’ the stormy seas in which they are situated – ironically highlights that the land feels under threat from the dual forces of Neptune and Aeolus (Drayton 1933, *The first Song*, ll. 45-48). The threat grows stronger when the islands loudly reply ‘With shrill and jocund shouts’, and in doing so, awaken ‘th’unmeaur’d deepes ... / And let the Gods of Sea their secret Bowres forsake’ (ll. 63-64).¹⁰ Now active, the waves that break on Brisons (a tiny island off the coast of Cornwall) disturb the shore, leaving the sand ‘troubled’ (l. 73). Later attacks are more disruptive still, such as at St Michael’s Mount, where Neptune comes ‘cutting in, a cante forth doth take’ (ll. 80-81). This provides a literal description of the tidal island, separated from mainland for most of the day, but in potentially violent terms: the word ‘take’ in particular implies that the Mount might not want to give up his land. Meanwhile on the north coast, Neptune ‘Hayles vaster mouth doth make / A Chersonese [peninsula] thereof’ (ll. 82-83). This literal description of a widened river mouth similarly highlights the material impact of the waves that shapes (and even reshapes) the coastal edges of Cornwall.

This opening passage thus introduces the coastline as vulnerable in the face of Neptune’s force. That vulnerability is then exacerbated through descriptions of the relationship between land and sea in terms of sexual harassment, since Neptune’s evident desire for the coast is not always reciprocated. For example, the Loe in Cornwall (a freshwater lake, separated from the sea by a shingle bank) is described by Drayton as formed ‘Through [Neptune’s] impatient love’ (l. 143). The brute force of Neptune’s desire results in a coastline that is physically overpowered, but not mentally swayed: to borrow the distinction drawn out by Jocelyn Catty, raped rather than seduced (1999, 19). The only insight that Drayton offers to the Loe’s perspective is that ‘shee had to entertaine / The lustfull Neptune oft’, with the ‘had’ suggesting resigned duty, rather than willing participation (1933, *The first Song*, ll. 143-144). In the account that follows, Neptune’s sexual violence becomes unignorable:

⁹ Earlier uses tend to refer to bodily erosion, which appears to change around the nineteenth century: see OED, ‘Erosion’, n.1.a.; ‘Erode’, v.1.a.

¹⁰ Klein suggests ‘the sea gods keep out of the way in their secret under-water bowers’ (2020, 163). However, I would argue that the couplet presents a burgeoning threat as the sea gods come out from (‘forsake’) their secret bowers.

[Neptune] when his wracks restraine,
 Impatient of the wrong, impetuouslie hee raves:
 And in his ragefull flowe, the furious King of waves,
 Breaks foming o'er the Beache, whom nothing seemes to coole,
 Till he have wrought his will on that capacious Poole. (ll. 144-148)

Neptune is again described as 'impatient', a quality that is stressed further through the image of the waves 'impetuouslie' raving against any constraints that might hold them back from the desired shore. That impatience is made more fearsome through the fact that his violent emotions are only eased when they are acted upon, that is when Neptune successfully assaults Loe. The violence is then held in perpetuity through the literal image of waves endlessly breaking against the shore, as well as through the lack of resolution in the poem, which simply moves on to describe the next stretch of coastline. The forcefulness of this unending assault is made more graphic through the emphasis on its material impact: the Loe is 'transform'd into a Lake' because of Neptune's advances. This simple description of an indent in the coastline is additionally suggestive of violent penetration, and thus simultaneously functions as a devastating portrayal of the physical impact of Neptune's assault. Along the coast from Loe lie the Meneage (on the Lizard peninsula) and the Roseland peninsula, both of which are inversely figured as male. This shift in the gender dynamic at first seems to signal a different relationship between the coast and the waves: it is still antagonistic, but the Meneage in particular seems better equipped to resist the forces of the waves. The Meneage 'jut[s] out' into the sea and 'with his threatenng cleeves in horrid *Neptunes* mouth, / Derides him and his power: nor cares how him he greets' (ll. 151-153). Even as Neptune grabs onto the coastline, the Meneage vocalises his resistance and hurls insults at the sea god, providing a notable contrast to the description a few lines earlier of the amenable Loe. Roseland mimics 'his friend, the mightier *Menedge*', and boldly 'meets / Great *Neptune* when he swells, and rageth at the Rocks' (ll. 154-155). His attempts, however, are less successful and Neptune subsequently 'inforc[es] through his shocks / Those armes of Sea, that thrust into the tinny strand' (ll. 156-157). With the preposition 'into', the description of the various waterways (the 'armes of Sea') becomes threateningly penetrative, especially considering the proximity to the violent assault on Loe. The brief moment of resistance at the Meneage is thus quickly countered as Neptune's insistent force again succeeds at violating the coastline at Roseland.

Other parts of the coastline are more successful at resisting Neptune's advances, such as the 'Marble-minded breast' of the Isle of Purbeck in Dorset (2.94). Through her 'marble' mind, she resists any attempts at seduction from the waves, and with her 'breast' (which is literally formed with 'some veins of marble'), she resists their physical force.¹¹ At Hayle, protection comes in the form of a nymph, who ensures that the land is sheltered from the worst of Neptune's attacks through reciprocated passion. Despite the anxiety underlying the description of '*Hayles* vaster mouth' in the opening passage, the description of her nymph (given around twenty lines later) reveals an enthusiastic attitude towards the advances of the waves (l. 82). Hayle's 'lustie Nymph' expresses playful desire for union with the sea: as the river flows away from the land, the nymph is found 'bent all to amorous play' and 'disporting in the Deepe' with Neptune's 'Pages' (ll. 111-113). Further, her 'quick recourse into the *Severne* Sea' seems a good match for the impatience of Neptune, which Drayton stresses in his description of Loe, whilst also taking the action away from the coastline: the union occurs in 'the Deepe', thereby

¹¹ Drayton seems here to draw on William Camden's description of Purbeck (1695, 46).

providing protection to the land from the force of the waves. As a result, the material impact on the coastline seems to become less alarming than at other sites, and the nymph is described as ‘One never touch’t with care; but how her selfe to keepe / In excellent estate’ (ll. 111-115). Hayle’s speech that follows goes on to describe that ‘excellent estate’, highlighting the riches of the region’s earth, namely the diamonds ‘By Nature neatly cut, as by a skilfull hand’ and the restorative ‘Seaholme’, or eryngo (ll. 119-120 and ll. 125-129). Drayton appears to put faith in the Hayle’s nymph that she can enact her own agency, in doing so countering Neptune’s violence, protecting the coastline, and even allowing it to thrive.

Purbeck and Hayle thus emerge as more resilient than the vulnerable southern coastline on account of their hard-wearing physical form and their enthusiastic nymph respectively. This only makes sites like Loe and Roseland seem more fragile by contrast: without veins of marble running through and strengthening the coast, it seems that Loe and Roseland similarly need some form of external protection as granted to the Hayle. There is, of course, the Meneage, hurling his insults at the sea god; however, whilst this functions as an act of resistance, it does not appear nearly as productive as the reciprocated passion offered by Hayle’s nymph. Indeed, when Roseland attempts to copy the Meneage, his own resistance fails. Neptune’s spatial agency needs regulation, without which he is able to terrorise the coast, resulting in significant spatial-environmental erosion, a particularly alarming image given the contexts of Twyne’s theory of submerged land and the severe reality of the Bristol Channel floods. As Neptune enacts his unbalanced spatial agency along the southern coast of Cornwall, the vulnerability of the land to the sea god’s erosive attacks arises from their lack of protection.

4. *Producing Space as Preservation*

Loe and Roseland are not only missing their own protective nymphs: there has also been no reference (unlike along the Tamar) to human inhabitants or their practices. In assaulting the coastline, Neptune follows his own unrestrained desire, rather than acting in response to the movements of people. This arguably leaves a gap, inviting the reader to step up and act as steward to the coastline. Although *Poly-Olbion* is a poem that has more often been read as displaying concern about the impact of excessive human activity, particularly through deforestation (see esp. Borlik 2011 and McRae 2011), Drayton is not completely antagonistic about all forms of human intervention. His description of Holland in Lincolnshire, for example, stresses the abundance that undrained fenland can offer (Drayton 1933, *The five and twenieth Song*, ll. 31-191), a description that is particularly poignant considering large-scale drainage works would commence nine years after the publication of *Poly-Olbion*’s second part.¹² Yet this description which seemingly celebrates the benefits of unmanaged fenland is immediately countered by a complaint from Kesteven about the ‘unwholesome ayre, and more unwholesome soyle’ of Holland (l. 196). Further, the fen-filled song starts with a dispassionate description of the county’s drainage channels which ‘draine, / Hemp-bearing *Hollands Fen*’, juxtaposed with the image of the Muse’s laborious progress as she attempts to wade ‘Through Quicksands, Beach, and Ouze’ (ll. 2-3 and 13). Excessive human activity (such as the devastation of England’s woodlands) repeatedly prompts a reflection on and critique of ‘mans gurmandize’ (l. 140); however, Drayton simultaneously recognises, alongside the value of a hands-off approach to environmental management, the need for some human intervention. In stressing its vulnerability, the unprotected coastline of southern Cornwall can be read as a poetic plea for his reader to intervene, especially considering that human intervention to protect fragile

¹² For a history of fenland drainage, see Ash 2017.

stretches of coastline from the erosive force of the sea was possible. The state papers domestic, for example, reference work to restore and protect Dover Harbour in Kent, which (by the reign of Elizabeth I) lay in a state of decay on account of flooding and silt build up. These works, starting in 1579, included 'the immediate erection of three "groynes" to protect the haven' (Lemon 1856, 630), a groyne being (in Norden's words) 'a defence against the force of water, as an Elbow ejected out beyond the rest to preserve the land' (Norden 1596, 26). The state papers show that the plans for Dover Harbour developed over the years, but the references to protective groynes continue. There is also a reference in 1584 to the need to maintain the groynes themselves, one of which was 'fretting away very fast' (Lemon 1865, 215). Coastal preservation, however, might not always look like a groyne in the sand: Drayton also advocates, I suggest, for a less pragmatic and more nostalgic response to environmental degradation, namely preservation through memory.

St Michael's Mount starts his song by encouraging the Muse to linger a little longer on the coastline of Cornwall, but he soon breaks down into tears when recalling what seems to be the semi-mythical land of Lyonesse: the 'fortie miles now Sea, [that] sometimes firme fore-land was' (Drayton 1933, *The first Song*, l. 98).¹³ Through his tears, the Mount recounts the story of Lyonesse's inundation:

Relating then how long this soile had laine forlorne,
As that her *Genius* now had almost her forsworne,
And of their ancient love did utterly repent,
Sith to destroy her selfe that fatall toole she lent
By which th'insatiate slave her intrailles out doth draw,
That thrust his gripple hand into her golden mawe;
And for his part doth wish, that it were in his power
To let the Ocean in, her wholly to devoure. (ll. 101-108)

The Mount's tale is fairly oblique in providing an exact cause for the loss of Lyonesse. The reference to the 'fatall toole' drawing out the land's entrails is likely an allusion to a history of excessive mining in the region, an explanation that seems to be supported by Camden's reference to 'veins of Tinn' found on the Isles of Scilly (1695, 1112). There is, then, the familiar concern about human greed. Equally, there is a problem of *disuse*: the land has now 'long ... laine forlorne' and it is this abandonment that seems to have rendered her undesirable to 'her *Genius*' (likely Albion), who therefore breaks off their 'ancient love'.¹⁴ Excessive human consumption, as is expected in ecocritical readings of *Poly-Olbion*, is implicated in this passage, but it appears that human abandonment has also played its part in Lyonesse's demise. Further, the slightly thorny nature of the passage, in relating the abandonment before the destruction, offers a reading of the tale in which the tragedy is set into motion by her heartbreak, with the land's desperate actions figured as a response to human neglect. A failure to remember is more cogently implicated as a reason for Camel's meandering course. Her 'careless[ness]' is initially prompted by grief, 'ever since her British *Arthurs* blood, / By *Mordreds* murtherous hand was mingled with her flood' (Drayton 1933, *The first Song*, ll. 193 and 183-184). As the song continues however, her winding course is accompanied by a complaint against 'this penurious

¹³ Patrick D. Nunn and Rita Compatangelo-Soussignan describe Lyonesse as 'a now-submerged area of land either off the west coasts of Cornwall (southwest Britain) or encapsulating the Scilly Isles, an island group some 40 kilometres offshore' (2024, 1-2).

¹⁴ It is not entirely clear who the figure of the Genius represents in this passage. A Genius is invoked at the beginning of the poem, with likely reference to the 'guardian spirit' of Albion (see OED, 'Genius' n. & adj., I.1.a.). This seems the best explanation in this passage.

age': 'time upon my waste committed hath such theft, / That it of *Arthur* here scarce memorie hath left' (ll. 199 and 202-203). Kept as she is in a state of continued grief for the now nearly forgotten Arthur, her deteriorated course is thus intrinsically tied up with the failure of modern Britons to uphold his memory. Elsewhere in the poem, the degradation of St Albans's soil into 'hotte and hungry sand' is supposedly caused by the dissolution of the monasteries (*The sixteenth Song*, l. 35). In particular, the failure to preserve the shrines from St Albans Abbey is what distresses the land, and consequently deteriorates the quality of the soil:

So that the earth to feele the ruinous heaps of stones,
That with the burth'nous weight now presse their sacred boanes,
Forbids this wicked brood, should by her fruits be fed. (ll. 79-81)

Even Stonehenge – whose past, Selden's notes suggest, is generally accepted as unknowable – is berated for the crime of 'not know[ing] who first did place thee there', that is of forgetting her past (*The third Song*, l. 54 and Selden's note in Drayton 1933, 60-61). This complaint against Stonehenge's failed memory becomes particularly striking when considered in the context of the degradation that is at stake.

Environmental deterioration is thus not only triggered by an extractive human mindset and resultant excessive and destructive activity; rather, there is a thread running through *Poly-Olbion* that presents degradation as a response to abandoned human practices. As such, the poem implores its reader to preserve through memory. This call perhaps seemed ever more urgent following the Reformation which saw not only (as at St Albans) the destruction of shrines during the dissolution of the monasteries, but also the gradual decline of Rogation ceremonies (or beating the bounds), a community practice that encouraged an embodied memory of the parish boundaries (see Woodcock 2020). This means of preservation is by no means as pragmatic as calling for a series of groynes along the southern coast of Cornwall; it could, however, foster a greater sense of stewardship. Philip Schwyzer, in his essay on *Poly-Olbion* and deep time, argues that Drayton is less concerned with the accuracy of the ancient and unknowable history being told than he is worried that 'modern men and women ... should turn their eyes away in scorn' (2020, 228). The act of continuing to gaze back through history even as it cannot be known with certainty encourages, Schwyzer suggests, 'an ethos of sustainability and stewardship', calling upon the readers 'to raise their eyes from the dirt and take the long view, and so begin to live in a way that does honour to the sublime expanses of British space and British time' (228-229). That is to say, there is an ethics to remembering the land and its history, and I suggest that the spatial agency of the land presents that ethics as even more urgent. By continuing to remember the land and its history, Drayton suggests that its inhabitants might ensure its heart is not broken, that we might continue to co-create with the non-human, producing space together as a means of preservation.

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Women and Faith



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Space of Silence, Space of Sound The Acoustic Organisation of Spaces and Places in the Nuremberg *Notel* of the Sacristan

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Abstract

The article explores a late medieval manuscript from a Dominican nuns' convent in the city of Nuremberg, Holy Roman Empire, in which the sacristan describes her duties in ensuring the successful performance of the liturgy. By focusing on sound, the connections between liturgical practice and the spaces in which it took place are revealed. These diverse spaces were shaped by sound, which had not only sacred but also social implications.

Keywords: Dominican Nuns, Liturgy, Nuremberg, Sound, Urban Space

1. *Introduction*

Research into pre-modern spaces and places has long emphasized that buildings, as spatial and spacious objects, always have a special significance because they not only serve a functional purpose but also have symbolic power (Bandmann 2005). This is reflected in the architecture and design of palaces, town halls, or universities, but also of churches, monasteries and convents, which, as an ensemble but also in their individual parts of chapels, cloisters, living and working spaces, represented the spiritual and social authority of their communities.¹ Exploring these buildings in their design, their decoration, or in their relationship to other buildings leads to a deeper understanding of the invisible aspects of monastic life and its cultural relevance for society (De Paermentier 2008; Mersch 2012). In order

¹ The present article considers Christian monasteries in Europe, but I would like to emphasize that this also applies to the symbolic power of buildings of other cultures and religions.

to conceptualize this socio-spatial influence of monastic communities, the term ‘monastic landscape’ can be used to highlight monasteries and convents as cultural powerhouses that, individually or as a network, had a far-reaching impact on their surroundings by owning buildings, cultivating land, employing workers, but mostly by being politically and artistically active (Collins 2019; Röckelein 2020).

How this authority was actually performed depended on the circumstances of the individual community, their social and material resources, and the influences they experienced themselves from their families, the political elite, and not least the church or the monastic order to which they belonged. This is especially true for communities of religious women, as they usually had to accept male supervisors and to implement the ideal of enclosure to a higher degree than male communities. But even the convents that followed the most rigid rules of active and passive enclosure, which kept the women behind monastic walls for their entire life, remained in contact with society. They were both recipients of and contributors to the religious, political, economic, cultural, and social life of the region, maintaining these connections through diverse forms of communication. This included written media such as books or letters, visual media like small pictures, textiles or other objects, and verbal exchange permitted through grilles in parlors.

Verbal exchange or the aspect of the human voice highlights sound as an important medium to influence, fill, and shape a space (Clauss, Mierke, and Krüger 2020; Jaspert and Müller 2023). Sound, defined as the intentionally produced, information-carrying variant of noise, is an integral part of both the human experience of spaces and places as well as monastic research. However, sound is a fleeting medium, and we often find it difficult to comprehend the sound-space-experience of bygone generations. We usually have to rely on written reports or, if the buildings are still standing, on our own experiments.²

Space, on the other hand, is also a non-permanent entity, as it can be defined from at least four perspectives: It can be seen as ‘a container, ... as a system of relations and connections, ... as a product of human perception, ... and as a social [construct]’ (Braun and Knitter 2021, 38-40; similar in Kümin 2009, 8-10). Thus, space is not only defined by walls, buildings, or landscapes that might contain rooms, objects, and people, but also the distance between two or more things, as well as something perceived through a specific cultural lens and, not least, as a virtual entity, constructed only in human communication about it (compare Crang 2009, 261-265). Although this concept somewhat overlaps with the more complex definition of place, which is usually understood as a specific location imbued with a particular intellectual and emotional significance, the four aspects or dimensions of space are particularly useful to highlight the different elements that are usually involved when space is studied scientifically.

How the four aspects are linked and intertwined can be explored in a late medieval manuscript from the Dominican nuns’ convent of St Katharina in Nuremberg, one of the largest imperial cities of the Holy Roman Empire north of the Alps. On the first and second level, the manuscript’s text gives us insights into two physical spaces or two interlocking containers and systems of physical relations: first and foremost, the convent building and its inner spatial structure, namely the rooms of the church, the nuns’ choir, the dormitory and others. But with the focus on sound, some information about the physical structure of the city of Nuremberg, in which St Katharina was nested, comes into the spotlight too. On the third level, the spaces of the convent and the city were experienced by the nuns and the Nuremberg population

² The DFG Network “Lautsphären des Mittelalters” is focused on this aspect and will publish their findings in another edited volume: Clauss, Jaser and Mierke forthcoming. Unfortunately, it was not yet available when this article was completed.

in a sensual way; for them, both spaces were not only shaped and defined by the visible and tangible structures, but also by sound and its symbolic implications. The fourth dimension is finally realized in the manuscript itself, as it is a physical container which holds written descriptions of the space to which it belonged and the symbolic actions performed therein. The present article will explore these connections between the manuscript, the sound, and the space and, through the lens of sound history, will try to reveal some aspects of the complexity of late medieval life that are not often recorded.

2. *The Manuscript*

The so-called *Notel der Kuesterin* (Sacristan's notebook)³ is a small duodecimo codex (15×10 cm) in plain red leather binding which comprises 285 paper folii, bound into 32 quires.⁴ Its initial compilation can be dated to the year of 1436, which appears in a scribal note.⁵ The scribe was an unidentified Dominican sister in Nuremberg, who presumably wrote down what another sister dictated to her. Their convent, St Katharina, was founded in 1295 by the patrician Konrad von Neumarkt and his wife Adelheid Pfinzing, complementing the other mendicant monasteries of Franciscans, Poor Clares, and Dominicans in the urban area. St Katharina became an influential community and left behind one of the largest monastic manuscript collections of fifteenth-century Northern Europe (Willing 2004 and 2012).

The convent also played a major role in the religious reform movement of Observantism that emerged in the Latin church from the fourteenth century. As a response to changing demands on religious communities and a perceived decline of monastic discipline, most of monastic orders strove to restore their lifestyle according to the idealized conditions of the orders' foundation. The reform entailed a new asceticism, a deeper engagement with renewed spirituality and liturgy, and reinforced enclosure, especially for the female communities (Elm 2016; Jones 2017; Neidhardt 2025). In Nuremberg, the council and patricians were also very interested in the reform and supported the efforts to implement Observant lifestyle in the city's monasteries and convents. The nuns of St Katharina initially rejected any changes, but after a period of observation and discussion, the community finally adopted the Observant reform in 1428. The supervisory duty (*cura monialium*) of the Dominican friars of Nuremberg, who had joined the reform already in 1396, was renewed, and a group of sisters from the Dominican nuns' convent in Schoenensteinbach were officially invited to St Katharina as teachers of the reformed lifestyle. Schoensteinbach, situated in Alsace not far from Muehlhausen, had adopted the reform in 1397 and was the first Observant convent in the order's *provincia teutonia* (Winnlen 1993, 33-79). With their help, the Nuremberg sisters implemented the new ideals so successfully that they became a model convent and were repeatedly called by the order's authorities to assist in the reform of other convents. Therefore, the convent of St Katharina followed Schoensteinbach's example and sent some sisters temporarily or permanently to take over offices and guide other

³ Stadtbibliothek Nuremberg, Cent VII 16.

⁴ I would like to thank Antonia Bertulies, Bianca Goch, Sabrina Marquart and Sascha Winkler, who joined me in the task of editing the manuscript (Vosding *et al.* forthcoming).

⁵ 'Liebe swester küsterin, pittent got fur mich, swester küsterin, denn ich dies ding mit fleiß zu sammen gesucht han. Pittent auch fur die swester, die in geschriben hat. Als man zalt von Kristus unsers lieben Herren gepurt tausent ior und iijj c jor und in dem xxxvj jor' (*Notel*, 8v) (Dear sister *sacrista*, pray to God for me, sister *sacrista*, who has dilligently brought together all these things. And pray for the sister who has written the book. In the year counted from our dear lord Christ's birth as 1000 and 400 and 36). Already noted by Schneider 1965, 284. Unless stated otherwise, all translations are mine.

convents in the Observant way of life (Fries 1924; Kist 1963; Steinke 2006). The first such mission was sent in 1436 to the Dominican nuns' convent in Tulln, close to Vienna. It consisted of ten sisters, among them sister Katharina von Muelheim, who herself came to Nuremberg from Schoenensteinbach in 1428 and had been appointed the first sacristan after the reform in St Katharina. After eight years on duty, she was sent on again, and it is very plausible to identify her as the dictator of the *Notel* who sought to ensure that the routines she had established would continue after her departure (Vosding *et al.* forthcoming).

The manuscript, written in Nuremberg German (Pfanner 1954), is a collection of practical notes and explanations concerning the tasks the sacristan of St Katharina had to perform throughout the liturgical year. Thus, the *Notel* can be categorized as 'internal' or 'pragmatic' writing, that is, a text not intended for the liturgy itself, the convent's library, or the archival collection of legal documents, but instead for regular consultation in the course of everyday duties (Keller, Grubmüller, and Staubach 1992). Like many other handbooks for the liturgy, often called *libri ordinarii*, it was probably kept in or close to the place where it was usually consulted, thus the choir or the sacristan's workplace, particularly the sacristy (Schlotheuber and McQuillen 2020, 977-979). This function as a handbook is also reflected in the modest appearance of the paper, the writing, and the obvious anticipation of later additions. The main hand frequently leaves space for comments, and indeed later hands enter further notes, sometimes even more carelessly written. It is only in the description of the feast of Saint Catherine of Alexandria (25 November), the convent's patron, that a colorful initial of the saint adds some elaborated decor (*Notel*, 184r).

As in most reformed convents, the liturgy had been comprehensively revised according to Dominican Observant norms, alongside many other aspects of convent life. It was not only the feast days or the prayers that were revised, but all practical aspects of the liturgical performance under the renewed enclosure. The descriptions of what the sacristan and her assistants had to prepare and supervise are sometimes highly detailed in the *Notel*. They cover the feasts of the liturgical year, but also, for instance, instructions for washing the vestments or the payment for the Dominican friars from the so-called Predigerkloster in Nuremberg who celebrated the memorial services for the convent's donors. Similar to the *libri ordinarii*, the *Notel* provides a rare glimpse behind the scenes of a women's convent, allowing the reconstruction of some necessary tasks before and after the liturgy itself (van Tongeren and Caspers 2015). The *Notel* is not least a valuable source for the relationship between the Order's official liturgy and its local realization. It demonstrates how universal rules and habits, valid for all Dominican houses (Guerrini 1921; Humbertus de Romanis 1956), were adapted to the local conditions of each convent (Thomas 1965; Meyer 2015). Even communities striving to fully observe the ideals of the reform movement had to find compromises. For instance, architectural features such as the location of the sacristy, the chapels, or the dormitory could not be altered, and long-established rituals such as the veneration of regional saints were often retained, in favour of diocesan or local traditions.

The sacristan in her *Notel* explicitly acknowledges such accommodations, for example in the description of the liturgy on All Souls' day: 'Item kan die vigil an aller sel tag nit geleßen werden als vorgeschriben ist, so frog man die priorin oder sengerin, wen man si leßen schüll. Si ist nit von orden, aber man hot es hin von guter gewonheit her proht, und ist gut' (182r).⁶ Even more explicitly, another passage reads: 'Item dise vorgeschriben weis mit den kertzen und

⁶ (Also, if the vigil cannot be read on All Souls' day as it should be, one should ask the prioress or the *cantrix* when to read it instead. It is not a rule of the Order, but it was brought to us from good custom, and it is well). The flexibility of this vigil was probably a custom the nuns in St Katharina adopted themselves maybe from Schoenensteinbach or from other religious communities in Nuremberg.

grebern hot man von alter her gehalten und sol es auch fürpas halten, es wer denn, das es ein meisterschaft anders ordent' (178r).⁷ These examples show that some practices at St Katharina were tolerated by Dominican authorities, although they were not based on official norms. The *Notel* is thus a reminder that official monastic rules and normative texts do not necessarily represent the actual practice in the convents which must be virtually reconstructed by combining the rule with other sources from every individual monastic community.⁸

Unfortunately, St Katharina's church and monastic buildings are also subject to virtual exploration only because they were destroyed in 1945. In his article 'Alltag einer Küsterin' (2003), Gerhard Weilandt used photographs from the 1920s and, mainly, the *Notel* to reconstruct the arrangement of the altars in the church and on the nuns' choir of St Katharina in relation to surviving works of art.⁹ Weilandt's important work reveals how closely the liturgy was bound to its spatial 'stage' with its sacred places and objects. Reading the *Notel* with a focus on acoustics and sound, this aspect becomes even more evident.

3. *Voice, Board, Bell, and Time*

Singing, praying, reading aloud, and music were recurring forms of sound in convents, although they were always in tension with the general rule of silence, a common feature of most monastic traditions. Nevertheless, this applies to casual conversations, gossiping, or even whispered comments during rituals and mealtime, but not to sounds related to liturgy or necessary conversation, for instance in the chapter house during the daily meeting. The church and monastic buildings are therefore better understood not as a space of permanent silence, but as a space of controlled sound where distinctions were made between desired, tolerated, and forbidden sounds (Breitenstein 2023). These differences were also defined by the architectural features which shaped the internal acoustic environment or 'soundscape' (Schafer 1994; Breitsameter 2010). For example, the aforementioned grill in the parlor or the chapter house were explicitly built for conversations, while the pulpit in the refectory manifests the tradition of quietly listening to a reading during the conventual meals. In rooms like the dormitory, the scriptorium, or the cloister, conversation and sound were forbidden or only tolerated when absolutely necessary, except during liturgical rituals. This applies especially to the nuns' choir, one of the most important places for a monastic community. In St Katharina, as in many convents in northern Europe, it was situated on a gallery in the back of the church, where the sisters had their choir stalls and their main altar which was placed close to the parapet and in line with the high altar in the apse below. The choir was part of the nuns' enclosure and the place where they celebrated and contributed to mass with their singing – an invisible yet audible congregation (Pérez Vidal 2022).

The practicality of this acoustic control is a recurring element in the *Notel*, with singing and liturgical readings as the most frequently mentioned forms of sound. Both are clearly linked to the Ordinary, Proper, and Common that stipulate the constant and the variable elements of liturgy. The *Notel* is designed to complement these normative books and requires a thorough knowledge of reformed Dominican liturgy in a female community. The chants

⁷ (Also the aforementioned manner with the candlesticks and the donors has been custom for a long time and we shall keep it further, unless the masters of our Order give a different order).

⁸ Compare the volume Linde 2018, especially 1-18.

⁹ For other photographs see Fries 1924, 145-169. More pictures, including from drawings in manuscripts, can be found under <[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:St._Katharina_\(Nürnberg\)](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:St._Katharina_(Nürnberg))>, accessed 1 December 2025.

for example are cited only by their incipits as cues for ritual action: ‘Mon hot auch ein gute gewöheit hinnen an dem heiligen krist obent czu vesper, so mon den MAGNIFICAT an fehet, daz denn die priorin oder die supriorin reüchet for dem altar’ (18v).¹⁰ Here, the beginning of the *magnificat* marks the moment for censuring the altar which means that the prioress or subprioress had to collect the censer, maybe even light it, and go to the altar in sufficient time. In another description, about the Feast of Corpus Christi, the chant *O sacrum* is coordinated with multiple simultaneous actions:

... frü als pald noch der tertz so feht mon O SACRUM an, und die weil sol mon meß leüten. Unter dem so bereiten sich die fur den alter, die die kertzen und den fannen tragen, und wen O SACRUM aus ist, so foht der priester in der kirchen an, die kertzen czu gesegen mit gesang. Und wen es aus ist, so anwort der kofent “Amen”. (25v-26r)¹¹

The sacristan thus not only had to instruct the community of sisters on the choir and the priest in the church on what to do and when, but also constantly keep an ear on the bells and the choir in order to coordinate ritual actions. The *Notel* even prescribes measures in case the quality of the singing should decline.¹²

Liturgical readings are also indicated for the knowing reader only. The respective instructions actually reveal important information not just about liturgical rituals in different rooms, but also about the self-sufficient spiritual guidance the nuns provided to each other within their enclosure. For example, in the description of the *cantrix* reading aloud from the Bible to the community of nuns: ‘... und wen der covent aller in dem capitel ist, ietliche an ir orden stat, so stet ein sengerin zu dem pulpet und lese das ewangelii. Die weil sol der covent sten und als pald das geendet ist, so sitzet die priorin und der covent nider’ (83v-84r).¹³ Although this was a reading from the Bible – the most familiar text to all monastic individuals – rather than a sermon, the tradition nonetheless demonstrates that religious women were capable of reading and understanding central Latin texts without the guidance of university-educated men, thereby challenging an overly simplistic view of skills and knowledge in late medieval convents.¹⁴ On the other hand, the *Notel* clearly reveals the hierarchy between ordained men and women. The priests, i.e. the Dominican friars, were officially entrusted with the sacraments and were permitted to perform the Eucharistic celebration in St Katharina. They were also responsible for preaching to the nuns and parishioners, thus linking an interpretation of a biblical passage or theological topic with practical advice. As the *Notel* does not include any description of

¹⁰ (We also have the good custom here for the vespers at Christmas eve that the prioress, when we start singing the MAGNIFICAT, or the subprioress swing the censer in front of the altar).

¹¹ (... shortly after the terce, we start singing O SACRUM, and meanwhile the bells are to be rung for mass. At the same time, the sisters who carry candles and the banner gather in front of the altar, and when we stop singing O SACRUM, the priest in the church begins to bless the candles with his singing. And when he stops, the convent answers with “Amen”).

¹² Unfortunately the text of this section is missing, leaving only the heading.

¹³ (... and when the whole convent is in the chapter house, every sister at her designated spot, the *cantrix* stands at the pulpit and reads from the gospel. During this, the convent shall stand and when the reading has ended, the prioress and the convent sit down).

¹⁴ The question of language skills in convents is a recurring topic in research. The general impression is that convents in the south of the Holy Roman Empire tended to translate Latin texts into the vernacular, while in the north the nuns’ Latin skills were strengthened. Both approaches enabled religious women to understand their liturgical and monastic texts – just as the Observant reformers requested (Ehrenscheidtner 1997 and 2004; Schlottheuber 2004 and 2006). The *Notel* does not contradict this impression, but suggests a more complex situation. It is plausible to assume that convents found their own individual solutions for dealing with language requirements.

these monologues or other liturgical elements that the nuns could only observe or listen to, it seems to strictly separate the domains. But this should be seen as a result of the *Notel's* practical focus on the sisters' part in the collaboration with the priest and the friars, which had to be complemented (while reading) with the other known elements of liturgy.

In addition to singing and reading, musical instruments are mentioned as well. First, there are small gongs or percussion boards that were mostly used to wake the nuns, to summon them, or to indicate different actions during a more complex liturgical ritual. For example, the end of the liturgy of Maundy Thursday is described as follows: '... do noch so gibt die priorin das zeichen, so tafelt die küsterin dreü kurtze zeichen mit der großen tafeln peÿ der kor tür für AVE MARIA. Also ist es aus. Die zirklerin tafelt mit dem tefelein das zeichen aus dem kor' (96v).¹⁵ This passage suggests that at least two percussion instruments were used by the sacristan and the *circaria*, a sister who monitors the discipline as she 'circulates' through the convent, to conduct the nuns through the liturgy and out of the choir. One of these boards was apparently quite large and was kept permanently in the chapter house, maybe hanging from a wall.

Another description, this time of the detailed performance prescribed for Good Friday morning, confirms that playing the boards was not only informative but also space-transforming:

An dem heiligen karfreytag zu meten so ist die ander vinster meten und man weket, wen der weker vel und get ümb daz tormitori und clopfet an die zellen ... Und wen alle swester gewecket sint, so get die küsterin zu dem andern mol ümb das tormiter mit dem kleinen tefelein und schleht mit dem segelein, das dor an hanget, pis si wider zu dem kor kümet. Das ist das erst und dor noch, wen die swester in dem kor sint und die kusterin vor dem alter die kertzen an gezünt hot, so nÿmpt si die großen tafeln und get in die hindern abseiten und gibt der außern küsterin und dem gesind ein zeichen und get denn ümb das tormitori mit der großen tafeln pis wider zu dem kor. (97r-98r)¹⁶

It is obvious that the sacristan's two rounds around the dormitory, first striking the small and then the large board, were not meant to wake the nuns twice. Rather, the second round served to ritually transform and include the dormitory to the liturgical ceremony of remembering the crucifixion, death, and burial of Christ. In addition, this passage also informs us that the sacristan signaled to the outer or second sacristan (usually her assistant and often occupied with the liturgy for the lay sisters and the monastic servants), who apparently had to be downstairs in the church with the lay community, by striking the board from the nuns' gallery, so that both communities could perform their rituals at the same time.

The second group of instruments are bells. Except during the *triduum sacrum* (the three days between Maundy Thursday night and Easter Sunday morning), small altar bells were used during the liturgy, rung by the priests and the nuns at the elevation of the host and on other occasions. Their function parallels practices still known in Catholic liturgy today. For the feast of Corpus Christi the *Notel* reads:

¹⁵ (... afterwards, the prioress gives the sign, and the sacristan strikes the large board next to the choir's door three times quickly to give the sign for the AVE MARIA. And with that, it is over. The *circaria* strikes the sign on the small board to leave the choir).

¹⁶ (On holy Good Friday we have the second *tenebrae* as mass and one wakes the sisters when the hour strikes and goes around the dormitory and knocks at the cells' doors ... And when all sisters are awake, the sacristan goes around the dormitory a second time striking the small board with the small mallet hanging on it, until she gets back to the choir. This is the first, and after that, when the sisters are in the choir and the sacristan has lit the candles in front of the altar, she takes the large board and goes to the back corner and gives the outer sacristan and the servants a sign, and then she goes around the dormitory again with the large board until she gets back to the choir).

[and when the father confessor] ... unsern Herren nimet in der monstrancien und die kusterin daz glöcklein in der kirchen hört, so heiß si das ander leüten und do mit nit auf hören pis der peihtvater wider aus kümet. Und die weil, so schik si das vier von den novicien oder vier ander iung swester vor den kertzen gen und glöcklein leüten und noch in zwü mit kertzen und dor noch der peihtvater mit unserm Herren und dor noch der covent, unter dem schüllen leüten alle die do gelöcken haben. (142r-142v)¹⁷

Here, small bells are used not only to coordinate the activities in the church and on the nuns' choir, but also to frame the rare event of one Dominican friar entering the enclosure, bringing the new host in the monstrance to the nuns' altar. He was probably coming via a staircase from the main church up to the gallery and through a usually locked door, welcomed by the nuns and included in their procession to the altar. The bell-ringing provided the acoustic signal of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

Other small bells are not mentioned in the *Notel* itself, but in the so called *Schwesternbuch* (Sisterbook) from the Dominican nuns' convent in St Gallen. Although they lived about 300 kilometres away, their manuscript contains invaluable information about the convent in Nuremberg. The St Gallen sisters never joined the reform movement officially but were trying to adapt as many elements of that lifestyle as possible. For that, they had asked their sisters in Nuremberg to describe the reformed life and the convent of St Katharina's sent them detailed letters which the St Gallen nuns copied into the *Schwesternbuch*. Thus, the St Gallen manuscript contains more descriptive information about the situation in Nuremberg and the tools the sisters in St Katharina were using. For example, this includes a *capitelgloggen* (chapter bell), which the Nuremberg *circaria* used to call the sisters to bed (Willing 2016, 610). Also mentioned is a cymbal, which was used to signal the start of meals in the refectory (616). Interestingly, the *Schwesternbuch* even describes how the sacristan could be alerted by her assistants in the sacristy using a rope (and presumably another bell) – a spatial detail that is not mentioned in the *Notel* but reveals that the sacristy apparently had two rooms: one for the enclosed part of the church and another for the space used by lay people, but both under the sacristan's responsibility.¹⁸

Finally, the bigger church bells, mentioned above, deserve particular emphasis as they created a completely different sound and were part of the wider soundscape of the city. A remarkable example would be during the *Heiltumsweisung* ('display of imperial relics'), a very specific event not just for Nuremberg but for the entire Empire.¹⁹ It was a feast day on which the imperial regalia were presented to the public from one of the sumptuous balconies on the market square. Although the nuns were unable to leave their monastic enclosure and therefore did not witness the actual event, they nevertheless took an active part in the festivities:

¹⁷ ([and when the father confessor] ... takes our Lord in the monstrance and the sacristan hears the small bell in the church, she signifies to ring the other small bell and not to stop until the father confessor comes out again. And then, she orders four novices or four other young sisters to walk in front of the candles and ring small bells and after them two more with candles and after them the father confessor with our Lord and after him the convent, and all who have bells shall ring them).

¹⁸ 'Wenn die ober kusterin ir erstes zaichen het geton, so wartet die vnder kusterin und tut dz ander zaichen vnd versorget all ampulen im cor vnd vff dem tormitor. Vnd ob man der kustrinen in den sagrer lut, dz sait ir och die, die wuchen halt. Durch die kilchen hinab ist ain stricklin by ainer mur, wenn man der kusterin bedarf in dem sagrer vswendig' (Willing 2016, 634). (When the senior sacristan has given her first sign, the sub-sacristan waits and gives the other sign and takes care of all ampoules [maybe for holy water] at the choir and in the dormitory. And if the bell is rung for the sacristans [sic] in the sacristy, will be decided by the sister who has responsibility for the week. They have a rope hanging through a wall into the church, for when the sacristan is needed in the outer sacristy).

¹⁹ The date of the *festum reliquarium* or *festum lancee et clavorum* was celebrated on the second Friday after Easter (Machilek 2002).

Und an dem obent so bereit man den alter hinnen als ein schlechten tuplex und auch die kirchen und setzet die tafeln mit dem heiltum, do daz sper innen ist, und prennet zu allen zeiten ein kertzen dor vor ... [On the same day] ... wen man das heiltum gezeiget, so leütet man gar herlich in der gantzen stat. So leüten wir auch hinnen ein langes zeichen. Dor vor schol man nit mit der rechten geloken leüten und dor nach, wen man daz zeichen zu der meß gibt, so leüt man meß nach gewonheit. (121r-122v)²⁰

This proves not only that St Katharina's treasury included a piece of the Holy Lance and that the nuns decorated both the nuns' choir and the church for the feast day, but also that their right bell (it remains unclear whether this refers to the side or the quality in the sense of 'correct') was to remain silent on the day itself. This is likely to be the bell that usually announced church services and which, on this special day, ran the risk of disturbing the service in the market square. Later, the ringing of all bells in the city was to be joined in loudly, while the evening mass after the festival was to be rung in as normal.

The sacristan was responsible for ensuring this bell-ringing, which meant she had to listen carefully to the city's bells and coordinate accordingly. On a day such as the *Heiltumsweisung*, when all the bells in the city rang simultaneously, this must have been relatively easy. On other days, however, this task was more challenging. A striking example can be found in the regulations for Lent:

Item die küsterin sol großen fleiß haben in der vasten, daz sÿ der stat gloken war neme und das or glas zu dem garaus ümb ker und also fürpas czu allen stunden piß auf mitten tag. So kon si selten oder nimer yrrren, wen denn sich nit alwegen noch unser or czu rihten ist, wan es unterweilen nit reht schleht. ... Item wenn es den tag XIIJ schlecht, so riht die or hinn, das es frue ste ein halbe or über VJ und zu nacht zum garaus auch also. Dis sol die küsterin die vasten halden und besonders frü, das der mitag gleich werd hÿnn und in der stat. ... Und ker das or gelas ümb so wirt die küsterin nit irr. (37r-37v)²¹

In other words, avoiding the risk of getting confused depended directly on the sounds coming from the city, the sacristan's ability to hear, and her coordination between two different methods of measuring time in Nuremberg: first, there was the *Große Uhr* (great clock) which measured hours according to daylight and darkness rather than uniform time, and created special challenges (Gaab 2006). In summer, a day could have sixteen hours and the night only eight, while in winter, conversely, the day had only eight hours and the night sixteen. These hours were chimed by the towers of St Sebald's church, St Lorenz's church, and from two city towers, the Weiße Turm and the Laufer Turm. Second, St Katharina had their own clock, a *Kleine Uhr* (small clock) which had been installed only in 1436 and measured time in two sets

²⁰ (And in the evening, we prepare the inner altar for a *minor duplex* feast as well as the church, and place the cabinets with the relic, the one that includes the spear, and constantly have a burning candle in front of it ... [On the same day,] when they show the relics, they ring the bells marvelously across the whole city. And so we ring our bell for a long time too. Before this, we shall not ring the right bell and after it, when they call for mass, we ring the bell for mass as usual).

²¹ (Also the sacristan shall be very diligent during lent to pay attention to the city bells and to turn the hour glass for the end of the day and all hours until noon. That way she can rarely or never go wrong, when she is not only relying on our clock, as this sometimes does not work properly. ... Also, when the 13th hour of the day strikes, adjust the clock in a way that it shows half past 5 in the morning and similar for the last hour of the day. The sacristan shall keep it like this during lent and especially in the morning, so that noon is at the same time in our convent and in the city. ... And turn the hour glass over; thus, the sacristan will not go wrong). *Garaus* was the term used for the last light hour of the day. *Ponfasten* were the fasting periods for all Christians, while *Regelfasten* were additional fasting times for monastic communities.

of twelve equal hours. Unfortunately, its mechanism was not entirely reliable and gave good reason for the sacristan to advise her successor to double-check the time against the city bells as well as the convent's hourglass.

Auditory observation of the city was thus a recurrent duty for the sacristan, important for timing the convent's liturgy in relation to that of other churches, especially the Dominican friars, who provided the sisters' pastoral care. The *Notel* contains multiple instructions for auditory coordination with the Predigerkloster, reflecting the close collaboration between nuns and friars, as for example: 'Wen unser veter das ander zur kirwey leüten, so leüt wir daz erst, wan si predigen' (119v).²² This short but important sentence is a reminder that, on one hand, all churches were sacred spaces whose symbolic character was renewed in the anniversary of their dedication and, on the other hand, neighboring convents of the same order usually were well aware of their celebrations. In Nuremberg, the sisters left the acoustic stage to the brothers on the day of their church's consecration, and rang their own bell later, as if in response to the joyful message of the brothers' bells. In this acoustic performance, the two Dominican monasteries presented themselves as distinct spaces that nevertheless had a close spiritual relationship.

The *Notel* also records St Katharina's role as a station church for public processions, as for example on the day when the community of the Heilig-Geist Hospital carried their Eucharist around the city. For them, the Dominican nuns on their choir acted as invisible hosts. The sacristan was to prepare elaborate decorations in the church, then listen for the approaching procession (Reichert 2020), and at the appropriate moment, open the tabernacle and coordinate the bell-ringing:

An dem suntag in der octaf corpore Christi so legt man in der kirchen die tuxel altertücher auf und tut die tafeln auf und zündet kertzen auf de [sic] die elter an und besunder den angst alter, der der mittelst in der kirchen ist, do man unsern Herren auf setzet. Den bereit man schon aus und tut roßen, die ab geplattet sind, dor auf und heiltum. An disem suntag so kument die von dem spital her mit unserm Herren noch der ersten stund und wen si die küsterin höret, so tu si unsern Herren auf, aber die gatern bedarf si nit auf sperren. Man leüt auch mit der rehten geloken unserm Herren einhin und hin aus. Man let unser Herren also offen ston und wen es preim zeit ist, so leüt man preim und singet den vers. (150v-151r)²³

Thus, the convent again integrated itself into the religious rituals of other communities through sound. The strict enclosure, rigorously imposed after the reform, created both physical and symbolic boundaries, but those boundaries were bridged. Though the sisters were invisible to the public, their voices, music, and bells made the convent of St Katharina present not just as a building in the city, but also as a symbolic space where the sacred was experienced and as a community of religious women who were in charge of it all. Ultimately, the liturgical acoustics served to express different aspects of the sisters' identity: they were an individual community of religious women, members of the Dominican Order, and part of the city of Nuremberg (compare Lagergren 2025, 18).

²² (When our fathers ring their bell for the anniversary of the dedication of their church the second time, we ring our bell only after they started preaching).

²³ (On Sunday in the Octave after Corpus Christi we put the altar cloths for *duplex* feasts on the altars in the church, open the altarpieces, light candles on the altars, and especially the altar with the Resurrection, which is standing in the center of our church, because they will place the host there. We prepare it beautifully with pressed roses and relics. On that Sunday, they come from the hospital with the host after the first hour and as soon as the sacristan hears them, she shall open the tabernacle where our monstrance stands, but keep the grill closed. Also, we ring our right bell while their monstrance is carried in and out our church. The compartment with our monstrance is kept open and when it is Prime, we ring for Prime and sing the verse).

4. *Sound, Meaning, and Space*

As has become apparent, the different sound types given in the *Notel* can be assigned to specific functions, allowing a partial reconstruction of the convent's sound profile as well as some physical and social dimensions of its acoustics. Although oriented to internal practice, the text also allows insights into the convent's interaction with the outside world. The sounds mentioned are time-structuring and highly symbolic which made them intelligible only to initiated listeners. They can be distinguished into three social groups: first and foremost, the community of St Katharina themselves; second, the neighboring clerics, such as the Dominican friars or the priests of the Holy Spirit Hospital; and third, the people of Nuremberg, who experienced St Katharina as both a convent and a parish church (Reitemeier 2020). Along with these groups, three levels of space related acoustic communication emerge: internal, semi-external, and external. For the convent itself, there were quieter sounds such as the board tapping in the dormitory, audible only to the nuns. The singing and the ringing of small bells on the choir could be heard by those in the church under the nuns' choir, while the loud church bells in the ridge turret were audible to the entire population of Nuremberg and extended the nuns' voice beyond the convent walls into the urban area.

This highlights again that sounds rooted in liturgy carried not only spiritual but also spatial and thus socially hierarchizing and even political elements. The ability to produce and use sound to convey information, take a stand in society, and mark a sphere of influence was a regulated asset for institutions like monasteries and convents. As sound always was (and is) a medium of power and dominance over meaning, space, and social order, organizations and individuals with influence used it to negotiate their balance. So, when sound was produced within established rituals, it served to stabilize society, but when used against the rules and customs it also had the potential for social disruption (Wagner 2019; Baker 2021; Dillon 2012, 92-128).

From this perspective, monastic communities, with their chants, musical instruments, and bells, had powerful tools at hand to confirm or oppose socio-political structures or developments. Thus, accounts of pre-modern convents using their distinctive sound as means of disagreement with interference in their domain hardly come as a surprise, as for example nuns singing songs of protest against restrictions or the violation of their rights (Nolte 1932, 99; Koldau 2005, 758-799; Schmidt 2006; Jones 2022). Sound as a medium for negotiating social and legal issues can also be found in the history of St Katharina. The first attempt to implement the Observant reform in 1396, just after the successful reformation of the Predigerkloster, turned into a sonic power struggle. When the reformers tried to read out the text of a corresponding papal bull, officially announcing the reform to the convent in their church, the nuns refused to listen, responding with rude remarks and physical resistance. Only after distracting the nuns by throwing bags of flour were the reformers able to read out the text and thus force the nuns into the reform (Meyer 1909, 12-14). This dramatic episode reveals the performative power of reading a (legal) text aloud and being forced to listen, especially in a situation where the convent's members were not able to flee without leaving their own church to the opponents. The effectiveness of this reading is also confirmed by the fact that the convent of St Katharina later obtained the repeal of the imposed reform by officially appealing to the emperor and the order's master general (Kist 1963, 34).

Later, the Protestant Reformation forced the religious communities in Nuremberg to defend, reconsider, and adapt their sound profile. After the city embraced the new faith in 1525, the monasteries and convents, including St Katharina, were gradually dissolved. The female communities fought fiercely for their survival by engaging in theological discussions

or keeping their doors shut. Finally, the convents and the city council agreed on a relatively peaceful process; the communities were prohibited from accepting new members, but there was no major destruction. The preceding disputes, however, were always heated and often related to sound. No descriptions have survived from St Katharina, but the abbess of the Nuremberg convent of Poor Clares, Caritas Pirckheimer († 1532), described in detail how her community and the other monasteries and convents were repressed by the reformers and the city council. She vividly illustrates how the Nuremberg patricians demanded to open the windows for speaking in the parlor (i.e., removing the grill or screen) and how the mothers came to the convent and forcibly took their daughters back. These fights in the church are depicted with an aggressive soundscape: screaming, crying, ranting, wailing. The sermon of a Lutheran priest from the pulpit is characterized as shouting.²⁴ Thus, the monastic space of ordered sound is described as being invaded and disrupted by discordant sounds from the external. Caritas also recounts how the choral prayer and bell-ringing were forbidden to the Franciscans who supervised the Poor Clares, and how her own community continued to practice both praying and bell-ringing despite all prohibitions. People responded with swearing, shouting, and throwing stones, which once again illustrates the symbolic power of sound and its capacity to provoke aggressive reactions when unwanted. Regarding the Dominican sisters of St Katharina, Caritas only reports that they have not rung the bells for mass for six months.²⁵

In other regions, convents were also physically attacked by the Protestants who entered the space of enclosure or destroyed parts of the monastic infrastructure. It is telling that these attacks were often directed against the instruments and bells (Meyer 1909). They were either completely removed or made useless.²⁶ In some convents in north Germany, the former provost had been kept from entering the premises and the nuns had to accept mass according to the new faith in their church. This acoustic penetration of the semi-external space also entailed acoustic control of the internal space, as the nuns were forbidden to sing certain hymns. Their reaction was to recite these lyrics only within their cloister (Meyer 1909, 214-219; Brandis 2004, 385). Although concessions like this proved to be beneficial in the long term, as many of the convents in north Germany ultimately survived as Protestant Ladies' convents, such restrictions on acoustic expression once again reveal the symbolism of a convent's soundscape. Occupying acoustic space through song and music represented a claim to religious and social

²⁴ All three aspects can be found multiple times in Pfanner 1962, 70, 74, 79, 81-84 and 102.

²⁵ 'Do wir nun also in vill engsten und notten warn und teglich mer ungelucks warteten und wir uns also truckten und schmuckten, das wir kaym den gotlichen dinst dorfften halften noch dy glocken im chor leutten, den wen man etwas von uns hort,so hub sich fluchen und schelten, schryren in der kirchen herauf gegen uns, wurffen mit steynen in unßern chor und zerwurffen uns dy fenster in der kirchen und sungen schentliche lyeder auf dem kirchhof, troeten uns off, wen wir noch ein nacht metten leutten, wollt man uns große ding thun. Aber wir wogten es immer auf dy genad gottes, lyeßen keyn nacht on geleudt und ungehalten dy metten; sunst warn lengst all metten abgangen; dy swester zu s. Katterina leutten woll in einem halben jar keyn metten' (Pfanner 1962, 67). (And we were in great fear and distress and expected further misfortune every day, and we cowered and cringed, because we were not allowed to hold services or ring the bells in the choir, for if anyone heard us, they would start cursing and scolding us, shouting up at us from the lower church, and they threw stones at our choir and smashed the windows in the church and sang shameful songs in the churchyard. They often threatened us that if we rang the bells for the night mass again, they would do something terrible to us. But we always dared to do it, trusting in God's mercy, and did not let a night pass without ringing the bells and holding mass; otherwise, all masses have long since disappeared; the sisters in St Katharine's have not rung the bells for mass for six months). The Franciscans are mentioned in Pfanner 1962, 65.

²⁶ The Lutheran liturgy did not completely ban church bells, but their proper use was a recurring topic of discussion (Hahn 2015).

authority, which the reformers sought to curtail. Another and particularly striking example of such conflicts of authority is the Peasants' War of 1524-1525 (Roper 2025), where the rioters used drums, pipes, and bells to disrupt the established boundaries of acoustic authority of lords, cities, churches, and of course convents (Hacke 2016).

Against this backdrop, the practices described in the *Notel* gain even more significance. The nuns of St Katharina rang their bells themselves – it was not the friars or some other (male) office holder – and they determined their own liturgical schedule. For women living in enclosure, the symbolism is clear: they could make themselves heard independently and regulate their own liturgy, with only limited external influence from male clergy. Although late medieval society was patriarchal, these women possessed their own unmistakable voice. Of course, it was tied to their shared identity as brides of Christ and to the public expectations placed on their institution as part of the spiritual infrastructure of the city. This raises questions of female agency and the capacity to act autonomously within social constraints. It is certainly worth discussing to which elements of the nuns' sonic expressions the term of 'agency'²⁷ can actually be applied, especially if they complied with their socially expected role, and to what extent their agency would have increased or decreased if they had counteracted this role through arbitrary action.²⁸

In any case, the nuns had authority over sound-determined spaces and their symbolic meaning. While the internal and semi-external space was limited by the architectural structures of walls, roofs, and doors, the question remains as to how far the external space, claimed by the sisters through sound, extended. St Katharina was located near the river Pegnitz, close to the city wall, about 200 meters from the parish church St Lorenz, and some 650 meters from the Predigerkloster across the river and the island with the Heilig Geist-Hospital. Also nearby was the large paper mill, located on the banks of the Pegnitz just on the other side of the city wall. The convent was thus probably embedded in a dense soundscape, shaped by churches, towers, and urban activity. The everyday noise of the city was surely considerable, though not comparable to modern levels. In fact, Nuremberg's city center is now relatively traffic-free and quiet.²⁹ It would be tempting to create a digital reconstruction of the convent's medieval acoustic 'catchment area' (Bertoldi *et al.* 2022), but factors such as the height and materials of Nuremberg's premodern buildings, the noise of the workshops, or the size of St Katharina's bells remain unknown.³⁰ For now, we must assume that the convent's bells covered the whole urban area and even the land outside the city walls, though on days of great civic festivity, such as the *Heiltumsweisung*, their sound likely merged with the general peal (Schmidt 2003). Conversely, it also remains opaque how clearly the nuns could hear the Dominican friars' bells, though there are no extraordinary efforts of listening mentioned in the *Notel*. This suggests that the different external bells were indeed distinguishable even from within the sacristy and behind thick convent walls.

²⁷ 'Agency' is a powerful yet complex concept and requires definition. A rudimentary definition would be that a living entity has the (gradual) ability and opportunity to act as an 'agent' in its own cause, i.e. to adapt its life and environment according to its own ideas. From a historical perspective, however, the question arises as to what the rules and limits are. Is simply existing and self-preserving already agency? Is it possible to live a life entirely without agency? To what extent is compliance with society's norms and expectations agency? See Wiesner-Hanks 2023.

²⁸ I would like to thank Daniela Hacke and the Oxford-Berlin Workshop for Early Modern History for the discussion of these aspects.

²⁹ I would like to thank Louisa Bergold for testing today's soundscape at the location of St Katharina. Research also assumes that the Middle Ages were 'relatively quiet' (Jaspert and Müller 2023, 14).

³⁰ I would like to thank Aaron Larsen for introducing me to QGIS and the discussion of problems for a soundscape of the fifteenth century. An important source for research into trades, workshops, and used materials is Endres Tucher's *Baumeisterbuch* (von Weech and Lexer 1862). Here, I have to thank Niklas Groschinski for his thoughtful comments.

Finally, this leaves the manuscript itself as a spatial container with the overriding, virtual concept of the spaces shaped by liturgical sounds. The *Notel's* focus shifts through the rooms of the church and the enclosure, always to where work needed to be done. Since the sacristan and the scribe assumed that the users of their notes were familiar with the premises, a clear description of the rooms is lacking in some sections. Thus, despite the text's attention to detail, it can prove challenging for us to visualize the spatial layout or even the details of the physical boundaries around the enclosure. As the *Notel's* perspective on sounds and spaces is not one from the sacristy but rather from an omniscient point of view, we can assume a writing situation that did not take place in the sacristy alone – the sacristan and her scribe probably wandered through the convent, maybe only in their thoughts, and worked in a room where they could talk about the rituals and interactions without disturbing others. This becomes apparent, for example, in the descriptions of objects and tools in the sacristy and around the convent: 'Doch so ist das und mer dinges an einem püchlein geschriben, das hanget in dem sagrer. Man hot auch sider mangerley zu der kuster geben, das vor nit dor an waß, das nit not ist, alles zu schreyben' (*Notel*, 236v).³¹ The sacristy is not marked as 'here'; rather, it is mentioned as another actual room (*sagrer*) as well as the virtual collection of liturgical objects distributed throughout the convent (*kuster*).

In this instance, the concept of 'sacred scriptural spaces' helps to emphasize once again the connections between space and defining writings about it (Frese and Krüger 2019, 1-3). The concept, summarizing the comprehensive research on sanctity, states that a sacred site such as a church or a convent is not sacred in itself, but only through repeated rituals, purposefully placed objects and, in particular, through the shared knowledge of the communities who gather there to experience God through words and deeds. Thus, the liturgical message was not only one of faith but also of social and cultural capital, controlled by those who shaped its performance and its sensorial form (Droste 2001). This knowledge has been and continues to be conveyed through texts that therefore determine these sacred spaces – the church and the convent are spaces in which text-based reflections (prayer, worship, contemplation) mentally expand the physical environment to encompass the dimension of divine grace (Alsmann 2025, 25-75). The *Notel*, although not sacred as an object or text itself, was an important tool for this intellectual creation of a transcendent space of the divine with immediate, transformative effects on the physical space and human society. We can assume that the sacristan and her scribe, like all subsequent users of the *Notel*, visualized the entire space of St Katharina in their mind – including all three-dimensional features and objects which the *Notel* does not mention, but which could be filled in by the women who knew the place. This connection between the *Notel* as a book and the building where it belonged to is also mirrored in the fact that, due to the loss of the buildings of St Katharina's and the topographical transformation of the city of Nuremberg, the impression of spatial, sensory, and social experience can no longer be truly comprehended. Although the *Notel* provides an unusually direct insight into the liturgical practices, the veil of historical distance nevertheless remains opaque.

5. Conclusion

The *Notel* reveals the practical, non-public organization underlying the liturgical routines of a late medieval women's convent in a capital city. It records the tasks necessary for liturgy under

³¹ (But these and more things are described in a little book hanging in the sacristy. Also, people have donated many things for the sacristy that we did not have before, but it is not necessary to write about this all).

the spatial and social conditions of the reformed Dominican convent in Nuremberg. As a handbook or rather a collection of instructions from one sacristan to her successor, it is of both descriptive and normative character, documenting established customs and prescribing norms for the future. The *Notel* also enables a partial reconstruction of the sisters' sensory, in this case acoustic, perception of their surroundings. It reveals a community involved in the expression of faith not only in a cognitive, but a very physical way.

Liturgy was firmly grounded in the physical world of those who enacted, observed, smelled, and heard it. Thus, liturgical sounds both created and structured community, within and across the physical boundaries of the convent walls. Sound was probably the most suitable medium for this task, as acoustic volume and complexity were relatively easy to adjust to a specific audience and space. The consideration of the *Notel's* acoustic elements has shown both the diversity of sound in St Katharina and the varied meaning of the convent's soundscape. There are sounds mentioned that mainly carried organizational information, and there are sounds with more symbolic meaning as elements of the liturgical ritual. Its references to sound give evidence that the spaces of the monastic enclosure, the church, and the city did not exist independently but in relation to each other. In St Katharina and in Nuremberg, physical and social spaces were not created simply by architectural elements and an abstract idea of belonging, they were also defined and organized by acoustic experience. The *Notel* proves that sound was used by the nuns to define their enclosure, but also to control the outside space. Although it is not explicitly stated in the *Notel*, the sisters were surely aware of the symbolic power of sound, which has been confirmed in other examples. As custodians of silence and sound in their convent, church, and beyond, they became an authority for all who heard them; and thus mistresses of the physical spaces in and around Nuremberg.

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Locating Aemilia Lanyer Mapping Transformation in ‘The Description of Cooke-ham’

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Abstract

The article interrogates the assumption that Aemilia Lanyer’s poem ‘The Description of Cooke-ham’ describes a classic country house. Utilizing early modern maps, it expands the definition of Cookham and questions the importance of the alleged ‘country house’ to Lanyer, thereby enriching discussions of Lanyer’s unique proto-feminist poetics. Understanding the place and space of Cookham allows readers to properly position Lanyer and her companions, Margaret and Anne Clifford, in an elided literal and spiritual landscape where autonomous female religious community thrives. The article contends that Lanyer’s poems must be read as tightly interwoven pieces which have the place of Cookham as the unifying, palimpsested theme. Restoring the context of Lanyer’s book and returning to the context of her writing are a means of moving beyond tokenism to study Lanyer as a talented, innovative writer keenly in tune with her social, religious, and physical environments.

Keywords: Country House, Female Community, Geography, Religio-Political Resistance, Topopoetics

In 1604,¹ Aemilia Lanyer accompanied Margaret Clifford Countess of Cumberland and her daughter, Anne, to Cookham in Berkshire. In 1600, Clifford had separated from her husband, George Clifford, third Earl of Cumberland, due to his extramarital affairs and financial profligacy. Despite the separation and despite having been a former favorite of Queen Elizabeth, the scandal from George’s actions as well as his debts affected Margaret and Anne’s ability to remain in London; thus, they frequently retired to Cookham to enjoy the hospitality of her

¹ Or 1605. There is some disagreement as to when Lanyer accompanied the Cliffords to Cookham. Based on manuscript evidence, Malay offers a convincing reconstruction of the Clifford’s movements in 1604 and 1605 to determine that Margaret and Anne would have resided at Cookham from late August to late October of 1604 (2013, 253).

brother William Russell of Thornhaugh.² Due to these regular peregrinations, the area became a favorite retreat for the Cliffords (Woods 1999, 117). It is on this territory, once part of the dowry of the queens of England,³ that Aemilia Lanyer wrote her mini-epic on the passion of Christ: ‘*Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*’.⁴

Though ‘*Salve Deus*’ was written around 1604, it was not published until 1611. Bound together in a single volume called *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, the poem is prefaced by nine dedication poems and two epistles, and is appended with what is considered the first ‘country house’ poem: ‘The Description of Cooke-ham’. While most scholars have focused on the dedication poems as significant for Lanyer’s bid for patronage and literary cache in a patriarchal world, on the text of ‘*Salve Deus*’ as an anthem for female legitimacy of personhood, or on ‘The Description of Cooke-ham’ as creating a new genre of English poetry, the Cookham poem is often treated as unconnected to the dedications and to the text of ‘*Salve Deus*’. It is regularly considered a sort of vestigial tail that Lanyer oddly tacked on to her ‘more important’ poems. While the dedications and mini-epic are often read in tandem by scholars interested in how women feature in *Salve Deus*, the role of Cookham as the *place* where the poem was written is neglected. It is this critical neglect and separate treatment of the poems that I challenge in my reading of the texts. I propose that ‘The Description of Cooke-ham’ and ‘*Salve Deus*’ must be read together as companion pieces since Lanyer’s experiences in the place generated the circumstances and, in certain ways, the material conditions for her mini-epic.

Because ‘*Salve Deus*’ from its inception is a text that explores female agency, its creation was reliant upon the devotional practices of the female community of Cookham.⁵ The ritual ways in which women transform an outdoor space into an agential place form the crux of the Cookham poem, which in turn acts as the palimpsested backdrop of ‘*Salve Deus*’.⁶ The biblical women in ‘*Salve Deus*’ among whom Clifford is anachronistically numbered enter into the ritual sacrifice of Christ and thereby they – and Lanyer – rediscover the power of female spaces and female communities. Reading ‘*Salve Deus*’ through the lens of the Cookham poem is essential for unpacking the ‘feminist poetics’ (Mueller 1994, 210-211) of Lanyer’s verses. On this premise, I argue that ‘*Salve Deus*’ and ‘The Description of Cooke-ham’ were written in a specific, ritually constructed place; that the place of the writing matters in the interpretation of the poems’ religio-political import; and, finally, that female communities as/at sacred sites matter to our understanding of early modern women’s negotiations of power. To this end, I first present evidence for identifying the influence of ritually encoded space and place on Lanyer’s poetic endeavors. I then suggest that because Lanyer’s poems elide real and imaginative spaces and places, her poetics is acutely poised to protest gender configurations in religious and political arenas. And finally, I discuss the tripartite structural divisions of her book as existing in symbiotic relationships with each other rather than in isolation – relationships that are founded on experiences of place.

² Anne Clifford’s memoir of 1603 mentions stopping through Cookham ‘where my uncle Russell, his wife and son then lay’ (Malay 2018, 24).

³ ‘The manor formed part of the dowry of the Queens of England from the reign of Edward I, who assigned the manor in 1281 to his mother Eleanor, until the end of the reign of Henry VIII’ (Ditchfield and Page 1923, 124-133). For further reading on the history of Cookham and its important houses, see Darby 1980 and Tyack 1998.

⁴ For the sake of clarity, I will refer to the passion poem in quotation marks (‘*Salve Deus*’) and the work as a whole in italics (*Salve Deus*).

⁵ My working definition of community draws from Snijders’ definition of ideational community as ‘a practice-based social group whose identity is based on shared performances of a repertoire that is in constant flux’ (2019, 17).

⁶ The imagery of a palimpsest, or parchment manuscript that has been scraped in order to be reused but where traces of the original writing remain, seems an apt metaphor for the layered fashioning and refashioning of identity and place evident in *Salve Deus*.

1. *Place Matters: The Cliffords and Cookham*

'The Description of Cooke-ham' is a valedictory poem in which Lanyer not only bids farewell to the Cookham environs, but also to her patrons, Margaret Clifford and her daughter Anne. Written at Margaret's request, Lanyer eternizes the place, memorializes the past pleasures experienced at Cookham, and venerates the virtues of Margaret and Anne. The poem moves from exposition, to description of the landscape, to representation of the Cliffords' movements in the landscape. The poem adopts a somber tone when Lanyer discusses Anne's espousal to the Earl of Dorset for this event, which in effect, terminates the female dynamic of the Cookham residency. Lanyer concludes by describing the negative effects that the Cliffords' final departure had on Cookham. The outdoor religious and scholarly pursuits of the Clifford women provide the movement in the poem and carry the reader from place to place in the Cookham imaginary.

As a description not only of the Cookham geography, 'The Description of Cooke-ham' poem operates as a lyric *itinerarium* of Margaret Clifford's meditative perambulations in the Cookham locale. At this time, Lanyer was possibly employed by Clifford, and in the poem, she describes Margaret walking the terrain of Cookham, scripture in hand, and pausing at certain significant locations to meditate upon biblical passages. A metamorphosing cross of Christ under which Lanyer and Anne sit companionably together becomes an anchoring point in the landscape and in the poem. In this way, Margaret's ritual circuit through the landscape as iterated in 'The Description of Cooke-ham' represents the physical 'pilgrimage' she undertook even as the text of 'Salve Deus' narrativizes her pilgrimage of the spirit in her meditations on the Gospels. Thus, in 'The Description of Cooke-ham', Lanyer describes the effect a female community has on the natural world and vice versa. In her valorization of the 'sweet Place' (1993, 7) or *locus amoenus* of Cookham, she presents the possibility that the ritual, religious actions of female communities can participate in the redemptive work of Christ and can act as restoratives to a post-lapsarian world.⁷ By doing so, Lanyer proposes that Edenic social and spiritual harmony is attainable in non-patriarchal spaces.

Because the place of Cookham was vital to the Cliffords' spirituality and to Lanyer's creative process, it is relevant to further investigate this location. Place-based poetry has recently received renewed interest, and scholars have striven to form definitions, classifications, and subcategories to describe poetry about place. Older terms such as 'nature poetry', 'pastoral', and 'georgic' have been joined by 'ecopoetics', 'geopoetics', and 'topopoetics'. Topopoetics offers a useful framework in this discussion of place for it seeks to encompass both the work of poetry as creating place and the influence of place on making poetry. The drive to define 'place' has a long academic lineage that most simply culminates in the idea that place is socially constructed space infused with meaning through communal interaction and memory.⁸ However, topopoetics unites an Aristotelian *topos* with Heidegger's concept of 'being-in-place' (Cresswell 2017, 17) with the idea of *poesis* as 'making'.⁹ The making of being is the making of place is the place of the making is poetry of place. In other words, 'Poems of place are not simply poems about places, rather they are a species of place with a special relationship to what it is to be in (external) place' (20).

⁷ Mendelson and Crawford note that 'Apart from informal settings... there were no female religious associations in England after the Reformation until the separate Quaker Women's Meetings of the 1670s' (1998, 225). And further, they claim that 'Women's exclusion from the formal church hierarchy directed them into personal modes of worship that transcended parochial and other institutional boundaries' (230-231).

⁸ See Lefebvre 1992 and Tuan 2001.

⁹ Etymologically, *topos* simultaneously means 'place', 'rhetorical pattern of naming', and 'shape of place'.

It is with this relationship in mind that I propose to investigate the physical places of Lanyer's poems that form the substrata of her oeuvre.

Based on fair copies of Margaret Clifford's letters of fall 1604, we know her precise locations: in August she and Anne traveled from Clerkenwell to Bedford House (Portland MS 23, 24v-26v). There are two letters in September that simply state her location as 'Cookham in Berkshire', while her letters from November find her in London residing specifically at Austin Friars.

Present day maps of the royal county of Berkshire name the town of Cookham near Maidenhead. Cookham is located roughly 30 miles west of London and borders the river Thames. The premise that the Cliffords and Lanyer resided in or around the town Cookham in 1604 situates them in an area which consisted of open commons, moors, wastes, fishing grounds, and woodlands. While the town of Cookham presently exists and is easily found on a map, there is another formulation for the location of Lanyer's poem – a formulation that cannot be found on modern maps. On the 1676 and 1665 maps of Berkshire (Figures 1 and 2), the old Cookham Hundred adjacent to Windsor Forest is outlined, while Cookham town near Maidenhead is omitted. In fact, Cookham Hundred formed one of the Seven Hundreds of Windsor Forest and seems to perhaps be of more import than the town (Ditchfield and Page 1923, 117-118).



Figure 1 – John Speed, 'Barkshire Described', in *The theatre of the empire of Great Britaine*, London, printed for Thomas Bassett and Richard Chiswell, 1676. David Rumsey Map Collection, David Rumsey Map Center, Stanford Libraries¹⁰

¹⁰ CC BY-NC-SA 3.0, <https://www.davidrumsey.com/luna/servlet/detail/RUMSEY-8-1-285221-90057894:Barkshire-?sort=Pub_List_No_InitialSort&mi=1&trs=3&qvq=q:Barkshire%20Described;sort=Pub_List_No_InitialSort;lc:RUMSEY-8-1>, accessed 1 December 2025.



Figure 2 – Joan Blaeu, ‘Bercheria Vernacule Barkshire’, in *Atlas Maior sive Cosmographia Blaviana, quae Solvm, Salvm, Coelvm, accuratissime describntvr*, Amsterdam, 1665.
David Rumsey Map Collection, David Rumsey Map Center, Stanford Libraries¹¹

A potential issue to confront is why Clifford did not locate her Cookham letters to a more specific place. Thus, the elusive phrase ‘Cookham in Berkshire’ points to two possibilities: either the Cliffords resided in unnamed accommodations in the town of Cookham, or they lived somewhere in the rural Cookham Hundred and neglected to name the residence in the letters. In either instance, two major points are relevant: historic maps are vital to contemporary research and, in either geographic scenario, the Cliffords’ dwelling place was not a particular focal point for either Lanyer or the Cliffords.

2. *Space Matters: Countryside Community*

The absence of a domestic centerpiece in Cookham town or the greater area is significant when studying Lanyer’s ‘The Description of Cookham’. Lanyer scholars have made the assumption that Lanyer and the Cliffords resided at some kind of ‘country house’ in the Cookham vicinity and even call Cookham an ‘estate’ with manicured gardens and grounds.¹² However, the frequent claim that ‘The Description of Cookham’ is the foundational poem of the ‘country house’ poetic genre is called into question by the uncertainty surrounding the location and

¹¹ CC BY-NC-SA 3.0, <https://www.davidrumsey.com/luna/servlet/detail/RUMSEY-8-1-281520-90053035:Bercheria-Vernacule-Barkshire?sort=Pub_List_No_InitialSort&mi=0&trs=1&qvq=q:Bercheria%20Vernacule%20Barkshire;sort=Pub_List_No_InitialSort;lc:RUMSEY-8-1>, accessed 1 December 2025.

¹² See Grossman 1998; Lewalski 1998; McBride 2001; Munroe 2008; Molekamp 2012; Noble 2015. Guimaraes (2012) even claims to describe the house and gardens, but with no documentary evidence or citations.

prominence of the habitation, as well as the lack of details in Lanyer's own poem.¹³ Because the poem does not emphasize a house, but rather the unimmured outdoors and the devotions of the female inhabitants who populate and 'cultivate' the landscape by their presence and with the imagined presence of biblical figures, it does not in fact set the precedent for country house discourse, for how could Lanyer establish a genre and yet break every 'rule' of the genre she is said to have invented? Rather than diminishing Lanyer's stature, acknowledging that she does not write a 'country house poem' liberates her from the constraints of comparison with other poets to reveal the uniqueness of her poem. It also offers a way of reading the poem that is more in tune with the *place* of Cookham and with Lanyer's proto-feminist poetics.

With the 'rediscovery' of Aemilia Lanyer in the 1970s came the realization that her poem 'The Description of Cooke-ham' predates Ben Jonson's 1616 country house poem 'To Penshurst'. According to definitions of the country house poem genre based on Jonson's treatment, such poems celebrate the social and domestic hierarchies evident in a household predicated upon male landowner rights. Descriptions of the houses themselves do form part of the poetic theme, but poems typically focus on the great hall of the house as a symbol of enclosed, domestic, hospitable space. The agricultural networks of class-based economics which support the hospitality of the landed gentry are celebrated as contributing to the value of the country house. In this way, 'Country house discourse ... is profoundly defined by a sense of time and place' of a particular estate and a particular family in contrast to the generalness of pastoral poetry (McBride 2001, 7). However, subsequent explorations of Lanyer's descriptions of Cookham focus not so much on the abode itself, but rather on the activities of the Cliffords in the landscape surrounding their residence.¹⁴ Instead of domestic space and social stratification, Lanyer portrays an outdoor space wherein hierarchies can be leveled due to intimacy, religious fervor, and appreciation of female creativity.¹⁵

Though the association of women with nature is a longstanding trope, Lanyer's choice to remove the Cliffords from the interior of a house and to consider them in the open outdoors is not just a method of again positioning women as negatively impacted by enclosed space. Instead, she demonstrates that female communities thrive in spaces that eliminate social conventions. As a sort of pastoral poem, Lanyer tacitly positions the open countryside as a place where real religion can be found as opposed to the enclosure of an urban church. Purity of worship can thus be recovered in the idealized country life of a society of ladies who meditatively populate the landscape with the lamb of God and his flock. The elegiac turn in the latter half of the poem derives its genesis from Lanyer's allusion to Anne's impending marriage – an event that serves to hasten the demise of the female community. In mourning the end of community, she also mourns the loss of the place which rendered possible the formation of that community. In both 'The Description of Cooke-ham' and 'Salve Deus' Cookham, then, serves as the touchstone place in Lanyer's literal and spiritual dramas featuring the rituals of female communities.

The poem is addressed to Margaret as the 'Mistris of that Place, / From whose desires did spring this worke of Grace' (1993, ll. 11-12). The Cookham poem as a 'work of grace' written at Margaret's prompting is an echo of the opening lines:

¹³ See Lewalski 1998; Woods 1999; Song 2010; Beskin 2017.

¹⁴ A few examples among many are Noble 2015; Beskin 2017; Hadfield 2018; Zirker 2019; Netzley 2022.

¹⁵ Lewalski proposes that the differences between Lanyer and Jonson point to differences in female and male conceptions of space and 'an idealized social order' (1998, 235). Additionally, Woods hypothesizes a (unlikely) situation wherein Lanyer and Jonson met and exchanged ideas, which ultimately led to Jonson copying Lanyer's idea (1999, 116).

Farewell (sweet *Cooke-ham*) where I first obtain'd
 Grace from that Grace where perfit Grace remain'd;
 And where the Muses gave their full consent,
 I should have powre the virtuous to content:
 Where princely Palace will'd me to indite,
 The sacred Storie of the Soules delight. (ll. 1-6)

Lanyer implies that the habitation in Cookham, the 'princely Palace', had a will of its own and pushed her to 'indite' (write) her 'sacred Storie' of the passion of Christ. In this way, she speaks of the 'palace' itself as a sort of *genius loci* or 'spirit of the place'. Calling their residence a 'palace' could be hyperbole born of fondness, or it could be a more literal claim. In either case, the place of Cookham, when combined with female community, enables Lanyer to make a bold poetic assertion. She writes that the Muses 'consent' to her poetic plans. Instead of the trend in masculine poetics to think of the muses as external forces or personae who implant poetic ideas in a man worthy of writing, Lanyer casts the muses as agreeing to the *place's* idea to write a poetic passion narrative while the place itself derives its presence from the female community's ritual engagement with the landscape.

The importance of Cookham to the Cliffords and to Lanyer's poetry is also evident in the third stanza of 'Salve Deus'. This stanza addresses Margaret's desire that Lanyer write a poem about Cookham. However, there seems to be a conflict of interest between the two ladies. Lanyer apologizes for prioritizing the passion narrative poem over the Cookham poem:

And pardon (Madame) though I do not write
 Those praisefull lines of that delightful place,
 As you commaunded me in that faire night,
 When shining *Phoebe* gave so great a grace,
 Presenting *Paradice* to your sweet sight,
 Unfolding all the beauty of her face
 With pleasant groves, hills, walks and stately trees,
 Which pleasures with retired minds agrees. (ll. 17-24)

In these passages, she claims that Margaret Clifford commanded her to write about Cookham, and we also see that Lanyer's experience at Cookham prompted her to write the passion narrative. The female community and the sensory experiences of place found in the Cookham poem are thus literally the foundation and backdrop for 'Salve Deus'. As a third iteration of Lanyer's inspiration and justification for writing, she appends a final defense for her poetry in a note 'To the doubtfull Reader'. Appearing on the page immediately following the conclusion of 'The Description of Cooke-ham', Lanyer claims that the title *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* 'was delivered unto me in sleepe many yeares before I had any intent to write in this maner, and was quite out of my memory, untill I had written the Passion of Christ, when immediately it came into my remembrance ... and thinking it a significant token, that I was appointed to performe this Worke, I gave the very same words I received in sleepe as the fittest Title I could devise for this Booke' (1993, 139). Her claim to have received a divine message in sleep resonates with biblical precedent, but also with the tradition of visionary women of medieval England. If we take Lanyer at her word that she received the title in her sleep and that she was appointed by God to write her passion narrative, then it is at Cookham and at the prompting of the *place* that she recognized and stepped into her role as 'that which is seldome seene, / A Womans writing of divinest things' (ll. 3-4).

In describing the Cookham landscape as a holy place that engendered holy writing and holy living, Lanyer proposes that place and objects in space are vital to spiritual life. In this sense,

she departs from a puritan or reformist abjuration of material objects as aids to spirituality. Anticipating George Herbert's poetry of meditation, Lanyer, too, concedes that places and spaces can accentuate religious fervor. By envisioning nature as an aid to devotion, she transforms the Cookham area into the prelapsarian garden of Eden. At the outset of the poem, she mentions the house, the walks, and the plants all 'did seeme some new delight to frame!' (l. 18), while a few lines later she writes 'each plant, each floure, each tree / Set forth their beauties then to welcome thee' (ll. 33-34). The Cookham terrain becomes a new paradise where the trees, the paths, the streams, the birds, the hills, and the winds all gladly temper themselves so that 'Pleasure in that place might more abound' (l. 42). Even man-made elements express an agential enjoyment in conforming to the Cliffords: 'Each Arbor, Banke, each Seate, each stately Tree, / Thought themselves honor'd in supporting thee' (ll. 45-46). In this scenario, nature recognizes the Cliffords as a type of organizing principle due to their virtuous femininity.

After describing the new Eden of female community, Lanyer suddenly imposes a deixical present tense imperative that shifts the poem from describing the natural elements to investing the landscape with supernatural significance. She brings the Cliffords to the oak-crested hill at a high point in the Cookham topography:

Now let me come unto that stately Tree,
Wherein such goodly Prospects you did see;
That Oake that did in height his fellowes passe,
As much as lofty trees, low growing grasse:
Much like a comely Cedar streight and tall,
Whose beauteous stature farre exceeded all:
How often did you visite this faire tree,
Which seeming joyfull in receiving thee,
Would like a Palme tree spread his armes abroad,
Desirous that you there should make abode: (ll. 53-62)

Here Lanyer compares the favored oak tree of British historical resonance to a perfect cedar of Old Testament Lebanon before transforming it again into the palm tree of New Testament significance (Wilcox 2014, 55). The oak-turned-palm tree as an emblem of the cross of Christ further metamorphizes into a lover whose open 'armes' invite, a *lá* the bridegroom of the *Song of Songs*, the Cliffords' presence. It is here at the foot of the cross in the arms of Christ the lover that the Clifford women realize the harmonious possibilities of female community. In their protected, panoptic position at the crest of the hill, Lanyer writes:

Where beeing seated, you might plainly see,
Hills, vales, and woods, as if on bended knee
They had appeared, your honour to salute,
Or to preferre some strange unlook'd for sute:
All interlac'd with brookes and christall springs,
A Prospect fit to please the eyes of Kings:
And thirteene shires appear'd all in your sight,
Europe could not afford much more delight. (1993, ll. 67-74)

These lines provide specifics of place that perhaps point a reader to decode location. The references to oak and cedar recall that the area of Windsor Forest was predominantly composed of those trees. Further, the view from the hill is pleasing 'to the eyes of Kings' and is extensive enough to encompass a very specific 'thirteen shires'. If the Cliffords and Lanyer were in the

Cookham Hundred segment of Windsor Forest they could have overlooked Windsor Castle on their walks. Thus, it seems possible to think of the Cliffords and Lanyer viewing Windsor Castle and subversively receiving honor and respect from the king's own landscape.

At the foot of the 'cross', the Cliffords use nature to meditate upon the providence of God in terms that reintroduce the concepts of nature as a mirror of God and of the material world impacting the spiritual:

While you the time in meditation spent,
Of their Creators powre, which there you saw,
In all his Creatures held a perfit Law;
And in their beauties did you plaine descric,
His beauty, wisdome, grace, love, majestie. (ll. 76-80)

Lanyer clearly states that the Cookham woods provide the situation and setting for productive meditation. The tree returns at the conclusion of the poem where it acts as a leveler of social status. Lanyer describes Margaret traversing the land bidding farewell to the plants and birds and 'Placing their former pleasures in your heart' (l. 154). However, the tree receives special attention because it was the 'first and last you did vouchsafe to see' (l. 158) and it was where Margaret and Anne read and scanned 'many a learned Booke' (l. 161). Lanyer seems to be included in all these activities as an equal for 'To this faire tree, taking me by the hand, / You did repeat the pleasures which had past, / Seeming to grieve they could no longer last' (ll. 162-164). The ritual female space at the foot of the cross which the faithful biblical women inhabited and in which contemporary women enter through meditation is created by collapsing hierarchies while pilgrimaging through the landscape. Socio-economic status affected a woman's ability to enter into the masculine world with typically 'The lower the social level, the more common it was for women to control their own cultural, physical, and ritual space, and to share, dispute, or invade space which was under the nominal control of men' (Mendelson and Crawford 1998, 210-211). In the unstructured rural landscape where the Cliffords' social status did not have the same caché as in town, Lanyer notes that social orders are reconfigured in the creation of religious space.

Once the method has been established, the fruit of the Cliffords' meditation in the Edenic landscape becomes the subject of the next ten lines of the poem. It is in these lines that Lanyer combines movement with meditation in a kind of physical and spiritual pilgrimage. She writes:

In these sweet woods how often did you walke,
With Christ and his Apostles there to talke;
Placing his holy Writ in some faire tree,
To meditate what you therein did see:
With *Moses* you did mount his holy Hill,
To know his pleasure, and performe his Will.
With lovely *David* you did often sing,
His holy Hymnes to Heavens Eternall King.
And in sweet musicke did your soule delight,
To sound his prayes, morning, noone, and night.
With blessed *Joseph* you did often feed
Your pined brethren, when they stood in need. (1993, ll. 81-92)

Lanyer describes the Cliffords as walking in the open outdoors *in order to* converse with Christ. In this way, the countryside pilgrimage becomes essential to the Cliffords' spirituality. While pilgrimage to shrines had been prohibited following the Reformation, the concept of life itself as a

pilgrimage of the spirit was still an essential one for puritan writers.¹⁶ John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* is the most famous of these texts, but other puritan writers such as John Downname, Paul Bayne, and Francis Quarles also actively used the pilgrimage concept. In an autobiographical letter, Margaret Clifford describes her life as 'matching the name of a Dance to the Pilgrimage of Grief, because it holds in nothing more like, for still I change and yet the Dance, or thing that makes the sound is sorrow still to me' (quoted in Williamson 1920, 285). She identifies her life with the journey motif in the dance of death. Her literal pilgrimage around the Cookham landscape where she walks in the woods with Christ, traverses hills with Moses, marks the time of day with David, and feeds the poor while in exile with Joseph is reminiscent of the medieval pilgrimage accounts written for cloistered female communities by male pilgrims. The *Sionpilger* accounts of the fifteenth century allowed cloistered women and even lay people without the means to travel to 'experience' the Holy Land in an imaginative way. Using guided meditation, description, and physical movement around a garden space, women could go on a 'virtual' pilgrimage. In a less stringently formulaic way, walking in the Cookham countryside is significant for inducing the material conditions for the Cliffords' mind's eye journey.

Margaret Clifford's valuation of the spiritual investing the physical is evident in Lanyer's expression that Margaret figured herself among the apostles walking with Christ and resting her bible in trees while she meditates. Lanyer points to the power of meditation to collapse time with:

In these sweet woods how often did you walke,
 With Christ and his Apostles there to talke;
 Placing his holy Writ in some faire tree,
 To meditate what you therein did see: (1993, ll. 81-84)

Margaret Clifford had a deep and active interest in alchemy and natural philosophy, even going so far as to compile her own book of alchemical observations.¹⁷ Paracelsan alchemy framed Nature as feminine, as the shadow of God, and as a book that could be read for spiritual and physical healing. For true believers, 'the Book of Nature was, in effect, a second work of divine revelation (after Holy Scripture), and the devout Renaissance philosopher was thus duty bound to seek out nature's treasures which became hidden after man's expulsion from the Garden of Eden' (Healy 2013, 81). By literally placing the book of scripture on the 'book' of nature, Clifford unites the spiritual with the physical world. In doing so, she demonstrates the importance of physical place to a vibrant spirituality. By placing scripture on or in a tree in order to 'see' Christ, Margaret imitates another pilgrim devotion of the Holy Land, the *via crucis* or *via dolorosa*. The *via* was a devotional practice that followed the footsteps of Christ on the way to Calvary from Mary's perspective. When enacting the *via*, one moves from one station to another while meditating on different aspects of Christ's passion. In many ways, Lanyer's 'Salve Deus' is a seventeenth-century retelling of the *via*. Since Margaret plays a role in the female communities of the passion narrative in 'Salve Deus', Lanyer's discussion of meditative rituals that enable Margaret to enter into the biblical story transforms 'The Description of Cooke-ham' from simply a valedictory nature poem, to a guide for successful meditation. By taking her cue from Margaret's female-centric meditations, Lanyer claims that her inspiration for the proto-feminist poetics of *Salve Deus* came from Margaret's ritual reimaginings in the place of Cookham.

¹⁶ Hebrews 11:13-16 was the most influential text in establishing the pilgrim concept. See Hambrick-Stowe 1986, 55.

¹⁷ Bayer (2005) has done extensive and exciting work connecting Margaret Clifford with John Dee and Paracelsan paradigms. See also Matheson 2004.

3. *Structure Matters: Salve Deus as Triptych*

The structure of the *Salve Deus* book as a whole has invited scholars to comment upon the positioning of the poems as a reading experience. Though the work is titled *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, the poem of the same name is placed after 9 dedication poems and 2 epistles. This kind of placement has encouraged scholars to read the women addressed in the dedication poems either as Lanyer's pandering for patrons or as her attempt to create a society of 'good women' (Lewalski 1991, 102, footnote 44) who could be 'spiritual heirs to the biblical and historical good women her title poem celebrates' (1998, 220).¹⁸ Additionally, these poems have been read as commenting on the systemically disenfranchised and persecuted personal lives of the dedicatees, and thus as Lanyer's bid to expose the injustices of the policy of *femme couverture*.¹⁹ Some critics postulate that the entire volume can be understood in terms of women's loss of land rights due to marriage (Munroe 2008, 76-80 and 84-85).²⁰ Due to the roughly seven year gap between the time Lanyer wrote the passion poem and her publication of the book in 1611, Malay has postulated that she published the text for the purpose of assisting Anne Clifford in her bid for regaining her inheritance (2013, 253).²¹ While the dedication poems do constitute a buffer or 'mirror' of/for princesses before the passion narrative, their importance to the reading of the passion poem has not been questioned. Because an epistle to Margaret and a poem to Anne Clifford are included in the dedications, and because Margaret features as anachronistically present in 'Salve Deus', the dedicatees form part of the crowd of holy women – the brides of Christ – accompanying Him on the way to His death.²² In this vein, if Lanyer's dedication poems are viewed as bids for patronage and recognition, she is in essence crafting a poetic similitude of a medieval donor portrait.²³ However, her book can also be read as a commentary on how ritually and spatially constructed community is essential to unraveling detrimental cultural narratives about gender. While the dedication poems create a society of ladies who spiritually accompany Christ to the cross, the mini-epic validates female devotion to Christ to refute long-standing misogynistic interpretations of scripture. And finally, the evidence of female community in the Cookham poem underpins the creative efforts of the entire book. The genesis of the book as a whole relies on the construction of female community in a ritual space.

If we consider the structure of the book as a triptych donor portrait with the central feature being the middle text on the death of Christ, the unifying feature of the book as a whole is the ritually mediated presence of women in the sacred Presence.²⁴ Lanyer herself advocates for the affective piety of visual images within her verses. This theme of presence and picture creating

¹⁸ Lewalski lists the political affiliations of the women in the dedications as a rationale for Lanyer's appeals to them (1998, 220).

¹⁹ Wilcox's research into the personal histories of the dedicatees reveals that most of them were widows deprived of their land rights, or were single women whose marriageability was being disastrously manipulated (2014, 57-67). Garrison also discusses the transgressive, destabilizing women of the dedication poems as Lanyer's means of offering visibility and 'recuperation of lost freedom or power' to the dedicatees (2012, 310).

²⁰ Hodgson writes that 'patronage space is deliberately built on the power of grief' (2014, 51).

²¹ Longfellow argues that Lanyer and her husband worked together to promote her book in a 'pooling of joint social capital' (2009, 64).

²² In 'To all vertuous Ladies in generall', Lanyer writes 'Put on your wedding garments every one, / The Bridegroome staves to entertaine you all' (1993, ll. 8-9).

²³ The desire to provide a shape or container to the *Salve Deus* volume in order to understand its organization is evident from Wilcox's characterization of the volume as nesting 'Chinese boxes' (2014, 50) of love, to Hodgson's sense that it is a rosary (2014, 50).

²⁴ Knoppers (2024) has also noticed and explored the triptych configuration of Lanyer's book.

community can be seen in passages in each of the divisions of the *Salve Deus* text. The first dedication poem addressed to Queen Anne clearly indicates Lanyer's plan. First, she refers to the 'Salve Deus' poem as a holy work written in honor of women. The purpose of the poem is to bring the queen and all women to a feast which she describes as:

For here I have prepar'd my Paschal Lambe,
The figure of that living Sacrifice;

...

This pretious Passeover feed upon, O Queene,
Let your faire Virtues in my Glasse be seene. (1993, ll. 85-86 and 89-90)

Lanyer trades in the visceral, ritually loaded imagery of Christ as the Paschal lamb who feeds the virtuous with His body. She specifically invites women as brides of Christ to this Paschal feast as a call to communion, and as a call to community with other women. The dedicatory epistle to Margaret Clifford again emphasizes the role of Christ in the unitive, affective piety of women. Lanyer boldly writes 'I present unto you even our Lord Jesus himselfe' (34). In presenting Christ, she emphasizes the power of gazing on Christ and tells Clifford 'Therefore good Madame, to the most perfect eyes of your understanding, I deliver the inestimable treasure of all elected souls, to be perused at convenient times; as also the mirrour of your most worthy minde' (35). Lanyer proposes that gazing on Christ through her poem creates a unified aid to affective devotion. *Salve Deus* thus assumes a sacramental nature as a material aid or sign of inward, communal devotion.

The visual nature of devotional practice and the ensuing community is explored in the additional dedication pieces. In the poem addressed to the Lady Susan, Lanyer urges her to

Receive your Love whom you have sought so farre
Which heere presents himselfe within your view;

...

And in his humble paths since you do tread,
Take this fair Bridegroom in your soules pure bed. (ll. 37-38 and 41-42)

The poem to Lucy, Countess of Bedford, also takes up this affective reading tactic. Lanyer urges Bedford to 'unlocke the closet of your lovely breast' (l. 2) in order to admit the suffering Christ 'In whose most pretious wounds your soule may reade / Salvation, while he (dying Lord) doth bleed' (ll. 13-14). Lanyer urges her to 'Vouchsafe to entertaine this dying lover' (l. 16) who is 'sweetly seated in your brest' (l. 21). Once presence is accomplished, 'There may your thoughts as servants to your heart, / Give true attendance on this lovely guest' (ll. 22-23). Lanyer's push for meditative communion with Christ as a means of creating community among women contains an erotic element which images Christ in the feminized terms of the Song of Songs. The erotic imagery of enfolding the dying Christ in the arms of the soul or the closet of one's heart is present in the dedication poems to Anne Clifford and to Lady Katherine.²⁵ This latter poem especially emphasizes Lanyer's perceived divine right to write of Christ as well as the transformative power of gazing on Christ through her meditative passion poem. The poem states:

²⁵ Patricia Phillippy (2001) has observed that Mary Magdalene is not present in the 'Salve Deus' poem even though she is among the Biblical women at the foot of the Cross. Phillippy thus proposes that the dedicatees themselves are the Magdalenes who 'embalm' Christ in their hearts.

Heere I present to you the King of kings:
 Desiring you to take a perfit view,
 Of those great torments Patience did indure;
 And reape those Comforts that belongs to you,
 Which his most painfull death did then assure:
 Writing the Covenant with his pretious blood,
 That your faire soule might bathe her in that flood.
 And let your noble daughters likewise reade²⁶
 This little Booke that I present to you;
 On heavenly food let them vouchsafe to feede;
 Heere they may see a Lover much more true
 Than ever was since first the world began,
 This poore rich King that di'd both God and man. (ll. 42-54)

After describing the dead Christ in sensual terms, Lanyer then calls Him ‘all that Ladies can desire’ (85) and follows this claim with two stanzas describing the characteristics of a true lover. The purpose of this erotic frame narrative is to emphasize the value of contemplating Christ as a means of creating spiritual community among women on earth and of ultimately reaching spiritual community in heaven.

The earthly spiritual community that Lanyer envisions is premised on the idea of women as the brides of Christ. In ‘To all vertuous Ladies in generall’, Lanyer calls all women to ‘Put on your wedding garments every one, / The Bridegroome stayes to entertaine you all’ (ll. 8-9). Lanyer describes these garments as ‘purple scarlet white, / Those perfit colours purest Virtue wore’, (ll. 15-16). One of the interpretive, printed marginal notes²⁷ hammers home the significance of these colors as being the same as ‘The robes that Christ wore before his death’. After a literal ‘putting on of Christ’,²⁸ Lanyer radically advocates for the community of women to join into a priesthood. She writes,

Annoynt your hair with *Aarons* pretious oyle,
 And bring your palmes of vict'ry in your hands,
 ...
 Sweet odours, mirrhe, gum, aloes, frankincense,
 Present that King who di'd for your offence. (ll. 36-37 and 41-42)

Aaron was the first Jewish high priest who, with Moses, brought the Israelites forth from Egypt and who established the rituals of Jewish worship. Furthermore, the invocation of ritual worship using sense-based material objects is reminiscent of pre-Reformation modes of worship. After ritualistically preparing for Christ's arrival, Lanyer calls the women to be ‘transfigur'd with our loving Lord’ (l. 51). In this phrase, she alludes to the story of the transfiguration of Christ on Mount Tabor where, flanked by a similarly transfigured Moses and Elias, he revealed His divinity to some of His apostles.²⁹ Lanyer's implication that women can similarly take on the roles of Moses and Elias in an outdoor setting away from temple or church worship is a powerful deviation from contemporary notions of women's religious character. On top of Mount Tabor, as

²⁶ Lanyer here repeats her desire expressed in the epistle to Margaret Clifford that *Salve Deus* should serve in perpetuity as a means of female meditative practice.

²⁷ For discussion of the authorial nature of the marginalia, see Simon 2018.

²⁸ ‘But put on the Lord Jesus Christ’ (Romans 13:14).

²⁹ Matthew 17:1-8; Mark 9:2-8; Luke 9:28-36.

upon the oak-topped hill of Cookham, Lanyer discovers the transcendent possibilities of female communities which can more fully enable women to enter into their potential in the absence of masculine modes of worship, of masculine organization of space, and of male social restrictions on women. Additionally, in the dedication poem to Anne Clifford, Lanyer again imbues physical objects with religio-political significance by granting Anne apostolic and redolently papal powers:

He is the stone the builders did refuse,
Which you, sweet Lady, are to build upon;
He is the rock that holy Church did chuse,
Among which number, you must needs be one;
Faire Shepherdesse, tis you that he [Christ] will use
To feed his flocke, that trust in him alone
 All worldly blessings he vouchsafes to you,
 That to the poore you may returne his due. (ll. 129-136)

In all these dedication pieces, to actively call upon all virtuous ladies to enter into the passion of Christ through the use of physical objects and to ritually worship Him with priestly performances is a religiously and politically radical move. On the one hand, it aligns women with Christ and elevates women to an active role in formal, religious worship; on the other, it creates a parallel between virtuous women and male figures of political and religious emancipation. In essence, Lanyer creates an affectively pious precedent for women's religio-political involvement which involves a female community of interiority across time and space.

If the dedication poems demonstrate that women become sanctified and united in the ritual process of themselves becoming places to house Christ, the text of 'Salve Deus', again emphasizes meditative interiority as a means of organizing female community around the *place* of the passion of Christ. After some 300 lines of rhetorically addressing Margaret Clifford and of rationalizing her decision to write of the passion, a marginal comment notes that now Lanyer will write 'A preamble of the Author before the Passion'. In this preamble, she displays her awareness of the connections between story and place:

A Matter farre beyond my barren skill,
To shew with any Life this map of Death,
This Storie; that whole Worlds with Bookes would fill,
In these few Lines, will put me out of breath,
To run so swiftly up this mightie Hill,
I may behold it with the eye of Faith; (ll. 313-318)

Speaking of the story of the passion as a 'map' emphasizes the spatial element of the story for the narrative that can be mapped onto a physical place and time, while also being mapped onto the interior space of the pious reader. Additionally, the act of writing is itself compared to physical activity. While the 'eye of Faith' may act as the poetic muse, Lanyer must metaphorically run up a hill in order to accomplish the promptings of the muse. Metaphors used to explain the laborious nature of writing are not uncommon, but it is unique to Lanyer's personal context that she chose this particular image. The hill of Cookham on which she and the Cliffords meditated on the passion is recalled and she gestures toward the concept that contemplative interiority is rooted in spatial environment.

It is not lost on Lanyer that Christ's passion itself begins with outdoor, place-based, meditation. In fact, her representation of Christ's meditation in the garden of Gethsemane constitutes the longest section of the poem that occurs in a single location. In the garden, Lanyer sets up

the dichotomy between those who meditate and pray, and those who do not. Christ, in His spiritual interiority, is cast as a 'Watchman' (l. 467), while the sleeping apostles who had failed to engage in prayer with Christ had 'shut those Eies that should their Maker see' (l. 420). The band of soldiers that arrive in the garden to apprehend Christ 'could not know him, whom their eyes did see' (l. 504), and the Jewish high priest Caiphas before whom Christ is initially brought cannot apprehend Christ's 'Glory' for his 'Owly eies are blind, and cannot see' (ll. 711-712). Lanyer contrasts the blindness of men to the clear-eyed vision of Christ and of women. Pilate's wife begs him to spare Christ and urges Pilate to:

Open thine eies, that thou the truth mai'st see
 Doe not the thing that goes against thy heart,
 Condemne not him that must thy Saviour be;
 But view his holy Life, his good desert. (ll. 755-758)

This speech which asks for mercy for Christ and which opens with an invocation for sight, is followed by the famous 'Eves Apologie' portion of the poem wherein Lanyer overtakes Pilate's wife's voice and asks readers to re-view the cultural narrative imposed on the biblical story of Adam and Eve – a narrative that affects how women as a community are treated. After defending Eve and reducing the gravity of her sin compared to Adam's, the speaker deftly demonstrates that the condemnation of Christ is a far greater sin than the sin of the Genesis story, and it's a sin 'To which ... we [women] never gave consent, / Witnesse they wife (O *Pilate*) speakes for all; / Who did but dreame, and yet a message sent' (ll. 833-835). In taking on the role of spokesperson for women, Pilate's wife creates solidarity among women while also demonstrating that this community is blameless. The private dream-vision of Pilate's wife urges her to action, while Christ's own apostles are called 'Heavy Spectators' (l. 482). The passive, uncomprehending band of apostles can be contrasted with the community of weeping women of Jerusalem who find 'favour in your Saviors sight' (l. 986) since they identify with and mourn his suffering. Their emotional affiliation with Christ gives them 'Eagles eyes' (l. 991).

The powerful accuracy of female sight is especially present at the moment of the crucifixion. After all the descriptive details of all other moments of the passion, the crucifixion of Christ occupies a mere two stanzas before Lanyer defers to the superiority of affective meditation over poetry. At the moment of Christ's death, Lanyer returns to her frame narrative of mediation and pens an address to Margaret Clifford. Instead of describing His death, Lanyer shies away and writes

This with the eie of Faith thou maist behold
 Deere Spouse of Christ, and more than I can write;
 And here both Griefe and Joy thou maist unfold,
 To view thy Love in this most heavy plight,
 Bowing his head, his bloodlesse body cold;
 Those eies waxe dimme that gave us all our light, (ll. 1169-1174)

Lanyer's deixical move places Clifford at the foot of the cross. She narratively occupies this feminine place with the community of John, Mary Magadlene, Mary Cleophas, and Mary the mother of Christ – as a result of her clear-sited meditative practices at Cookham. Her comprehending 'eie of Faith' is able to transcend the physical environment, even as it is rooted in place-based, situational events. Clifford's emotional, affective 'presence' at Calvary where she experiences conflicting emotions of 'Griefe and Joy' is what enables her to have her vision-based religious conviction. Her identification with Christ affords her an apostolic role in the continuing work of redemption. In a radical move, Lanyer grants Clifford pastoral powers and casts her as the leading apostle:

These are those Keyes Saint *Peter* did possesse,
 Which with a Spirituall powre are giv'n to thee,
 To heale the soules of those that doe transgresse,
 By thy faire virtues; which, if once they see,
 Unto the like they doe their minds adresse,
 Such as thou art, such they desire to be:
 If they be blind, thou giv'st to them their sight;
 If deafe or lame, they heare, and goe upright. (ll. 1369-1376)

Rather than effecting miracles of healing at the physical level, Clifford's powers are spiritual. She is a mirror for others, a book to be read and meditated upon and followed. Because Clifford identifies with and houses Christ, she can be a vessel of spiritual healing to others.

The continuing message of interiority concludes 'Salve Deus'. In doing so, Lanyer hearkens back to the imagery in the dedication poems that bodies should be read as texts as a means of attaining affective unity with Christ. Lanyer devotes two stanzas to blazoning the body of the risen Christ and casting Him as the bride of the Song of Songs.³⁰ Reading the risen body of Christ in feminine language brings Him into the private circle of ladies as a means of finding a balance to and refuge from male-dominated social and religious arenas. Lanyer concludes the poem on this same theme. In terms reminiscent of a reliquary, she addresses Margaret Clifford:

Ah! give me leave (good Lady) now to leave
 This task of Beauty which I tooke in hand,
 ...
 Therefore (good Madame) in your heart I leave
 His perfect picture, where it still shall stand,
 Deepely engraved in that holy shrine,
 Environed with Love and Thoughts divine.
 There you may see him as a God in glory,
 And as a man in miserable case;
 There you may reade his true and perfect storie,
 His bleeding body there you may embrace (ll. 1321-1322 and 1325-1332)

In the creation of an interior shrine, Lanyer again emphasizes that women become sanctified in the ritual process of becoming places to house Christ. While Lanyer includes her own poem as part of the ritual meditative process, she still maintains that reading the lineaments of Christ engenders real sight of and real union with Christ. Her book thus serves a sacramental purpose as an outward sign of an inward grace. In this inward place, female communities united as clear-sited lovers of Christ can thrive across space and time. And behind this inward place lies the palimpsested, enigmatic Cookham – the physical *topos* that contoured the blossoming spiritual and poetic practices of three visionary women.

4. Conclusion

Revisiting Lanyer in a geographic space has illustrated several key points for early modern scholarship. First, material culture and book history are intimately related to the study of literature. In the digital age where libraries offer scanned archival images, pieces of the material world

³⁰ Lanyer writes Christ's face is like 'Snowe' and His cheeks and lips like 'skarlet' while his curled hair is 'Blacke as a Raven' (see ll. 1305-1320).

of a bygone age are a click away. New Criticism's pristine texts existing in silent voids are no more. The clutter and clamor and cursory effulgence of everyday life surround a text and exert an influence that gives a fourth dimension to a page. A writer's psychological strata can begin to be mapped onto promontories and parts of the main. The mapping impulse, the spatial turn, book history – all are means of piercing the veil that separates readers from the world of a text. Secondly, studying Aemilia Lanyer in her own context rather than by comparison to other poets allows her to be celebrated as a notable poet worthy of study. Lanyer scholarship has neatly followed Susan Bassnett's postulation that early feminist studies of women initially focused on misogynist representations of women, while a second wave of study 'focused on texts produced by women, with a view to revising traditionally male determined literary history' (Bassnett 1993, 116). Much of this phase emphasizes comparison between male and female authors. The deep desire to cast Lanyer as the inventor of the country house genre as opposed to Ben Jonson speaks to this trend, as does A. L. Rowse's unfounded attribution of Lanyer as Shakespeare's Dark Lady. That Lanyer must be proved to be significant via contrast was a useful tack in introducing her to the canon. And yet, male poets seem to rarely undergo this sort of comparative reinforcement. They can be said to be part of a 'school' of poetry – a much less patronizing method of introducing a writer and fitting them into a category. The comfortableness and helpfulness of categories is perhaps why Lanyer's *Salve Deus Rex Judeorum* has been treated in separate pieces for so long instead of as an organic whole. Restoring the context of the book, restoring the context of the writing, are a means of moving beyond tokenism to study Lanyer as a talented, innovative writer keenly in tune with her social, religious, and physical environments.

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Changing Places/Spaces



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Real and Imagined Space The Rhetoric of Thomas Overbury's Imprisonment

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Abstract

The article discusses how the presentation of the career, arrest and imprisonment of Sir Thomas Overbury illustrate the importance of place. Looking at epistolary material between 1611 and 1613, it examines how Overbury was represented by courtiers, diplomats and commentators in connection to different royal locations. It argues that the rhetorical training of such writers led to the use of places of argument which aimed to guide readers' emotional responses to the information presented. Having begun with Overbury's disagreement with the queen at Greenwich in May 1611, the article then moves on to his role in the competition for the position of the royal secretary and the connection of the courtier at this time to the king's hunting lodge at Royston. Finally, moving to the reception of Overbury's arrest by those watching the court and his own letters from the Tower, it considers how he uses the same rhetorical techniques in an ill-fated attempt to influence the king's favourite, Robert Carr, then Viscount Rochester, and secure his release from close imprisonment.

Keywords: Letters, Place, Prison, Rhetoric, Thomas Overbury

1. Introduction

The arrest of prominent Jacobean courtier, Thomas Overbury, came out of nowhere for most of the court. Henry Wotton, writing as he did regularly to his friend Edmund Bacon, gave an account of the arrest, with all the circumstantial details that a man of his rhetorical education might have been expected to include:

[Y]esterday, about six of the clock at evening, Sir Thomas Overbury was from the council chamber conveyed by a clerk of the Council and two of the guard to the Tower, and there by warrant consigned to the lieutenant as close prisoner; which both by the suddenness, like a stroke of thunder, and more by the quality and relation of the person, breeding in the beholders (whereof by chance I was one) very much amazement (Wotton 1907, 19)

Wotton's use of simile both shows the unexpectedness of the act and implies the godlike power of a monarch who is able to produce thunderbolts. Positioning himself as an eyewitness, a typical epistolary technique to make his written account more reliable, he envisages that Bacon will wish to know the motivation behind such action.¹ He continues, therefore, to explain how Overbury has gained the enmity of James VI and I:

I will adventure, for the satisfying of your thoughts about it, to set down the forerunning and leading causes of this accident, as far as in so short a time I have been able to wade in so deep a water. It is conceived that the King hath a good while been much distasted with the said gentleman, even in his own nature, for too stiff a carriage of his fortune; besides that scandalous offence of the Queen at Greenwich, which was never but a palliated cure. (*Ibid.*)

The place of Overbury's arrest was clearly significant. Such an arrest in the council chamber meant public humiliation and reputational damage. All these details enable Wotton's schadenfreude, as he tells his friend about what has happened to a man whose rise has coincided with Wotton's recent decline. He gloats that Overbury, at that point acting as secretary to the king's favourite, Robert Carr, Viscount Rochester, was 'standing in the second degree of power in the Court, and conceiving (as himself told me but two hours before) never better than at that present of his own fortunes and ends' (20). In contrast, the place where Overbury was taken after his arrest was also significant; the Tower, demonstrating both the monarch's power and the courtier's complete lack of it, is the antithesis of the council chamber.

This essay considers the importance of place in the story of Overbury's court career and in the epistolary telling of that story. The palaces of Greenwich and Whitehall and the quasi-court of the hunting lodge at Royston all had particular affordances for a courtier and were the settings for a courtly habitus. I use the term that Pierre Bourdieu describes as shared 'schemata or structures of perception, conception and action' (2002, 27) in this context as common experiences of behaviour, speech, knowledge, and thinking, shared by those who worked at James's court. As Nicholas Popper notes, '[t]he early Stuart political world was a complex media sphere of multiple overlapping networks' (2024, 89), and this habitus underlay the significance of the courtly spaces in the many letters where courtiers, diplomats, and their secretaries exchanged information about Overbury's career. Popper's work looks at '[t]he increase of paper' in this period, which led to 'a surge in writing, as the scraps speckling early modern archives testify' (9), and which, he comments, 'verged on graphomania' (*ibid.*). Though he warns against 'a bias for letter writing and discursive argument' in academic work, leading to the ignoring of 'the churn of fragmentary scraps and papers typically overlooked despite their ubiquity within archives' (16), the importance of letters is clear. The evidence letters provide is a key means of interpreting the portrayal of a courtly figure such as Overbury. Having explored the relevance of royal spaces more broadly in the epistolary exchanges of court observers, therefore, the essay moves on to the significance of a contrasting location associated with the once-successful courtier: the prison cell in the Tower where he was to die. Finally, the essay reflects on the resonance of all these places for the imprisoned courtier in his letters to Rochester. Both court space and the Tower gain a rhetorical valency that Overbury uses as places of argument. Thus, exploring how the evocation of place creates specific emotions, the essay will show how Overbury uses the skills he learnt at university and at the Inns of Court in what will prove to be an ineffectual attempt to manipulate his reader through those final communications.

¹ See Schneider: 'letters often mediated the anxieties and dilemmas ... by employing epistolary strategies that attempted to authenticate the emotion, sincerity, and veracity of correspondents' articulations' (2005, 17).

2. Overbury's Court Spaces

Wotton's letter to Edmund Bacon with which this essay opened refers to 'that scandalous offence of the Queen at Greenwich' (1907, 19), one of the key spaces of Overbury's life as a courtier. As Kevin Sharpe notes, 'the courts of [the queen and Prince Henry] became semi-independent power bases which drew critics of the king' (2010, 108); Anna's palace at Greenwich was her domain and, distinct from Whitehall, it represented her authority. Sharpe points out that 'her court provided support for factions hostile to James's lover, Robert Carr', but through drawing such oppositional currents into her circle, 'she helped to earth critics of the favourite to the royal court' (*ibid.*). In fact, her space, part of the wider court network, actually helped to defuse potentially destructive opponents by bringing them into the queen's proximity (2010, 109). But an atmosphere antagonistic to Carr, and thus to Overbury, certainly pervaded Greenwich and in May 1611; there was an incident there that was much covered in correspondence between diplomats and their intelligencers in London. A Mr Taverner relays the events to William Trumbull, the king's representative in Brussels:

On Monday last Rochester and his dear Overbury, walking in the garden at Greenwich whither the queen's window openeth, she broke into a sudden and contemptible laughing at them. "So," saith she, "they did at her," which belief carried her so far that she went to the king with tears in her eyes and complained and besought him that she might have right of them, which he not seeming to be so sensible of as she hoped, she cast herself on her knees and besought him not to suffer her to be so scorned and despised of his grooms, though she were content to suffer it from him, with earnest protestation that if he would not right her, she would go back into Denmark. (1 June 1611, HMC Downshire 1938, 83)

Like many of the men at and on the edges of the court whose letters this essay examines, Taverner would have been familiar with the key works used in teaching oratory such as Cicero's *De oratore*, Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria*, and Erasmus's *De copia*. Quintilian, for instance, would have told him of the importance of *circumstantiae* such as 'motive, time, place, opportunity, means, method and the like' in constructing a persuasive narrative (Quintilian 2001, 5.10.23). As in Wotton's account of the arrest, Taverner's dramatic retelling of the story, with the words and actions of the aggrieved queen, presents circumstantial details of time, place, manner, and motive, and enables Trumbull and his fellow readers in Brussels to interpret the behaviour of the key players. The queen's tears and her kneeling, added to the words recorded, or given to her, by Taverner, for instance, have a subtle impact; a reader of the letter infers her desire for the king's pity, and perhaps, in the 'unqueenly' conduct perceives Taverner's mockery. Work on the impact of a humanist education, such as that of Colin Burrow, shows how the pervasive understanding of classical texts inspired writing for the stage. He notes that:

The skills of an early modern dramatist were multiple, but at their absolute centre lay the ability to put a case plausibly, to represent a debate from both sides, to mimic style and character, and to write as though from a particular character's situation and perspective. (2013, 43)

Writing about the impact of rhetorical learning, Lorna Hutson shows how audience response to character and situation is driven by the use of this circumstantial detail to create what the Greeks called *enargeia*. She explains how the use of circumstances shows the 'unscene', or 'extramimetic, *imagined or conjectured* locations and temporalities' (2015, 7) in drama, and thus audiences can infer motive and can be guided in their emotional response. Inference about character and conjectures of their motives are just as central to letters such as Taverner's as they

are in the playhouse. Trumbull is enabled to make judgements of the situation beyond what is stated on the surface of the text, and thus to judge how to work with key political players. The queen's tears and pleading with the king are attempts to work against Rochester as the main cause of her jealousy.

Her subsequent actions continue to show the significance of separate royal spaces. Into her court at Greenwich, the queen summons both the prince from his court at Richmond and leading courtiers from the king's at Whitehall, to present her argument against Carr in the manner of a rhetorical *causa*:

The next day she sent to the prince to Richmond to entreat him, and so to the lords in Whitehall to come to Greenwich to have the hearing of her cause, where on Wednesday it was cunningly urged by her and as confidently denied by them. The conclusion was, she finding herself not able to supplant Carr, which she desireth of all things in the world, turned all her force against Overbury, against whom she hath so far prevailed that he is banished from the Court. (HMC Downshire 1938, 83)

That Greenwich is the queen's space undoubtedly exacerbates her anger at the behaviour of the two courtiers. As Rochester's position as the king's favourite is unassailable, and he is supported by the 'lords', she cannot secure his punishment. So, the outcome of the confrontation is Overbury's expulsion from 'the Court', presumably all of the royal palaces. He, instead, has to retreat to 'his lodging by Whitehall', an apparent humiliation; yet his growing power is indicated when he is joined there by those who support *his* cause: 'all men almost visit him and my ld. of Pembroke, too' (*ibid.*). Soon, with the help of Robert Cecil, he is to return to the space of the court, but several commentators can see the queen's resentment against him is not healed; as Wotton comments, it is 'but a palliated cure' (1907, 19).

Despite the queen's feelings, the support of other courtiers leads to a growth in Overbury's power, and this is shown again in letters written after the death of Robert Cecil in 1612. This time the location of the action is not at Greenwich, but wherever the king's court was residing. His love of hunting often meant that James was not in London, but that he and his gentlemen of the bedchamber regularly shifted close to one of his regular hunting grounds. In 1612, the position of lord secretary left vacant at Cecil's death caused much discussion in the letters of intelligencers writing to their masters abroad, and some even suggested that Overbury himself may be in line for the post.² However, as time goes on, the race seemed to be between Thomas Lake, client of the powerful Howard faction at court, and Henry Neville, supported by the Protestant lords including Pembroke and Southampton. It is this latter grouping to which Overbury is most regularly connected, and Neville clearly feels that Overbury's influence with Rochester, and thus with the king, will enable him to clinch the position.³ Even before Cecil's death, those with most knowledge of the workings of the court were noting Overbury's power. Levinus Munck, Cecil's secretary, is a reliable inside source to prove this influence. John More tells Ralph Winwood, for whom he worked, that Munck told him preferment is to be gained

² Robert Naunton writes to Winwood, in September 1612, that 'Sir Tho. Overburie may fit himself with as good a probability to furnish the place in time, by the practice and experience he is now in' (HMC Buccleuch Whitehall 1899, 113).

³ In a letter to Trumbull on 15 September 1612, Overbury makes the process of influence explicit. He tells Trumbull, the king's agent in Brussels, who is keen that he should be replaced, having not been made a full ambassador several years after his predecessor's reposting, 'I have done my best offices for you toward my lord of Rochester, and my lord hath done such toward the king as I hope you shall find good effects of it in due time' (HMC Downshire 1938, 369).

‘through [Sir] Thomas Overbury, by means of Viscount Rochester, who of late (said he) hath brought to pass many great and strange matters, there being still (but especially were before Sir Thomas his disgrace with the Queen) more suitors following him than my Lord Treasurer’ (29 October 1611, HMC Buccleuch Whitehall 1899, 102). As with Taverner’s citing of the queen’s words to the king in his earlier letter, quoting a source like Munck directly is a tactic establishing the reliability of epistolary testimony. Winwood and the group around him who will read More’s letter are encouraged to believe the writer’s opinion that, although the impact of the spat with the queen is still being felt five months later, Overbury’s power is established. Intelligence like this undoubtedly encouraged Winwood and Neville to gain Overbury’s support.

But securing this support was not always easy, and the problem often lay in the mobility of the king’s court. In a series of letters between Neville and Winwood (who planned to act as his secretary when Neville was appointed) they discuss the problems in accessing Overbury, whom they needed to engage on their behalf. The courtier was constantly on the move, and the letters are full of comments such as this, written on July 12, 1612: ‘I sent yesternight to Sir Tho[mas] Overbury to know what time I might come to him this morning; and he made me answer that he went out of town early, but would return about 6 of clock in the evening, and prayed me to come to him then’ (HMC Buccleuch Whitehall 1899, 109). Immediately after this, Neville wrote again to explain that the proposed meeting has not in fact happened: ‘I feared that which happened: that Sir Tho[mas] Overbury would not return yesterday till it was very late ... but this afternoon, about two of clock, he will be with me’ (12 July [probably in fact 13 July as it follows a day after the previous one] 1612, *ibid.*). Markers of time, constantly part of the narrative, suggest how busy the courtier was, implying his importance, building the pressure, and guiding the reader’s inference of Neville’s frustration. These letters are marked from Westminster, but a key issue was the king’s travel to his hunting lodges, at places such as the small town of Royston outside the capital and away from the main royal palaces. Neil Cuddy notes that over the course of James’s reign, the king ‘must have spent about half his time either in hunting lodges thirty or forty miles from London – Royston and Newmarket were his favourites – or on progress’ (1987, 193). He often hunted between summer progress and Christmas, and then again between Christmas and Easter, taking with him a small entourage of his closest gentlemen. James’s choice of companions on these visits bestowed honour, and it was a sign of Overbury’s influence that he was there alongside Rochester. But it made him difficult to track down, as the frustration of Neville’s letters suggests: ‘I made Sir Tho[mas] Overbury acquainted with that which you wrote in your last letters to me concerning Sir Thomas Lake: whose [Overbury’s] answer from Roiston I send you herewith’ (April 1613, HMC Buccleuch Whitehall 1899, 131). Written as this letter must have been, shortly before Overbury’s arrest on 21st April, 1613, it demonstrates clearly both the length of time Neville had to work towards his, and Winwood’s, preferment and belief in the importance of Overbury to gaining the secretaryship.

3. *The Arrest*

The proximity of Overbury to royal spaces at Greenwich, Whitehall, and Royston is echoed by his arrest in the council chamber. The creation of shock in Wotton’s description of the arrest lies partly in the location. A man who had been in such a position of influence, benefiting from his close contact with Rochester and the king, was seized in the very heart of power. Indeed, the outward reason for the arrest was connected to Overbury’s need for proximity to Rochester and James. His power relies on his location. Asked by the king to accept an ambassadorial posting to (sources vary) France, the Low Countries, or perhaps even Moscow, Overbury had

refused. As the letters explored so far help to show, communication between London and those postings was comparatively slow, potentially untrustworthy, and vulnerable to interception. Such communication required letters from trusted individuals who worked hard to build into their missives proof of their reliability. Evidence suggests that the pressure on Overbury to accept such a posting was the result of the king's collusion with the Howard family: a political complexity to which Wotton alludes in his metaphor 'so deep a water' (1907, 19). Aiming to attach Rochester to their faction, key court figures such as the earl of Northampton capitalised on the favourite's attraction to the earl's niece, Frances Howard. At this time, when her divorce from the third earl of Essex was needed to facilitate her marriage to Rochester, Overbury's potential opposition to such a match would have made negotiations trickier. His removal from court was the most straightforward way for the Howards to secure their desired political outcome. This was accompanied by the king's personal animosity towards Overbury. As John Chamberlain explained to Dudley Carleton, then ambassador in Venice, the arrest was a result of James 'thincking yt a dishonor to him that the world shold have an opinion that Rochester ruled him and Overburie ruled Rochester' (1939, 443). The king's irritation was itself, of course, enhanced by the queen's grudge against both men and the pressure she had put on her husband. The plan to remove Overbury from the spaces of the royal court was thus devoutly to be wished by several powerful figures. Another epistolary account of the arrest gives more detail of Overbury's response as he wriggled on the hook of this plan:

Yesterday about Six of the Clock my Lord Chancellor and my Lord of Pembroke were employed by the King to speak with Sir Thomas Overbury, and to make him an Offer of an Ambassage into the Low Countries or France, which he would. Whereto he made Answer, that he was not capable of such Imployment for want of Language, nor able to undergoe it by reason of his Weakness, being so exceedingly troubled with the Spleen that if he had a long Letter to write he was feign to give over; therefore he should not be fit to attend any Busyness, as in accepting this Offer he must be forced to do: And whereas it was alleadged that his Majesty intended this for his Good and Preferment, he would not leave his Country for any Preferment in the World. (Winwood 1725, 447)

Overbury's excuses to avoid accepting the proposal, recounted by John Packer to Winwood, seem to vary in persuasiveness. The suggestion that he did not have the language skills to deal with a posting in France or the Low Countries seems inconceivable, as he had travelled there already, writing letters to Cecil in 1609 from the court of Henri IV; receiving letters in French; and, on his return, writing a book outlining his thoughts about the different political systems he had witnessed.⁴ His claims of 'spleen' issues may have had some truth, and this illness was to accompany his imprisonment, though the activity shown in Neville's letters appears to give the lie to his claim that he was not 'fit to attend any Busyness'. But the final reason Neville gives, that 'he would not leave his Country for any Preferment in the World', is the most likely to be key. Being physically separated from Rochester and the king would undoubtedly have reduced his effective power. Relying as he did on influence, the mechanism of Overbury's power would be largely destroyed by a move out of the spaces of the court. Chamberlain, writing to Winwood, agreed on the connection between Overbury's rejection of the king's embassy and his need to stay near the nexus of power in London: 'he insisted that the King could not in law or justice force him to forsake his countrie' (1939, 448). Portraying his self-interested need to remain close to Rochester and James as patriotism, Overbury had probably expected Rochester's

⁴ See Overbury 1626.

support, which he had previously experienced after the argument with Anna in May 1611. The desires of Rochester had many times before persuaded James to change heart. But this time Overbury did not receive this assistance. The king moved swiftly. Again, according to Packer:

this Report being made to the King, he sent my Lord of Pembroke for the Lords who were in Councill ... to whom he declared when they were come, that he could not obtaine so much of a Gentleman and one of his Servants, as to accept an honorable Employment from him. In Conclusion he gave them Order to send for him, and to send him to the Tower, where he is close Prisoner. (Winwood 1725, 447)

Being a close prisoner in the Tower should have prevented letter writing. Once one of the affordances of Overbury's life in court spaces, the privilege would ostensibly be removed as a result of the courtier's move to this location and to this particular kind of imprisonment. Incarceration did not necessarily lead to the end of letters. As Will Tosh explains, letter writing in prison was the norm in early modern England: 'the prison (a location that was far more familiar to educated men of the sixteenth century than it is to their equivalents today) was similarly able to foster an economy of favour and friendship among those within its walls, and between the imprisoned and their friends at liberty' (2016, 17). In his examination of prison letters, James Daybell stresses the importance of being able to write in prison as it 'enabled communication with the outside world and facilitated the writing of penitent letters for royal clemency' (2012, 27). The exception was for those prisoners kept 'close'. An unusually severe punishment for the 'contempt' of which Overbury was accused, being a close prisoner reduced to nothing a man's link to the outside world and kept him severed from his friends and supporters. Despite this, Overbury was able to send and receive letters from Rochester and two key members of the Howard family, the earls of Northampton and Suffolk. There have been many conjectures about why this severe punishment was given to Overbury, but the outcome was his dependency, not on the Tower's lieutenant, guards, and servants, as was the case with other close prisoners, but on the political faction that had secured his imprisonment. As Francis Bacon noted while preparing the prosecution of Rochester at the trial for Overbury's murder a few years later, the victim was a 'close prisoner to all his friends, and open and exposed to all his enemies' (1857, 319).

4. *The Tower*

The Tower was, of course, while being a prison, also a site of royal power, just as other court spaces were. This was one of the ironies of Overbury's change in situation. While remaining in a space where much of the business of government continued close by him, his situation as a close prisoner prevented his engaging in that business. It should, indeed, have prevented any kind of communication yet, despite his status, written communications from Rochester came back and forth through a variety of routes. Some were brought illicitly by messengers, others hidden in bottles and foodstuffs. The smuggling in of communication was a regular topic in the letters, and they cover extensive prophylactic circumstances of transmission: discussion of the concealment of potentially dangerous content; the choice of the right bearer; and the specifics of seals and wax. Securing the route of transmission as much as he could was Overbury's first aim in writing after his arrest: 'Looke well to your seals and mine, and marke them well', he instructs Rochester. '[M]y letter yesterday was seald with soft wax ill fauordly & seals, this is sealed with hard wax and my little seale', and, in a later letter he noted, 'I seale this with my owne seale, marke it well. I pray you seale with the stags head thereafter. and send mee my little

seale againe'.⁵ In case their letters were intercepted, he proposed code-names for key courtly characters. Early codes propose the king shall be 'Julius', Neville 'Similis', and Pembroke 'Niger' but, as the letters continue, more code-names follow. The queen became Agrippina, for instance, while Northampton became Dominick, and Northampton's brother and lord chamberlain, the earl of Suffolk became Wolsey. As we have already seen, the business of government relied on the growth of written communication, but epistolarity in any context can make writers vulnerable. Letters can be insecure, and potentially read by eyes other than those intended, and letters may not be trusted even if they reach their recipient intact. A written mode could be difficult to interpret as truth without the non-verbal communication that accompanies speech, hence some of the strategies employed by the letter writers above.⁶ Further, the thoughts conveyed could be used against the writer, and the reader, if intercepted.⁷ As Popper has shown in his work on the development of early modern archives, retention of inscriptions was the norm in court circles, but a few short years after their writing, Rochester was to find himself on trial, with the letters he received from Thomas Overbury used against him.

Overbury's letters are the result of his humanist education at The Queen's College, Oxford, and at Middle Temple, one of the four inns of court.⁸ He was accustomed to using the methods demonstrated by those writing on rhetoric to make a legal case after seeing them delivered, for instance, or delivering them himself, in such pedagogic contexts as moots. Overbury was known from the start for his effective and clever use of language, and his appearance in John Manningham's 1602 'diary' illustrates this. A student contemporary with Overbury at the Inn, Manningham recounts the witty and transgressive comments his fellow student made about other innsmen: their contemporary Ben Jonson and a statesman at the height of courtly power, Robert Cecil.⁹

In the six months Overbury spent in the Tower of London, he used his skills to write repeatedly to Rochester. We have extant a number of these letters in copied form, and a final one in autograph. The copies were made for Francis Bacon to use as inartificial proofs: evidence in his case against Rochester, by then the earl of Somerset, for Overbury's murder.¹⁰ Showing the full arc of Overbury's emotion, from the early confidence and political manoeuvring immediately after his arrest in April 1613, through to the despair and vitriol of his final communication

⁵ BL MS Harley 7002, 281r and 281v. All further references to the letters between Overbury and Rochester, with the exception of the final one, are from Harley 7002. In all my transcriptions from manuscript letters, I have retained original spelling. For the wider dangers of epistolarity, see Schneider (2005) (*passim*).

⁶ See Schneider: 'early modern Europe tended to valorize speech and face-to-face interaction as a more reliable, trustworthy, and authentic mode of communication compared to written or printed modes' (2005, 16) and '[o]ften non-verbal clues give away lies that might not be perceived by verbal means alone. With the physical body absent, as in a letter, these cues are missing; deception is therefore easier to maintain, and the reliability of knowledge and the integrity of communication are threatened' (32).

⁷ Many of Wotton's letters suggest awareness of this fear. Notably, his letter to Bacon on 7 May, 1613, discusses Overbury's imprisonment obliquely, using medical imagery to comment on what is happening ('The nature of his alteration was (as you rightly judge it) in the first access somewhat apoplethical, but yet mingled in my opinion with divers properties of a lethargy') before finally exclaiming 'we shall discourse more particularly when we meet; which I now long for, besides other respects, that we may lay aside these metaphors' (1907, 22). This letter continues with an anecdote about Sir Peter Buck, whose rather innocuous letter to a friend about activity at court led to his imprisonment and to his trial at the Star Chamber. Wotton quips, 'I set down these accidents barely, as you see, without their causes ... but my lodging is so near the Star Chamber that my pens shake in my hand' (23). For further discussion of this letter, see Watson 2018, 50-52.

⁸ For more information about the early life of Thomas Overbury, and the impact of his university and inns of court education, see Watson 2024, 12-18.

⁹ For more on Overbury's part in Manningham's Diary see Watson 2024, 25-27.

¹⁰ For the use of letters as atechnos proofs, see Watson 2018, 47-48.

just before his death in the September, these letters both reflect space and create it. This group of letters show the constriction of the physical space he inhabited as he wrote, the immobility and powerlessness of imprisonment, and, through them, Overbury conveys the physical and mental discomfort of his incarceration.

Even in the early letters in this sequence he is keen to stress how much the airlessness and constraint is affecting his health. Persuading Rochester to work on the king, and to have him sent away from the Tower, he tells the man he still considers his closest friend that he plans to take a 'vomitt'¹¹ which will make him ill. This, he writes in what is labelled in the transcriptions 'Letter III', 'will be a new occasion for you to be importunat to send me into the country to saue my life for tis not the close ayre but the apprehension of the place that hurts me'.¹² Though in later letters it seems that he is, indeed, made ill by his imprisonment, the veracity of his claims are difficult to judge because of his constant references to the taking of 'To', his code for a substance which he takes to make him ill, and that he proposes that Rochester should also take to manipulate the king. On this early occasion, Rochester seems to have procured the emetic with the help of Robert Killigrew. A member of the circle surrounding Rochester and Overbury, Killigrew was imprisoned around the time of 'Letter III', on 5 May 1613, for talking to Overbury at his window in the Tower. As he was also a friend, and relation by marriage, of Wotton's correspondent, Edmund Bacon, Wotton was keen to let him know: 'Your friend, Sir Robert Killigrew, hath been committed to the Fleet, for conferring with a close prisoner in a strange language; which were (as I hear) the two circumstances that did aggravate his error' (1907, 22). Wotton often writes obliquely, as a protection in case his letters are intercepted, but the 'close prisoner' here is clearly Overbury. Less obvious is the 'strange language' in which they spoke. It is perhaps suggestive of a coded exchange, something we have seen Overbury use in his writing at this time and showing his closeness to Killigrew.

Shortly after Overbury's letter asking Rochester to send the 'vomitt' from Killigrew to him quickly, Killigrew himself writes to Rochester, thinking the king's favourite is to take the emetic himself, and warning him of the power of the substance he provides:

I would not concell your Lo[rship] to take it vnlesse the phisitians doe aloe [allow] of it att this time for though this be as good as any can bee the yet there is noe such medicin good for all persons att all times of which they are the best iudges, but if your Lo[rship] be resolued to take it, this bearer can give direction for the manner.¹³

Though questioned at the time of the murder trial about his supplying of these powders to Rochester, Killigrew clearly knew nothing about the plan to use them to manipulate the king. He was simply a pawn in Overbury's game to fake illness, and this trickery makes it difficult to assess the level of the prisoner's real illness. By July, when Killigrew was one of the two friends allowed by the king's concession to visit him in the Tower, his illness was obviously genuine.¹⁴

As the letters to Rochester continue into the summer, so does the connection between bodily illness and the space Overbury inhabits. Early in the series of letters, in 'Letter III' where he asked for the emetic from Killigrew, he also asks Rochester to send doctors to him,

¹¹ BL MS Harley 7002, 281r.

¹² BL MS Harley 7002, 281r. He uses the noun 'apprehension' to suggest his emotional sensitivity to the place (OED, s.v. II.6), perhaps rather than his fear of what might happen there (OED, s.v. II.12, a slightly later usage of the word).

¹³ BL MS Harley 7002, 281v.

¹⁴ Killigrew's visit to Overbury in July is mentioned in Alastair Bellany's entry on Killigrew in the Oxford DNB.

and comments that he hopes they, ‘when they goe backe may goe into the king and relate how much my body is wasted with though[t] of the king’s displeasure and this place’.¹⁵ Throughout the epistolary exchange, he repeatedly tells Rochester what to do, especially what to say to the king, to secure his release. He is clearly used to directing the king’s favourite, and Chamberlain’s comment to Carleton seems to be based on good observation: the king was probably right to fear that people thought ‘Rochester ruled him and Overburie ruled Rochester’ (1939, 443). He is vulnerable, without many of his usual mechanisms of power, and physically unwell, but he still continues to act towards Rochester as is habitual: with a mixture of control and openness. As well as directing Rochester’s words to the king, he also tells his friend his secrets. Though he plans to tell the doctors that his legs are affected by his imprisonment, he admits that this is a fabrication. He is going to claim that the problem with his legs is the result of his imprisonment, even though it was a pre-existing condition: ‘I will impute since this though they were so afore’.¹⁶ His trickery in manipulating those around him and attempting to deceive the king perhaps suggests why some writers compare him to Mercury, the articulate god of deception.¹⁷

Overbury’s focus on the physical consequences of his imprisonment in the Tower continues through the letter sequence, and another apparently pre-existing condition returns in ‘Letter X’. The references to Robert Mansell’s release date this letter to the end of June and, rather than the problems with his legs, he now returns to his spleen, cited earlier by Mr Packer as one of the reasons why he could not take up the embassy.¹⁸ Chamberlain also picks up on this, telling Carleton ‘he then alledged indisposition of body and want of health as beeing much subject to the spleen’, with the use of the verb ‘alledged’ perhaps conveying that the letter writer wished to cast doubt on Overbury’s veracity (1939, 443). As suggested before, the amount of work he completed in late 1612 and early 1613, witnessed by the activity described by Neville, might reasonably cast doubt on this condition. Yet, it is clearly a weakness Rochester accepts and it recurs as a subject since in the June letter Overbury again cites physical illness as his reason for his refusal to go overseas. ‘[N]othing’, Overbury argues, ‘helps the spleen so much as our native ayre, and forraine, though better, hurts it, therfore of late Mr Burges the famous preecher hauing the spleen though otherwise of a strong body, was fayne to leaue his charge att the Hage, only to come to London, his natiue ayre, for the ease of his sicknesse, and I whiles I was abroad was neuer well how[ev]er as Mayerne knows, which made mee returne so soone’.¹⁹ The familiarity of Theodore de Mayerne, the king’s physician, with Overbury’s illness may be an argument to indicate his veracity, as well as of a chronic condition. By July, ‘Letter XI’ has Overbury again use Mayerne’s testimony as evidence, this time referring to another splenetic condition – a disturbance in black bile, or melancholia – to which the doctor can bear witness: ‘for my sicknes of consumption and flatus Hypochondriacus, Mayerne may be cald vpon’.²⁰ Whether this illness is genuinely debilitating or is being used as a convenient excuse not to take the embassy, the assumption that lies behind most of the scenarios that Overbury proposes during his imprisonment is that the impact of incarceration will be shown upon his body and in his health.

¹⁵ BL MS Harley 7002, 281r.

¹⁶ BL MS Harley 7002, 281r.

¹⁷ For example, in the letter from John Bull (HMC Buccleuch Whitehall 1899, 140), see note 21 below.

¹⁸ Mansell, a naval officer, declared to the lord admiral his opposition to a commission of enquiry into the navy, and was arraigned for contempt and sent to the Marshalsea on 12th June 1613, for refusing to declare the name of a lawyer he had consulted.

¹⁹ BL MS Harley 7002, 286r.

²⁰ BL MS Harley 7002, 286v.

By later in July, there seems less reason to doubt Overbury's illness, and intelligencers such as Thomas Bull are writing about it: in his case to inform Winwood that 'Sir Tho[mas] Ouerbury is still here in prison, shut up close, and very sick' (20 July 1613, HMC Buccleuch Whitehall 1899, 140).²¹ In 'Letter XII' Overbury himself gives an even more detailed account of his illness, increasingly medical and specific in his description:

This morning (notwithstanding my fasting all yesterday) I find a great heat continue in all my bodye and the sam desire of drinke and loathing of meat, and my water is strangly high, which I keepe till Mayerns com, this distemper of heat contrary to my constitution makes me feare some feuer at the last.²²

His expectation, again, is that he will die of this disease: 'such an one meeting with so weake a body, will quickly I doubt end it'. He 'can indure no cloaths on, and doe nothing but drinke'.²³ As before, the evidence is to be kept until Mayerne arrives, perhaps to convince him of his sickness and perhaps to enable him to diagnose effectively.

Physical illness is a signifier of his imprisonment in the Tower, and reports of that illness are expected to persuade James to clemency. Already, quite soon after his arrest, Overbury was claiming that he needed to be released 'to saue [his] life'. In a later letter, his plea to Rochester continues to link his death with the Tower: '[I]f you leaue mee here,' he tells him, 'I shall neuer see you more'.²⁴ Finally, almost at the end of that same letter, there is a genuine urgency in his association of the two: 'my feuer grows so vppon mee a new that by God if you leaue mee here a weeke longer, I thinke I shall neuer see you more, for the feuer will neuer leaue mee while I am here'.²⁵

As well as his physical decline, Overbury was also affected emotionally by being a close prisoner. Many of those in the Tower were allowed to speak with friends and to roam more freely around the space, as well as to write letters, but close prisoners were not. Unable to understand why the king was punishing him beyond what might be expected for 'a contempt', he lamented to Rochester during the summer, 'I heare nothing of hauing the libertye of this place'.²⁶ His feeling of being trapped was complete, and he even felt unable to look out of his room: 'I neuer dare open the windows to looke out', he told Rochester, perhaps connected with Killigrew's arrest and imprisonment for talking with the close prisoner at a window.²⁷ At one point, in 'Letter VIII', Overbury returns to an earlier request to 'be importunat to send me into the country to saue my life', but by now he seems to believe that Rochester is able to effect a change in his location.²⁸ He remains steadfast in his refusal to accept the embassy abroad,

²¹ Bull comments cryptically in this letter: 'it is thought Venus hath overthrown Mercury, and will knit the two sides into one', using a version of the 'metaphors' Wotton referred to in his letter to Edmund Bacon, and avoiding speaking directly about affairs of state. It is clear that Bull was informing Winwood of Frances Howard's victory over Overbury, uniting the two 'sides' at court (Rochester with the Howards).

²² BL MS Harley 7002, 287r.

²³ BL MS Harley 7002, 287r.

²⁴ BL MS Harley 7002, 282r.

²⁵ BL MS Harley 7002, 282r.

²⁶ BL MS Harley 7002, 283r. Overbury's sense of being victimised beyond the normal length of punishment for such an offence as his is shown explicitly in 'Letter X', when he recounts the comments of Gervase Elwes, Lieutenant of the Tower: 'hee wonderd at my being here thus long, Mansell out and returnd againe to court, whose cause and manner and time of imprisonment, was much different from mine, and hee had the same enimies I haue, and no such friend' (285r).

²⁷ BL MS Harley 7002, 284r.

²⁸ BL MS Harley 7002, 281r.

but he asks instead for time out of the Tower: an illicit escape, not a release. In June, Overbury is asking Rochester to ‘by noe means heare of my going out at all, beyond sea,’ and instead he wishes to go ‘though for an houre but to Berry, not by commaund, but stolne thether by discretion’.²⁹ This desperation to leave the Tower only increases as Overbury’s illness worsens, and by late July, in ‘Letter XII’, he resorts to increasingly incoherent threats with the deixis common to such intimate communication:

now my request to you is, and it may be my last is that you would gett me leaue to goe to my owne chamber to night, and after nine a clocke, I may goe thether in the leiftennants coach unseen and unknowne, not possible to gett mee hence to night because of that business tomorrow, then pressing to night vehemently will make him condeseend for tomorrow night, and besides will keepe the other from fayling to morrow, and tomorrow night how euer I am thought I dye for it I will if I may goe out of this place, if I cannot tonight, but if he deny you to night, and tomorrow night to[o], then this is my last request to you which if you denye mee you will tempt me farr.³⁰

Throughout his rambling prose, connection is made over and over between death and the place of his imprisonment. It is only by leaving the Tower that Overbury hopes to recover his health. He continues to issue his habitual orders to Rochester, apparently not realising that the change in his situation makes this a foolish strategy. By ‘Letter XII’, though, the conditionals imply an understanding that Rochester may not obey the commends or be able to secure the necessary permission, and, therefore, these orders are accompanied by an unclarified threat (‘you will tempt me farr’). He does not write what he will be tempted to do, but the implication is that Rochester knows exactly what that is. He is by this point desperate in his illness. His weakened physical state appears to be affecting his judgement. With a return to the splenetic weakness while writing he had stated publicly at the time of his arrest and cited in Packer’s letter in April, Overbury concludes this later letter with a return to his condition: ‘my hand is weake and I writt this much in payne’.³¹

Having shown, therefore, how the prison letters relay his physical and mental response to his surroundings, the final section of this essay now moves to how this epistolary sequence evokes the places he has left behind and makes rhetorical use of the signs of the everyday lives and the habitus of courtiers in those spaces. Details in the letters reflect spaces that have been part of his and Rochester’s identities, and his attempts to persuade Rochester to help him, and his final emotional outpourings in response to his realisation of his betrayal, are made more powerful by 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.

One of these letters, ‘Letter VIII’, uses Greenwich as the setting for a kind of play, where he scripts lines for ‘Wolsey’, the code name for the earl of Suffolk, Thomas Howard.³² As lord chamberlain and father of Frances Howard, Suffolk might have considerable sway in persuading the king to release Overbury from his imprisonment. Overbury thus imagines a scene where Suffolk talks to the king after having been advised what to say by Rochester. Suffolk’s lines, though, are written by Overbury. The opening stage direction of this quasi-dramatic piece tells Rochester

²⁹ BL MS Harley 7002, 281v.

³⁰ BL MS Harley 7002, 287r.

³¹ BL MS Harley 7002, 287r.

³² For further work on letters as a dramatic mode, see Watson 2024, 4-7 and *passim*; for further discussion of the ‘dramaturgy’ of ‘Letter VIII’, see 116-119.

that ‘Wolse[y] must com to Iulius on morning att grenwich’.³³ Our scene is set at the court space Overbury has physically left behind, but retains in his mind, and the instructions that follow in the letter are further stage directions, relying on Overbury’s mentally inhabiting everyday court life and his grasp of courtly habitus. He asks Rochester, for instance, to withdraw his quotidian services: not to ‘wayt, goe to church, be necessarye about’ the king until his friend is released.³⁴

The lines he supplies for Suffolk encourage the king to believe that Overbury is close to death. The plan is that Suffolk should tell James that the lieutenant of the Tower has come to him with information about the imprisoned man. Creating circumstances to suggest the veracity of what Elwes, the lieutenant, has told him, Suffolk is to persuade James of the need for swift action. Overbury writes that he should:

tell [the king] that the Lieftennant *huius loci* is come to him and tell him Overbury is every night so sick as he is ready to dye, and that these tow or three nights, he hath sett one to wach him, in another rome, without his knowledge, who though[t] still he would not live an howre.³⁵

The creation of not only an imaginary visit from Elwes to Suffolk with created testimony as to Overbury’s condition but also an imaginary servant set to watch the prisoner is a tour de force of dramatic plotting. The scene, set at night, with the observer in a room close by – unseen by the dying man – creates a believable urgency in Suffolk’s plea that the king should act, and the visual evidence of an impartial witness is to prove that what he says is true. This whole plan is the creation of a man trained in the writing of legal speeches, where circumstances such as the night-time scene, and the involvement of a witness seeing the events, are necessary to persuade those making judgement.³⁶ The lines he is given do not compliment the prisoner, as, the king is told, Overbury ‘being of an haughty nature, and ashamed of this disgrace conceals it, and will not so much as confess a word of this to the phisitions’.³⁷ The purpose is not to create pity for Overbury, and it is important, if James is to believe Suffolk, that the man who has been Overbury’s opponent at court does not speak too kindly of him. James is being asked for clemency, not pity, as that better befits a king. He should continue to believe in Overbury’s guilt, his shame, and his disgrace, but still release him. Therefore, the evidence he is given does not create pity for the prisoner’s illness but a wholly different emotion. Overbury cleverly creates two more valid reasons for Suffolk to give to the king to encourage him to grant clemency.

Sir, I hearing this, though[t] myself bound in honesty to tell to you, first for since if he dye in the night it might cost my Lord of Rochester his life to[o], who you see how passionatly he loves him; next Sir for my own part I speak, for the world thinking me his enimye would lay his blood to my charge, which I would not have imputed to me for all the world.³⁸

For love of Rochester, and respect for his lord chamberlain’s reputation, James might be persuaded to release the man who is ‘haughty’ and disgraced. The king does not need to judge him innocent of the crime for which he was imprisoned, he needs to pardon him, for the sake of others he cares for. In creating this scene, Overbury shows his understanding of early modern legal judgement,

³³ BL MS Harley 7002, 282r.

³⁴ BL MS Harley 7002, 282v.

³⁵ BL MS Harley 7002, 282r.

³⁶ For a comparable example of circumstances persuading rhetorically, see the discussion of the significance of sleeplessness in Cicero’s defence of Roscius in Hutson 2007, 176, footnote 53.

³⁷ BL MS Harley 7002, 282v.

³⁸ BL MS Harley 7002, 282v.

and the relationship between the monarch and the law. As Bernadette Meyler explains in her study of staged pardon, the king's prerogative power enabled him to make a judgement that conflicted with legal precedent. 'The sovereign's fear of generating slander through imposing the law' (2019, 51) could encourage him to clemency, using ideas of equity to lessen or remove the expected punishment. In Overbury's case, the punishment he has been given for 'a contempt' appears to the world around to be harsher than one might expect; equity has not lessened his punishment but, rather, royal personal enmity has increased it. In his creation of lines for Suffolk, Overbury cannot resist having the lord chamberlain make that point: 'considering his offence being only a harsh answere, a month of such close imprisonment is punishment enough'.³⁹ But the king's prerogative would still enable him to revoke his earlier judgement without incurring blame or denying the courtier's guilt. That way James produces an outcome that prevents his favourite suffering, Suffolk is not blamed for the death of a man he publicly opposed at court, and, most importantly, the king retains his power. In fact, Overbury cleverly creates a situation where his own fate *per se* is irrelevant. As Meyler explains, 'pardoning furnishes the only resolution that can preserve the sovereign's majesty' (2019, 54). Of course, as she goes on immediately to argue, because 'final pardons leave the laws in place while furnishing individual exceptions to their implementation, they mark a growing chasm between the sovereign and the legal institutions' (42), but Overbury's plan here does not concern itself with the gap between the common law and royal prerogative. Elsewhere, he has shown himself quite aware of that and concerned at growing autocratic power. But at this point he is simply desperate to be released from his incarceration.

Other letters, too, show that, despite his being in the Tower, he preserves the courtier's habitus: the manner of his thinking at court. In 'Letter X', for instance, he gives instructions to Rochester about suits he was working on before he was imprisoned: 'I should be glad to heare Will Udalls businesse of hydes went on, for his sake noe lesse then mine owne, for the reuersion after Fulk Grevill for Jack Lyttcotts boy, you may keepe any other from hauing it, till a fitt time to passe it for him, for Badgers stewardship I would he had it, for shirlies do somewhat, tis a fine suit'.⁴⁰

In a different way, this retention of his courtly habitus is also shown in his final letter, which evokes the spaces Carr still inhabits and he has left – he begins to realise, now, forever. There had been signs before of Overbury's surprise that Rochester is acting relatively normally. In 'Letter VIII', for example, he comments that 'for my part I wonder to heare that you [are] abroad, and are seene in the world I liyng here'.⁴¹ By the letter he writes at the end of the sequence, though, just before his death, this surprise has turned into contempt and anger. He pours out a torrent of pain at Rochester's everyday courtly actions which he takes as evidence of his betrayal and through the listing of which he aims to create shame in his reader:

how litle (never name love) human affection: how litle compassion (no not so much as to the colt in Enfield chace) when I heard how, notwithstanding my misery, you visited your woman; frizled your head, never more curiously; took care for hangings; & dayly were solicitous about your cloathes; officious in waighting; could prefer your cosen, and Gibb; held daily traffickes of letters with my enemies, without anie turning it to my good.⁴²

The behaviours he notes – preparing their hair and dress, furnishing their rooms, engaging in social and romantic activities, securing preferment for clients, writing letters – are, of course,

³⁹ BL MS Harley 7002, 282v.

⁴⁰ BL MS Harley 7002, 285v.

⁴¹ BL MS Harley 7002, 284r.

⁴² All the quotations from this final letter are from BL MS Cotton Titus B, vii, 483.

part of the habitus of those at the king's court. The list constructs the place and the life he has left behind on his imprisonment. He is abandoned by those he thought cared for him, and he has been proven to be considered less important than a young horse in one of the king's hunting parks. As well as emphasising his 'misery' and contrasting it with the 'love', 'affection', and 'compassion' he should have received, Overbury uses Rochester's actions to provoke guilt. The favourite has ignored his friend's misery and shown contempt in 'frizl[ing]' his hair 'curiously', has been 'solicitous' and 'officious' about things that didn't matter, and, worse, wrote the letters that Overbury so valued to his enemies instead of to him. He has done all this without turning his opportunities to any benefit for his friend.

Rather than help the man who had thought himself his friend and who was dying by inches in the Tower, Rochester has 'slip[ped] out of town'. The choice of verb implies the slippery nature of the man and his deception. The contrast is one of place: instead of the life at court or at the hunting lodge that they had shared, Overbury's 'share [is] to be a prison'. In his account of the growing rift between the two men, he blames Rochester for preferring Frances Howard to him, and the conflicts that led to this final break are locational: 'there came manie breaches, as Huntingdon, Newmarket, after at Whitehall'. In their travels with the king, there have been arguments and disagreements that Overbury now links to the places of power they inhabited. As a result of what became Rochester's alliance with the Howards, he vowed 'that [Overbury] should neither come in the court nor with [his] friends'. Rochester, the king's favourite, claimed as his own the space they had shared, and excluded his longstanding companion. More, the betrayal has been engineered and Overbury's refusal to accept the king's offer of an embassy abroad seems to have been Rochester's doing: the favourite had 'stayde [him] here when [he] would have bin gone', implying that he was prepared to accept the king's command, but that Rochester 'sen[t] for [him] twice that day that [he] was caught in the trappe'. The trap, a physical space as limiting and painful as his cell in the Tower, and as fatal for animals caught in it, may have been set by his enemies but it was only triggered by the betrayal of his friend.

This final letter, in Overbury's own hand and showing – in the little slips in his writing – the passion with which it was written, shows perhaps in the most direct way of all how epistolary communication can evoke emotion. Some of the other letters explored here, written by intelligencers and court commentators, are less personally involved, and can more objectively present detail to inspire a particular emotional response. The details they choose cause their (often multiple) readers to feel in specific ways about Overbury, the royal family, and the other members of court: presenting time, place, manner, motive and so on – the *circumstantiae* – to create *enargeia*, an emotional response, and thus provoking sympathy or laughter, or causing distrust. In the letters from Overbury to Rochester, the method shifts. This sequence of letters uses these details to inspire feelings and emotions, not about other figures, but about the writer and in the single intended reader. In prison, Overbury presents himself as his illness grows; he works to inspire pity in his reader, Robert Carr, and to encourage his friend's supportive action. He shows in the letters earlier in this prison sequence that he still mentally inhabits his court environment and retains his court habitus; he plots and directs action as he would have done in his life before his arrest. In his final letter, his aim is different, and he writes to present his reader, Robert Carr, as a guilty figure of betrayal: cruel, selfish, and ungrateful. Real or imagined, in letters by or about Overbury, the circumstance of place is at the centre of the inspiration of feeling.

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'Printers they know none' The Material Text and Textual Culture in Seventeenth-Century European Travel Writing about Persia*

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Abstract

Many European seventeenth-century travellers to Persia observe that the Persians did not produce printed books. The article explores the context for the apparent absence and attempted introduction of printing with movable type in Persia in the seventeenth century and considers the representation of Persian textual culture in European travel writing. European attempts to introduce printing with movable type were unsuccessful due to technological challenges, but also because of the book culture that already thrived in Persia, in which manuscript and oral traditions played an important part. European travel writings noted the presence of these other forms of literary culture, even when they did not fully understand them. The article seeks to contribute to our understanding of how Persia as a material space was understood in early modern Europe by examining the ideas about Persia which the absence and introduction of printing technology permitted or perpetuated.

Keywords: Manuscript, Orality, Persia, Print Culture, Travel Writing

The history of the book and the history of travel in the early modern period are closely interwoven. Journeys, actual and imagined, created writing: vast amounts of written material pertaining to travel, including books, in both print and manuscript, were produced in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This proliferation of travel books not only recorded but promoted travel abroad, such as the 'fonde bookes ... sold in euery shop in London' (1570, 26) that Roger Ascham feared would tempt

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Englishmen to go to Italy when they might better stay at home. Travellers carried books with them, for instruction and entertainment, as gifts, and for practical use, as diaries, records and aides-memoires of their experiences. Books, like other commodities, were travellers themselves. In *The Book in the Renaissance*, Andrew Pettegree describes how in Europe, printed books travelled along the networks used for other merchandise, and particularly ‘along the rivers ... that linked Europe’s major printing cities’ (2010, 78). Indeed, ‘the success of the European printing revolution ... was predicated upon its ability to be symbiotically interactive with networks of transportation and communication’ (Aslanian 2014a, 62), because, as Lisa Jardine writes, ‘From the very beginning of printing, book-distribution followed the same routes, with the same remarkable efficiency, as other consumer goods’ (1997, 319). The efficiency of these routes meant that in Europe in 1500, a book printed in Rome could be available to readers in England within a matter of weeks (*ibid.*).

Books and travel were of course also related in other, less literal, ways. Benedict Anderson (1991, rev. ed. 2006) has explained how standard print cultures played an important role in the creation of national identities in the colonial intelligentsia in Asia and Africa, following the European model.¹ Print cultures had the capacity to develop and describe groups and communities, and to shape their readers’ ideas about places and peoples. This article considers how various travel writings printed in the seventeenth century represented Persian literary culture and production, and thus contributed to a developing sense of Persia as a material space, at a time when both the material text and contemporary understanding of Persia and its environs were changing rapidly.²

Despite the growth of printing and its importance to the development of travel literature, writing about travel also continued to be a manuscript form long after the invention of printing, especially beyond Europe. As Gerald MacLean points out, ‘The impact of movable print on the development of early modern travel writing was widespread, but not global’ (2019, 62). The transition from a manuscript culture to a print one was slow, and in many parts of the world, travel literature continued to be essentially a manuscript genre, a reminder of the importance of attending to the global context, both in studying travel writing and in book history. In the last two decades, the tendency for the emergent discipline of book history towards Eurocentrism is gradually being corrected, reflecting the ‘global turn’ in historical studies (Aslanian 2014a, 51). Recent scholarship has shown the inter-connected nature of ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ print cultures and has addressed the deficit in the study of the history of the book beyond Europe and North America (Ghosh 2003; Aslanian 2014a).

This article begins from an observation sometimes made in passing by European travellers to Persia in the later seventeenth century: that Persia had no printing press. When I first encountered such comments in travel accounts, I became interested in what these travellers to Persia made of the comparative lack of printed texts, particularly in contrast to the growing importance of print in seventeenth-century European literary culture. In this article I attempt firstly to locate these observations within the broader contexts of the role of printing in the Middle East during this period, and the printing of Persian-language texts in Europe. I also explore European attempts to introduce printing to Persia in the seventeenth century, and what these can tell us about European desires and initiatives in the Islamic world more broadly. In

¹ See also Ghosh 2003, 23.

² In this article I use the term ‘Persia’ rather than ‘Iran’ because it is more commonly used in the early modern European texts which are my source material. The Persian empire at times incorporated parts of modern Turkey, Afghanistan, and the Central Asian republics. On the usage of ‘Persia’ and ‘Iran’, see Daryae 2012, 3.

particular, I am interested in travellers' representation of the material text in Persian culture – via book production, education, and reading, for example – and the understanding of Persia and its people that this suggests. What did early modern English travellers to Persia observe about printing or its absence? What ideas about Persia as a place did the absence of a printing press permit or perpetuate? How was an image of Persia as a material space constructed by the unique form of literary production that early modern European travel writing is, and how far was Persia's own literary culture present in that image?³

Printing with movable type was not firmly established in Persia until the early nineteenth century, when presses were set up in Tabriz, Tehran and Isfahan; by the latter half of that century, printing was widespread (Farman Farmayan, 1968, 145-146). Lithographic printing was the most widespread printing method in the latter half of the nineteenth century, although only a handful of titles were printed using movable type (Izadpanah 2023, 84-90). Printing was not an entirely unknown phenomenon prior to this time; block printing, for instance, had been used in Persia in the late thirteenth century, when an Ilkhanid ruler had attempted, unsuccessfully, to introduce printed money (Farman Farmayan 1968, 144-145; Bloom 2001, 219; Izadpanah 2023, 77). However, printing technology was very rarely used in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the period when European travel to Persia, and literature about Persia, increased greatly in volume and Persia became a much more familiar place to European readers.

The increase in publication of travel texts about Persia from the early seventeenth century stems from the rise in European travel to Persia from the later sixteenth century onwards.⁴ Many such texts describe the places and people that European travellers encountered in detail, sometimes including observations on Persian book culture via descriptions of Persian education, institutions or standards of knowledge. In earlier seventeenth-century accounts of English travels to Persia, such as those which appeared in printed books by William Parry and Thomas Herbert in 1601 and 1634 respectively, these subjects are mentioned, but the absence of a printing press is not directly remarked upon.

The closest reference to printing in Persia in texts published in England in the first half of the seventeenth century is made by Parry, who was one of the retinue of men and officers who accompanied Anthony Sherley on his journey to Persia, which they reached in 1598. Parry is generally positive in his description of Persia, which he preferred to his time in the Levant. In *A new and large discourse of the trauels of sir Anthony Sherley; Knight, by sea, and ouer land, to the Persian Empire ...* (1601), Parry mentions Persian books only briefly. He refers to the practices of Persian handwriting, and remarks that Persians do not have many books, but the lack of printing or a printing press is not directly stated. For Parry, the implied absence of the printed book is associated with a general weakness in learning and knowledge on behalf of the Persians:

They [the Persians] haue not many Bookes, much leffe great libraries amongst their best clarkes. They are no learned nation, but ignorant in all kinde of liberall or learned sciences, and almost of all other arts and faculties; except it be in certaine things pertaining to horfes, furniture, and some kindes of carpettings and filke workes, wherein they excell. (1601, 35)

The observation that Persia has no printing press is made more explicitly in accounts of Persia produced in the later seventeenth-century by travel-writers such as Adam Olearius, Jean Chardin,

³ In this article I focus on English-language travel writings, i.e. the texts available to an English readership, including the translated texts of non-English European writers.

⁴ On the rise in European travel to Persia during this period, see for example Braun 1969, 194-195; Stevens 1974, 421; Morgan 1988, 139.

John Fryer, and John Ogilby. The German mathematician and scholar Adam Olearius, who travelled to Persia in 1637, and whose account of his travels was translated into English in 1669, comments that the Persians ‘have not as yet ... the use of Printing, as we have in *Europe*’ (1669, 272). Jean Chardin, a French traveller who visited Persia in the 1660s and 1670s, is more fulsome. He writes that:

[The Persians] have desired a hundred times to have Printing-Houses; they acknowledge the Usefulness and Necessity of them; they see the Advantages and the Profit of them; yet no body undertakes to set up one. The Brother of the Great Master, who was a very Learned Man, and the King’s Favourite, would have engaged me, in the Year 1676, to send for Workmen to teach them that Ingenious Art: He showed His Majesty the *Arabick* and *Persian* Printed Books I had given him; whereupon a Contract was made; but when they should have laid down the Money, all was broke off. (1927, 249 quoted in Izadpanah 2023, 81)

In *Asia, the first part being An Accurate description of Persia* (1673), the Scottish geographer John Ogilby, who did not travel to Persia himself, but produced an atlas and description of Persia in his book, remarks that the Persians are ‘utterly ignorant in the Art of *Printing*’ (1673, 64). John Fryer, who perhaps had more detailed knowledge of Persia, having undertaken a long tour of Persia and India between 1672 and 1682 in the interests of the East India Company (Goodwin and Carter 2004), notes in *A new account of East-India and Persia in eight letters...* (1698) that in Persia ‘Books are all written with the Pen ... not committed to the Prefs’ (Fryer 1698, 361).

These later seventeenth-century travellers, as we will see in more detail, do not pursue Parry’s association between a lack of printed books and a lack of learning and knowledge; indeed, later seventeenth-century European travellers to Persia discuss the Persians’ learning and the importance of books in Persian culture in some detail, and demonstrate a greater awareness of the presence of a rich manuscript book culture in Persia. The French gem merchant Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, who undertook six voyages to Persia and India between 1630 and 1668, stated in his own record of travels through Persia that ‘Their nobler Arts are Writing, for Printers they know none. All their Books are writt’n, which is the reason they so much esteem that Art’ (1684, 229). Not only does Tavernier not repeat the assertion that a lack of printing or printed books is associated with a lack of knowledge, but he directly states that it results in a more developed and respected art of writing by hand. The continuation of this manuscript culture in favour of a printed one, and the absence of printing in Persia during this period, are both phenomena that need to be understood in the broader context of the adoption of printing in the Middle East.

Persia was not the only country in the Middle East where printing did not quickly become established. European travellers to the Ottoman empire, for example, also remarked upon a lack of printed text. Sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century travellers, writing of the Turks, note that: ‘they will suffer no Printing’ (Purchas 1626, 320); ‘they have no Printing’ (Botero 1630, 525); ‘the Turkes vse no printing’ (Baudier 1593, 15). Such observations have also become commonplace in histories of the book in the Muslim world. Some of these question why, in Geoffrey Roper’s words, book printing was

not adopted by Muslims for more than 1,000 years after it was invented in China and 250 years after it became widespread in western Europe (in spite of its use by non-Muslims in the Muslim world)? (2010, 332)

Scholars have addressed this question in a number of ways, including by making reference to the widespread Muslim reverence for handwritten word, arguing that that ‘the Islamic world

turned its back on printing technology for being an ungodly invention' (MacLean 2019, 62).⁵ It has become a commonplace in scholarship on the subject that 'Islamic culture itself remained cautious about acceptance of Arabic printing' (Ahmad 2015, 53). But understanding of the status and adoption of printing in the Ottoman empire and elsewhere is currently being rethought, traditional models being problematic because of how they centre the European experience of print, to the exclusion of other models (Schwartz 2017, 1). To suggest that Islamic countries were 'cautious' or 'turning [their] back on' printing technology suggests the presence of an actively negative attitude to printing, which may have become accepted as a commonplace in book history. Such attitudes frame the fact that Muslims countries did not adopt printing quickly as a regrettable failing, even when, as Jonathan Bloom does in his chapter on printing in Islamic countries, they minimise its effect in holding back global progress; Bloom writes that 'the tardiness of the Muslim world to adopt printing was just a brief pause in a continuous diffusion of inventions across Eurasia' (2001, 224). It is clear that early modern travellers to the Middle East were as likely to rely on European models for understanding book culture and the material text as were modern book historians in their discussions of the absence of print in these regions.

Persian- and Arabic-language texts were not printed with movable type in Arabic script in Arabic- or Persian-speaking countries in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Ayalon 2016, 1).⁶ Twentieth-century scholarship maintained that because of Islam's resistance to the printed text, printing failed to be adopted by European countries as quickly as it might otherwise have done. Thomas F. Carter, for example, argued that Islam was an impediment to the transmission of print from China to Europe from the medieval period, when it formed 'a barrier rather than a bridge for the transmission of block printing to Europe' (1943, 213). As Calestous Juma has pointed out, explanations of Muslim countries' reluctance to print which point to Islamic conservatism and mistrust of the products of non-Muslim civilisations are inconsistent with Muslim countries' readiness to adopt other non-Muslim innovations and technology during this period (2016, 70). Juma argues that the delay in the adoption of printing technology is more complicated than such arguments allow.

Kathryn A. Schwartz's examination of the Ottoman 'ban' on printing has established that, even in the twenty-first century, investigations into why Ottomans did not print tend to rely on 'generalisations about Islamic mores' or the frequently repeated idea that 'Middle Easterners viewed print technology negatively' (2017, 3).⁷ As Schwartz and others have demonstrated, the widely held belief that the Ottomans actually banned printing requires reconsideration, not least because there is no sound documentary evidence of such a ban (28). When it comes to thinking about the absence of print in other Muslim countries, Schwartz's work demonstrates the problems that occur when historians of the book rely on the European experience of print, which they take to be paradigmatic of other experiences, rather than understanding 'the European experience of print as one of many' (29). In looking at the reasons why printing was not common in Persia in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it is important to bear in mind that speaking of an 'aversion' or 'reluctance' to print, especially when such attitudes are

⁵ See also Schwartz 2017.

⁶ As Ayalon notes, such texts were produced from the sixteenth century in Europe, including Italy, France, Germany, the Netherlands and England, and texts in other languages were printed in the Arab-speaking world, such as the Jewish exiles from Spain who opened printing houses in Istanbul from the mid-1490s (2016, 1-2).

⁷ On the 'frequently cited objections made in the Islamic world to printing when it was first introduced', see Mahdi 1995, 4.

taken as resisting the advent of a ‘civilising’ or ‘advancing’ technology, is to take the European experience of print as the right and proper one, from which certain other countries deviate unnecessarily and at their peril.

Given the earlier use of block printing and the fact that, as Bloom notes, Persian leather bindings were ‘pressure-molded using delicately carved metal stamps’ (2001, 219), it is evident that other aspects of printing technology were also available in Persia prior to the introduction of the printing press in Europe. Nonetheless there are a number of likely technological reasons why the Persians, like other Islamic societies, did not quickly adopt the technologies of print once they were introduced. These include widespread difficulties for printers in reproducing Arabic and Persian or Farsi scripts and the difficulties in producing fonts (Ahmad 2015, Ch. 2). Printing in Persia, as we will see, may also have experienced setbacks due to other technical problems involving paper, ink, and the dryness of the climate. These constitute technical inhibitors to the adoption of print which may have been a factor in its failure to take off when it was first introduced.

The predominant literary culture of Persia must also be taken into account. In Persia, this was a manuscript age, with illuminated manuscripts being ‘one of the most significant art forms in ... early modern Iran’ (Quinn 2015, 97). Book culture was thriving; the early seventeenth century was a period during which the arts, including bookbinding, calligraphy and illustration, flourished in Persia (95-96). The richness of manuscript culture, as we shall see, was surely also a contributing factor to the slow adoption of print technology. In Islamic countries, calligraphers fulfilled a role which was markedly different from that of European scribes (Juma 2016, 73); and ‘writing [by hand] is one of the most important threads that runs through Islamic civilization’ (Blair 2006, xxvii). This is one reason why it is inaccurate to dismiss the absence of printing in Persia as simply part of a distaste for or caution regarding the new technology. Traditional frameworks for understanding printing in the Ottoman empire and Persia are ahistorical because of their reliance on the European experience as a way of understanding the adoption of print and the printed book (Schwartz 2017, 1). It is important to bear in mind that the absence of printing in Persia can be understood as stemming from the contemporary strength of manuscript culture as much as from a lack of interest in printing or print technology.

The early modern period saw the development of European scholarship on ‘Oriental’ languages and manuscripts, including Persian, and the gradual increase in the representation of these languages in texts printed in Europe, from the late fifteenth century onwards. These were not texts written entirely in languages such as Arabic or Syriac, but including words or portions of text in such languages, either in woodcuts or in handwritten additions to printed texts. The first printed text which included the Arabic script was printed in Mainz, Germany in 1486; Bernhard von Breydenbach’s *Peregrinatio in terram sanctam* included a woodcut of the Arabic alphabet (Toomer 1996, 38). Some texts which included sections in Persian were printed outside of Europe in the sixteenth century, if not in Persia itself; the first book printed that included the Persian language in the Near East was a Torah in Hebrew characters published in 1498 in Istanbul (Farman Farmayan 1968, 145). It was not until the sixteenth century that Arabic and Persian began to be printed on European presses using movable type. Arabic types existed in Germany as early as 1587, although they were not frequently put to use (Toomer 1996, 38). Persian punches, meanwhile, were produced in Europe at the Medici Press in the 1590s, although they were not being used in Persia at this time (Izadpanah 2018, 93).

In England, the first ever book to be printed with Arabic characters was Robert Wakefield’s *Oratio de laudibus & utilitate trium linguarum: Arabicae, Chaldaicae & Hebraicae*, which was produced by the German printer Wynkyn de Worde in London in 1528 (Smyth 2024, 35).

Without access to Arabic movable type, de Worde inserted Arabic words cut from wood in between the metal letters as he set the pages for the press. Printing in ‘Oriental’ languages continued to present technical challenges for printers working in England, perhaps reflected in the fact that the next book printed in England with Arabic type would not be produced until 1592; in 1597, Joseph Barnes’ edition of Richard Brett’s book on languages, printed in Oxford, left space in the printed text for Syriac, Arabic and Ethiopian text to be added later by hand (*ibid.*). Indeed, printed books continued to use this method, of leaving space in the text for Arabic words to be written by hand, well into the seventeenth century (e.g. Greaves 1639). In 1637, the Oxford Press bought the first Oriental founts including Arabic type. In his *Elementa linguae Persicae*, published in London in 1649, Graves states that the printing of the work was delayed for five years owing to the scarcity of Arabic types (Ahmad 2015, 65).

From the 1630s, the first Persian-language characters printed using movable type appeared in books printed in Europe. The text which has usually been taken to be the earliest printed book to include the Persian language produced in Europe is the *Dastan-e-Masih amma aluda*, a translation into Persian by Hieronymo Xavier from a Latin text, *Historia Christi*, published in Leiden in 1639 (Floor 1990; Ahmad 2015, 111). However, Borna Izadpanah has established an earlier text, the anonymous *Alphabetum persicum*, as the first known instance of a book including Persian printed using movable type in Europe. The *Alphabetum persicum*, which does not bear a title page, date or place of publication, was printed at the press of the Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide in Rome in 1633 (Izadpanah 2018, 97). This is the first complete book printed using Persian *nasta‘liq* type although, as Izadpanah notes, the earliest known printing with this type is from the Arabic and Persian proofs printed with the small *nasta‘liq* type of the Medici Press in the 1590s (94). In any case, it seems reasonable to judge that European travellers to Persia in the earlier part of the seventeenth century (such as Parry and Herbert) would certainly not have seen Persian characters in print, either in Europe or in Persia; later travellers, such as Fryer and Ogilby, might well have done.

It is important to note that these early printed Persian texts include Persian words and phrases, but are not exclusively in the Persian language; they are texts predominantly in another language, such as English or Latin, which include phrases or sections in Persian (Izadpanah 2018, 99). Moreover, the Persian they represent is often incomplete or inaccurate, recognisable as Persian but by no means a perfect representation of the Persian language as it was actually written. It is worth noting, as Izadpanah emphasizes, that ‘the knowledge of and drive to study the Persian language in Europe was very limited’ at this time (90). The Persian-language sections included in predominantly English- or Latin-language texts during this period frequently included errors which were presumably not evident to their English readership, although they would have been – and indeed were – to readers of Persian. In *Elementa linguae Persicae* both the Latin and Persian text are corrected in the copy held by the Bodleian (Mar. 119 (3)) and the text has been heavily annotated by hand. The manual annotations and corrections to the Persian suggest there was difficulty in correctly printing the Persian language, even when Persian movable type became available. Hence it seems reasonable to conclude that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, although it was possible to encounter books in Europe in which ‘Oriental’ languages such as Persian appeared, these were sometimes, perhaps frequently, only European ideas or approximations of what such languages actually were. The representations of languages such as Persian in dictionaries seem to suggest an exactness and precision of linguistic accuracy which are not in fact the case. Rather, the Persian language as it is represented in early printed examples of Persian in English texts is very much a European construct. It is important to bear in mind, then, that English readers of Persian in print in the later seventeenth century

encountered at best an English version of Persian: accurately printed Persian-language text in this period is very rare, both in Europe and the Muslim world.

European travellers' observations on the lack of printing in Persia can thus be placed within a wider context in which the Persian language was rarely available (especially in an accurate state) to European readers, and Persian-language texts were not being printed either in Europe or Asia. Nonetheless, Tavernier's statement of the Persians in his 1684 that 'Printers they know none' (229) was not in fact literally true at the time of his travels in the 1630s and early 1640s. There were two printing presses in Persia during this period, the earliest present from 1629, both of non-Persian origin: the first of these was delivered from Rome to the community of Carmelite friars at Isfahan, and the second built by Armenian monks at New Julfa. As we will see, these presses were part of Christian missionary efforts, and had a negligible impact on book culture in Persia in the seventeenth century.

In 1604 Pope Clement VIII, supported by Sigismund III Vasa of Poland, sent a mission of Discalced Carmelite fathers to Persia. The Carmelites, under the leadership of Father John Thaddeus (or Taddeo) of St. Elisaeus, established a monastery in Isfahan from 1608; Carmelites were to continue living in Persia until 1752, following the death of Philip Mary of St. Augustine, then bishop of Isfahan, in 1749 (Richard 1990). In 1618, Father John Thaddeus apparently presented Shah 'Abbās I with an alphabet in Arabic and 'acquainted him with the printing of Arabic and Persian letters' (Chick 2012, vol. 1, 305). The Carmelite *Chronicle* of these events includes Thaddeus' report that Shah 'Abbās 'showed much interest and expressed a wish to introduce it into his own country' and 'has even charged me to procure [a set of type]' (*ibid.*). Rosemary Lee quotes from Pietro Della Valle's letter on the subject, which also describes 'Abbās' particular interest in the press. Della Valle writes that: 'The shah was delighted to see all of these books, and showed great interest in having a printing press for Persian and Arabic brought to Isfahan' (1972, 327 quoted in Lee 2013, 24). Thaddeus, according to Della Valle, 'sparked within them [i.e., 'Abbās and his courtiers] the desire for a printing press, which would print works in Persian, but remain entirely in the hands of our religious'. Della Valle sees the press as a potential agent of conversion:

Without doubt, it would be a great means to spread books and achieve great gains in the conversion of souls. Because in fact the Persians, who are as curious as can be and well-schooled in philosophy and other sciences, not only freely receive and read our books, but also speak and debate doctrines of faith, as I have seen many times. They debate both in public and in private, and do not have the same stem unwillingness to listen that the Turks do. (1972, quoted in Lee 2013, 24)

Nonetheless, as Lee notes, the press was not only or exclusively intended as a means of disseminating Christian texts in a Muslim country. The 'unseen Italian printing-press was also a mechanical marvel and curiosity' which 'fascinated the Safavid shah independent of its evangelistic function'; Thaddeus 'used the tantalizing offer of a Persian language printing-press as leverage in his ongoing negotiations with the shah' (Lee 2013, 204). In this respect, the introduction of the printing press to Persia can be classed alongside other marvels and curiosities via which Christian European travellers and diplomats sought to build relationships with their Muslim hosts.⁸

A printing press was eventually prepared in Rome, apparently ready to be sent in 1624, although it did not arrive in Isfahan until early 1629. It seems likely that the press was accompanied by apparatus for setting type and casting letter forms; in 1642, Bernard of St. Theresa,

⁸ The most obvious comparison would be the organ given by Thomas Dallam to Sultan Muhammad III in 1599 (see Danson 2009).

then bishop of Baghdad and temporary vicar apostolic at Isfahan, left behind him in Isfahan matrices for 349 Arabic letters, together with such apparatus, presumably intended for use on this press (Floor 1980, 370). However, there is no evidence that any book was ever printed on it. In 1638 the Vatican wrote to enquire whether or not the press was in use, but there is no record of a reply to this enquiry (Richard 1990). The printing apparatus was stored in the Isfahan office of the Dutch East India Company from 1648 until 1669, when it was returned to the Carmelites (Floor 1980, 371; Bloom 2001, 221). The French Carmelite missionary Joseph Labrosse, known as Father Angelus of St. Joseph, who visited Persia from 1664 to 1678, later reported that ‘Our old Carmelite fathers founded an Arabic-Persian printing-press in their convent in Isfahan ... They still have it’ (Floor 1980, 369, footnote 2). Attempts may have been made at printing using the Carmelite press at Isfahan, but evidently they were not successfully established (Afsār 1958 quoted in Floor 1990; Farman Farmayan 1968, 145).⁹

The second printing press in Persia was also established by a religious community, in this case of Armenian monks living in New Julfa, a quarter of Isfahan. Like the Carmelites, the Julfan community had close relations with ‘Abbās (Herzig 1996, 313). The press was established by Bishop Khach’atur Kesaratsi’ in 1637 at the monastery of the Holy Saviour (Richard 1980, 483; Taylor 1995, 70; Bloom 2001, 221); Floor records that: ‘After struggling for seventeen months he was able to print the Psalms ... in ... 1638 ... the first book printed in Iran’ (1990). In order to do so, Alice Taylor suggests,

the monks virtually had to reinvent the whole printing process. None of them had ever seen a printing press; they depended on what information they could gather from travellers who had. The monks made their own ink and paper and employed Armenian goldsmiths of Isfahan to make type. They concentrated on essential devotional books, beginning with a psalter that they completed in 1638. (1995, 70-71)

This first book from the first printing press in Iran to successfully produce books in any language was printed in Armenian; the early texts produced on this press followed in their decorations and general appearance the traditions of Armenian manuscripts (71). The major limitation of this press as a technology for printing Persian-language texts is thus evident: the blocks used to produce Armenian-language texts would be of no use in printing books in Persian. Indeed, producing the blocks needed to print in Persian would have been a challenging and costly endeavour, the Persian language requiring four distinct blocks for each of its 32 letters, because the letter shape varies according to whether it appears in the initial, middle, final, or isolated position (Parhami 2019, 182). This perhaps explains why the Persian court apparently showed little interest in block printing, once it had been reintroduced (Farman Farmayan 1968, 145).

Another serious difficulty in managing to print books in any language seems to have been the unavailability of ink and paper of sufficiently good quality. The paper was too soft, and the print flawed by ‘uneven letters – the result of uneven pressure on an amateur press’ (Taylor 1995, 70). In 1640 the Capuchin monks at Julfa appealed to Paris for help on behalf of the bishop; Richard (1980, 483-484) notes that Father Joseph du Tremblay, who had supported efforts at establishing printing in the East and might have been able to help, had died two years earlier. The Julfan press did produce two more books, religious works printed in 1641 and 1642. The bishop then sent a pupil, Hovhannes, to Europe for the purpose of learning printing; Hovhannes printed a book in Armenian in Livorno before returning to Persia with another printing press and some lead type (Bloom 2001, 221). Access to the right sort of ink

⁹ See also Bloom 2001, 221.

continued to be a problem, however, and this press was not used until 1687, when nine further books were printed (*ibid.*).

The Armenian press at New Julfa seems somewhat more successful than the Carmelite press at Isfahan, in that there is evidence of it having been used to produce books, but neither press made any significant impact on book culture in Persia or produced texts that were entirely printed in the Persian language. James Barry notes that Armenian merchants negotiated the boundaries of the Christian West and Muslim East in their use of the printing press, as they did with their trading habits. As he argues, ‘this innovation [the press] was introduced by the Church for the Church’s own needs and no effort was ever made to share this technology with their Muslim neighbours’ (2019, 159).¹⁰ As agents of conversion, the printing presses had very little success. It seems that they were never intended as a means of introducing print technology to Persia, and so it is hardly surprising that they did not achieve this goal, either.

The information available on these attempts to introduce the printing press to Persia in the seventeenth century suggests that technical difficulties were likely a major reason why they were unsuccessful. There is another factor, however, which European travel writings to Persia themselves suggest, and that is the rich oral and manuscript traditions which dominated Persian literary culture during and beyond this period. Both oral and manuscript cultures thrived in Persia, although they have been marginalised in modern European scholarship; an appreciation of these traditions helps explain why printing did not take off in Persia in the early modern period.

Orality and oral traditions are central to Persian culture from the classical through the medieval and early modern periods and to the present day; many traditional Persian literary forms are oral rather than textual (Rubanovich 2012; Shahbazi 2012, 121). Nonetheless, Julia Rubanovich notes, ‘scholarship has tended to ignore orality in medieval and early modern Persia’ and ‘discussions of oral tradition and orality in the Iranian world have been limited in scope ... especially during the medieval and early modern periods’ (2012, 653 and 2015, 2-3). Rubanovich also emphasizes the complex and intertwined relationship between textual and oral culture during these periods, pointing to the ‘important evidence of textual culture’s intimate, extensive, and ongoing interaction with the realm of orality’, evidence which ‘refute[s] the exclusivity of the oral and literate worlds’ (2015, 13).

The importance of the handwritten text to Persian culture should also not be underestimated. Persian culture, in common with that of other Muslim countries, ‘revere[d] ... the (hand) written word’ (Bloom 2001, 222).¹¹ Calligraphy or the art of fine handwriting had long been important to Islamic traditions, and particularly in Persia. Sheila S. Blair describes the importance of the Safavid period (1501-1722) to the history of Iranian calligraphy and the rich collections of manuscripts which were commissioned and maintained by Safavid rulers from the early sixteenth century (2006, 417). The reign of Shah ‘Abbās I (1587-1629), Blair notes, ‘is considered by many the apogee of artistic production in Safavid Iran’ (423) a time when calligraphers were closely associated with the royal court and there was vibrant and active production of texts in manuscript form (426). Persian manuscript production was ‘highly revered’ under Safavid rule and at its height during this period (Izadpanah 2023, 79). This is clearly a reason why ‘the fine art of calligraphy was never seriously challenged until the nineteenth century’ (Farman Farmayan 1968, 144).

The strength of oral and manuscript culture in Persian literary production is an important reason why Persia did not quickly welcome the advent of the printing press in the early seven-

¹⁰ See also Ghougassian 1998, 138.

¹¹ See also Aslanian 2023, 120.

teenth century. Persian literary production did not provide the same space or opportunity for print as did the literary production of early modern Europe. While in Europe, print and manuscript literary cultures continued to coexist for many years after the introduction of printing with movable type, in Persia, the combined centrality of manuscript and oral cultures, along with the technical challenges printing involved, meant that the odds of the early seventeenth-century presses starting a Persian printing revolution were very slim.

European travellers, perhaps unsurprisingly, do not make such direct observations about the importance of manuscript and oral traditions in Persian literary production as I have done above. But their texts do signal their awareness of the strength of these cultures, and their intertwined nature, in the places and peoples that they encountered. Early modern European travel writings about Persia reflect a society in which there is a thriving literary culture which has no need of print, because books are widely available, and cheap and easy to purchase in manuscript, and orality plays an important role in literary transmission.

The travel-writers frequently comment on the ubiquity and value of handwritten books in Persian society. When European travel-writers mention seeing Persian books, or encountering people reading books, it is handwritten texts that they are describing. As Susan Mokheri notes, French travellers such as Jean Chardin praised Persians 'as beacons of learning and civility'; Chardin records that 'many peasants themselves go to read good books' (2019, 19 and 18). In *Asia*, Ogilby writes that 'Their chief Book is ... *Culustan* [Gulistān], that is, *Rose-Valley*, made by the famous Poet *Schich Saadi* ... every *Persian* hath this Book in his House'; he notes that '[books of philosophy are rare and kept] as a great Treafure' (1673, 60). Olearius describes encountering a library where:

The books were lay'd in Drawers, shuffled one upon another, without any order, but otherwise well enough kept. They were all Manuscripts, some, upon Parchment, others upon Paper, most in *Arabick*, and some in the *Persian* and *Turkish* Languages, but all excellently painted, richly bound, and cover'd with Plates of Gold and Silver, carv'd, and branch'd. The books of History were enrich'd with several representations in colours. (1669, 179)

Fryer speculates that Persian books, being in manuscript, are more accurate than they would be if printed, which are 'left free from Errors', suggesting one way in which handwritten texts might be valued over printed ones (1698, 361). These sources also note the prestige accorded to the scribe (Ogilby records in a marginal note that 'Writing [is] the most advantageous Employment') (1673, 64), and the importance of handwriting as an art form (Fryer, for example, explains that the Persians are 'mightily taken with a fair Hand and good Writing') (1698, 361).

The richness of Persian oral culture is less commonly noted, but is not absent from travel-writers' observations. Ogilby, in noting the ubiquity of books in Persia, also records the Persian tradition of learning poetry by heart: 'every *Persian* hath this Book in his House; nay, some there are which carry it in their memory, and are therefore accounted very learned; this they repeat at all Feasts and other Merry-meetings' (1673, 60). Olearius, who calls the Persians 'addicted to Poetry', explains that 'the Great Lords think they cannot give their Friends a better entertainment, than by Diverting them, while they are at Dinner, with the recital of some Poem' (1669, 251). In a fascinating image of literary production, he describes Persian poets, who

are known from others by their Habit, which is the same with that of the Philosophers; to wit, a long white Coat, but open before, with great broad Sleeves, and they have at their Girdle a kind of a Hawking-bag, in which are their Books, Paper, and an Ink-horn, that they may give Copies of their verses to such as desire them. (*Ibid.*)

In these glimpses into the richness of early modern Persian literary culture, travel-writers show – unwittingly – why Persia had little need for print technology as a means of textual production.

In the early seventeenth century, there was considerable enthusiasm among European travellers about Persia as a prospective trade and diplomatic partner. For a brief period of time, the printing press looked as though it might function to strengthen links between Persia and Christian Europe, by producing texts in European languages in Persia, and even possibly becoming established as part of the technology of Persian literary production. In this sense the printing press is exemplary of European hopes for closer relations with Persia at that time: much effort made, but not much consequence to follow. Printing failed to take off because of the technological difficulties it faced, but also because of the book culture that already thrived in Persia, in which manuscript books were plentiful and accessible.¹² But as well as noting the absence of a printing press in Persia – and thus the failure to establish printing – European travellers also recorded other aspects of Persian book culture which show the development of an understanding of Persia as different to Europe in this regard. In commenting on the absence of print, European travel writings reflected the strength of other forms of literary culture which European travellers registered even when they did not fully understand them.

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¹² On the successful introduction of printing with movable type to Persia in the early nineteenth century, see Green 2010.

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Imagery, Centre, Periphery



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Mapping Sovereignty Njinga, Missionary Writing and the Ambivalences of African Legibility

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Abstract

The article examines Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi da Montecucolo's *Istorica descrizione de' tre regni Congo, Matamba, et Angola* (1687) as a key text in the seventeenth-century Catholic effort to render West Central Africa legible within a Christian epistemological framework. Produced under the auspices of Propaganda Fide, Cavazzi's chronicle translates African political sovereignty – most notably that of Queen Njinga of Matamba – into a moralized narrative of sin, conversion, and redemption. Drawing on Cavazzi's firsthand experience as Njinga's confessor, as well as the visual regime established by Paolo da Lorena's engravings, the article shows how admiration and censure coexist within missionary representation. Rather than dismissing such accounts as purely didactic or exploitative, the present essay situates them within a broader historiographical dialogue that includes the more empathetic portrayals of Antonio da Gaeta and Francesco Maria Gioia, as well as modern historical reconstructions by John Thornton and Linda Heywood. Mobilizing theoretical frameworks from Michel de Certeau, Henri Lefebvre, Martin Jay, and Robyn Wiegman, the article analyzes how space, vision, and racialized visibility structure missionary knowledge. It argues that Capuchin texts functioned simultaneously as ethnographic records and performative scripts that sought to regulate bodies and territories, yet inadvertently opened sites of negotiation and resistance.

Keywords: Capuchin Missionary Discourse, Scopic Regimes, Spatial Representation and Sovereignty, Transcultural Negotiation, West Central Africa

1. Introduction

Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi da Montecucolo (1621-1678), a Capuchin chronicler, played a crucial role in documenting the cultural and political dynamics of seventeenth-century West Central Africa. His *Istorica descrizione de' tre regni Congo, Matamba, et Angola* (1687), produced under the auspices of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (Propaganda Fide), participates in a broader enterprise that sought to translate local

realities into a sacralized framework and contributes to a wider narrative of global Catholicism. In this sense, his work transforms the complex sovereignty of Black rulers into a tale of sin and redemption.¹ The book is divided into three sections – on customs, religion, and history of the three kingdoms – and includes his first-hand account of Queen Njinga of Matamba, whom he served as confessor in the 1660s. Enriched by Paolo da Lorena's engravings, the text blends observation with allegory, presenting Njinga's reign as both exotic and instructive. The resulting image oscillates between admiration and disapproval, offering valuable insight into how non-Western polities were framed through the language of conversion (Thornton n.d.; Bassani 1987; Fromont 2022).

Yet, as recent scholarship suggests, such representations cannot be dismissed as mere exercises in exploiting the alleged moral nature of the heathens for the edification of believers at home. Earlier writings, such as Antonio da Gaeta and Francesco Maria Gioia's *La meravigliosa conversione alla santa fede di Cristo della regina Singa* (1669), reveal alternative portrayals that praise Njinga's prudence, intelligence, and spiritual agency. Reading these texts alongside Cavazzi reveals the internal fractures of their evangelizing rhetoric – its simultaneous wonder and anxiety in the face of the African other, whose own ways of understanding the world required a transcultural negotiation to align with European missionary logic (Filesi 1967; Mastrogregori 2023). Meanwhile, John Thornton's *A History of West Central Africa to 1850* (2020) reframes this character as an architect of modernity, whose reign redefined statecraft through acts of cultural translation and performative diplomacy. This historiographical dialogue – from da Gaeta's hagiographic empathy to Cavazzi's moralization and Thornton's historicization – finds its most comprehensive articulation in L.M. Heywood's *Njinga of Angola* (2017), which maps the shifting epistemes that have shaped the queen's legacy across centuries.

Building on this layered genealogy, the present article reinterprets these works as maps that operate at the intersection of belief, geography, and power. Drawing on Michel de Certeau's concept of spatial practice (1984), Henri Lefebvre's production of space (1991), Martin Jay's analysis of visual regimes (2011), and Robyn Wiegman's study of racial visibility (1995), the article examines how Africa is constructed as a legible geography for Christian spectatorship. Through these works by travelers commissioned to spread the word of God, we see the emergence of ethnographic records as well as performative scripts that reorder distant realms according to their understanding. Ultimately, the present study contends that, although the missionaries' intentions were guided by apostolic zeal, their depictions of Njinga frequently assumed a voyeuristic quality, regulating both bodies and spaces through the lens of European norms. By situating Cavazzi within the continuum of da Gaeta's prayer and Thornton's reconstruction, the present article reclaims the portraits of this ruler as sites of resistance and translation, where queenship rearticulates itself through the very discourses that sought to contain it.

Though often mediated by accounts such as Cavazzi's and da Gaeta's, Njinga must be understood within the geopolitical realities of her time. Her actions and representations were shaped by a polycentric field of trade, diplomacy, and warfare linking Ndongo, Matamba, and Kongo to Portuguese and Dutch imperial projects, papal authority, and the shifting Iberian order of the seventeenth-century Atlantic – an arena in which African rulers themselves actively solicited, redirected, and contested Western power. Unlike colonial subjects, Njinga retained sovereignty and actively negotiated her position within these overlapping spheres of influence.

¹ The present article compares the original 1687 Italian edition with the following edition, from which the quotations are taken: Cavazzi 1965. All passages from the Lisboa 1965 edition are quoted in the English translation by the author of the present article.

Within this framework, she emerges both as a figure of conversion in the eyes of missionaries and as a sovereign actor whose legacy traverses the boundaries between faith, local autonomy, European interest, and transatlantic entanglements.

This article, therefore, unfolds along two intersecting trajectories. The first examines the textual economies through which Capuchin reports translated their experience into the grammar of Christian doctrine, producing representations that shaped the understanding of their readers back home without necessarily exercising direct political power. The second traces the material and geopolitical dimensions in which these writings circulated, situating them within networks of commerce, diplomacy, and occasional coercion. Read together, these perspectives reveal how missionary observation and textualization intersected with broader socioeconomic structures: religious imaginaries, articulated by the pens of traveling preachers, opened a vantage point through which Western audiences interpreted societies abroad, while African agency, negotiation, and sovereignty remained central to shaping the contours of this transcultural engagement. The said accounts fashioned Njinga through overlapping registers aimed at Christian audiences. Yet, for contemporary analysis, her figure repeatedly exceeded those interpretations, revealing both the reach and the limits of this mediation.

2. From Text to Effigy: Njinga at the Crossroads of Semiotics, Visual Discourses, and Political Imagination

The Atlantic world was forged through the expansion of a mercantilist-capitalist economy whose circulation of free and unfree labor structured an immense transoceanic system of interdependence. However violent and coercive these dynamics were, they generated extraterritorial spaces where local and global realities converged without neatly reproducing colonial models. Indeed, the political terrain of West Central Africa – particularly the polities of Ndongo and Matamba under Queen Njinga – does not fit the standard template of subjugation. These were arenas of negotiation marked by partial entanglement rather than unilateral domination. Within this heterogeneous context, missionary, imperial, and commercial actors operated alongside native sovereigns whose agency disrupted any straightforward reading of Western hegemony. This section situates these symbolic and material frictions within that more complex setting, revealing the tensions between Christian notions of civility and the demonizing rhetoric of ‘paganism’, the cleric, sailor, and soldier historian’s compulsion to classify and represent alterity, and the enduring influence of visualities shaped by both European knowledge regimes and vernacular political self-fashioning (Curtin 1969; Gilroy 1993; Shaw 2002; Matory 2005; Sweet 2011).

The narrative opens with an encounter in a place that chroniclers once framed as exotic: the Fortress of São Miguel de Luanda. As one of the principal slave-exporting ports of the South Atlantic, it became a nodal point not of simple imposition but of a layered strategic terrain involving white settlers, African states, mercenary groups, missionaries, interlopers, and shifting factions within Ndongo and Kongo. Constructed in 1624 amid mounting external threats – particularly Dutch incursions pursued in alliance with Kongo – the fortress functioned less as an initial instrument of Portuguese expansion than as a belated defensive anchor in an already contested space. From this fortified site flowed commercial, diplomatic, and military exchanges with surrounding kingdoms, including those ruled by the figure under study; these interactions, ranging from diplomatic embassies to slave-raiding alliances, formed the broader circuit within which several travelers produced their textual representations of Njinga’s world.

With Angolan independence centuries later, the fortress was transformed by the People’s Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) into an Armed Forces Museum, a palimpsest of militarized memory where the violence of slavery meets the triumphal narrative of nation-

alist struggle. Within this reframed space, the presence of Njinga takes on heightened semiotic force. Her statue – striding across the parade ground, richly adorned, ax raised – is not merely a nationalist monument but a condensed icon of political resilience whose meanings remain contested, oscillating between African, European, missionary, and postcolonial interpretive regimes. The statue’s heroic posture, projecting martial determination and sovereign pride, resonates with the complex archive through which travelers first encountered the real person it depicts. Ever since da Gaeta’s *La meravigliosa conversione*, Western thinkers – from the Duchess D’Abrantes to Castilhon, Sade, and Hegel – have appropriated her as evidence for competing theories of gender, race, or Black historicity. In a parallel movement, Njinga survived in oral traditions carried to Brazil, becoming a touchstone for Afro-Brazilian memory and resistance (Heintze 1984 and 1987; Heywood 2009; Fonseca 2012, 2014; Franco 2019). This heterogeneous circulation – pictorial, written, oral, and spatial – mirrors the multiple modes through which Njinga’s story has been mediated, from early modern textual accounts to postcolonial memorial practices, including the statue commissioned from a North Korean artist and once installed in Kinaxixi, at the heart of Luanda, where people regularly married in her shadow, as well as the MPLA’s repurposing of the fort’s preexisting museum infrastructure.

Crucially, as outlined earlier, Cavazzi cannot be understood simply as a functionary; the Capuchins were invited by the independent Kingdom of Kongo and operated through ecclesiastical rather than imperial chains of authority. Yet his narrative deploys a common semiotic repertoire: tropes of idolatry, duplicity, theatrical kingship, and spiritual volatility that framed African politics through a nascent supremacist optic. His representations gain interpretive depth when set against da Gaeta and Gioia’s account, which depicts her with admiration, attributing to her strategic clarity and political intelligence that Cavazzi often obscures or moralizes.

The contrast between the two Capuchins – Cavazzi’s ambivalent condemnations versus da Gaeta’s sympathetic appraisal – reveals the internal plurality of missionary textuality. Overlaying these voices is the more militarized perspective of António de Oliveira de Cadornega, whose *História Geral das Guerras Angolanas* (1680) captures the Portuguese view from the battlefield, emphasizing her military acumen, shifting alliances, and relentless defiance. This heterogeneity is further complicated by the fact that, although Cavazzi was directly embedded at the queen’s court, his observations were filtered through the Catholic Reformation’s polemical campaign against ‘superstition’ – a denunciatory idiom applied as forcefully to European practices under inquisitorial scrutiny as to those of Njinga or Kongo – while other accounts relied more heavily on derivative or secondhand testimony.

Even so, despite the richness and complexity of the record, the sources are in agreement that Njinga’s world was governed by strategic action, where territorial elites, priests, soldiers, and merchants navigated overlapping sovereignties. John Thornton’s *A History of West Central Africa to 1850* (2020) is indispensable here, for it demonstrates that the continent’s political life was neither static nor peripheral but defined by highly adaptive forms of statecraft. He shows how rulers in Ndongo – Matamba and the wider region operated within dense diplomatic landscapes full of shifting partnerships. Thornton also foregrounds their religious pluralism – Catholicism, Kongo Christianity, and various Central African cosmologies – as a dynamic field in which legitimacy was negotiated rather than imposed. Warfare, far from being a simple reaction to foreign incursions, was embedded in long-standing dynamics of power accumulation and geographical reorganization. Njinga’s reign unfolded at the epicenter of these transformations, and much of what chroniclers struggled to interpret was precisely this sophisticated interplay of pragmatism, ritual displays of authority, and multi-sited spiritual practice.

In the seventeenth century, Angola and its hinterlands had become the largest supplier of enslaved labor for Brazil and Spanish America. Like other leaders, Njinga engaged in the trade, leveraging pacts and ecclesiastical intermediaries to secure her position while simultaneously resisting Portuguese encroachment. Her 1622 diplomatic mission to Luanda – where she was baptized Ana de Souza – was emblematic of this ambivalence. Conversion did not indicate submission but rather a calculated maneuver within a terrain shaped by civil wars, Dutch invasions, and attempts to fragment Ndongo internally (Skidmore Hess 1995; Caldeira 2015; Herrendorf 2024). These dynamics expose the tragic ambiguities of her legacy: a sovereign fighting for autonomy while enmeshed in the human trafficking networks of the Atlantic economy. Her later embrace of missionary evangelization and ‘idol-cleansing’ campaigns must likewise be read not as capitulation but as sagacity, an effort to mobilize Christian symbolism to consolidate rule. Such acts, simultaneously political and spiritual, perplexed observers from overseas. Cavazzi interpreted them through the viewpoints of unprincipled behavior; da Gaeta framed them as evidence of intelligence; De Oliveira de Cadornega treated them as tactical adaptations. Their discordant readings reveal more about their own beliefs, semiotic systems, and logics of visibility than about the queen herself.

Ultimately, Njinga’s image oscillates between triumph and compromise, independence and violence, rebellion and appropriation. Her contemporary monument at São Miguel crystallizes these tensions: an icon of anticolonial nationalism forged through stories shaped partly by missionary suspicion, partly by romantic exoticism, and partly by Afro-diasporic reclamation. What survives of her in the archive is thus neither a transparent portrait nor a fabrication but a palimpsest of competing translations. Understanding her place within the Atlantic world requires attending to the interplay between writing, symbolism, and agency – all operating within a ground of contested meanings that resists easy categorization.

3. *Making Africa Intelligible: Missionary Writing and Local Sovereignty*

To contemplate Njinga’s trail across secular and clerical registers is to confront the epistemological entanglement of religion, representation, and power in the early interoceanic worlds – an entanglement whose outcomes shift markedly from one locale to another. And yet, for all their variation, a common logic runs through these transcultural circuits: at the moment of being consumed as bibliography in metropolitan areas, the devotional and the geopolitical functioned as intersecting cartographies for the reader. J.H. Elliott (2006) observes that, in the Iberian confessional and cultural expansion, spreading the true faith to reform new territories was a profoundly symbolic endeavor. Through ecclesiastical, linguistic, and visual proceedings, they sought to make space ‘intelligible’ – primarily for the understanding of their own civilizing agents, rather than for the newly encountered populations. The proliferation of such accounts during this period documents this operation.

Considered collectively, Cadornega’s military history and the missionary chronicles of Cavazzi and da Gaeta and Gioia reveal notable parallels in their construction of intelligibility. Still, unlike proselytizers in the colonies, their work unfolded within independent polities. Their descriptive impulse – cataloguing the topography, rituals, and rulers – was a form of scholarly analysis rather than direct control by archive-building. In other words, the perceptions of these writers had to confront the facts of African sovereignty. In this sense, they operated within a field of reciprocal recognition and negotiation. At the same time, these missionary relations circulated within the expanding system that linked West Central Africa, Europe, and the Americas through trade, warfare, and the traffic in human lives. The same pages that recorded spiritual

difference also documented complex political engagement with the West, translating the Black performative enactment of rule and diplomacy into narrative tropes, rather than reproducing the conditions of actual submission.

By following Njinga's presence through these archives and the interoceanic networks of textual production – where travelers recorded distant realities for a public far across the seas – this study contends that these books acted as transcoding devices: they rendered autonomous sovereignties readable through the idiom of civilization and salvation while indirectly reflecting global hierarchies of power. What emerges is not a simple binary between faith and empire, but a continuum. In this overlapping field, zeal, representation, and emergent European rationalities intersected with African agency in the production of notions of space, authority, and subjectivity.

The Capuchin project in Kongo, Ndongo, and Matamba operated through invitation, mediation and negotiation rather than direct annexation. Yet, as in coexisting colonial spheres, the work of conversion and the subsequent tale of that work constituted a form of ordering: to preach the teachings of the Church was to integrate distant realities into a coherent moral universe, to record that endeavor was to structure the perception of that truth (Thomas 1997; France 2008; Wheat 2016). In this missionary-ethnographic corpus – as in much of the work of their contemporaries – geography and theology coalesce into a single enterprise of comprehensibility. In this regard, documentary illustrations, such as the detailed Angolan map shown here, represented valuable findings. These maps, along with the descriptions they enabled, framed African space in ways legible to viewers across the Catholic West.

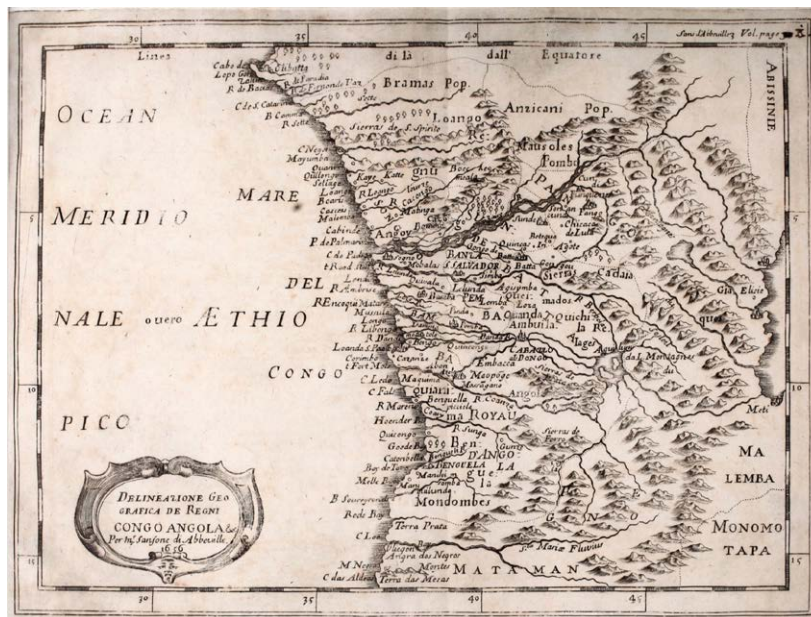


Figure 1 – Map of Angola, Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi da Montecuccolo (1687), *Istorica descrizione de' tre regni Congo, Matamba, et Angola*, Bologna, Giacomo Monti²

² Public Domain, <<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=gri.ark:/13960/t0wq6cp2v&seq=23>>, accessed 1 December 2025.

At the same time, these depictions did not directly translate into political control: for the clergy, scholars, and occasional colonial agents who consulted them, they offered guidance for navigating the complexities of regional kingdoms and states – always within a context carefully choreographed by Njinga, her counselors, and other dignitaries. Through staged acts and careful conduct in the presence of chroniclers or the informants who reported to them, these historical actors had relative control of the terms of encounter and orchestrated displays of power, causing the eventual texts to reflect not only what happened but also, perhaps inadvertently, their deliberate capacity for action.

This produces a particular oscillation of meaning: on the one hand, these discourses document topography, fauna, flora, and other geographic features as they appeared to the eye, but this observation was rooted in the ethnocentric assumption that the Christian man must reveal the ‘true’ form of the land (Sandiford 2003; Fromont 2011, 2014). Through his depictions of Angola, Matamba, and Kongo, these archival records move beyond mere documentation: their work constructs – if unintentionally – a legible blueprint of difference, translating unfamiliar territories into forms that could be interpreted and circulated in Europe. In doing so, they reinforced prevailing notions of distorted nature, exotic environments, and the continent’s supposed inferiority (Davis 1966; Thornton 1979; Casabó Suqué 2007; García Novo 2010). In this sense, they reflect the impulse to record, the need for figures and diagrams to organize information, and the use of conceptual taxonomy based on outside standards.

Yet as stated before, beyond landscape, their ordering of human initiative was always contingent: interactions were negotiated within local frameworks that limited the scope of Western interpretive authority. As a result, African rituals and political structures were rendered in ways that codified difference – but not in a manner that eradicated local agency. What these interpretations created was what Martin Jay terms a *scopic regime*, where observation presumes authority, but not coercion. A *scopic regime* refers to a historically and culturally specific system of seeing in which perception is structured, interpreted, and endowed with the power to define perceived external phenomena – such as a socially ‘othered’ group – from a standpoint that is assumed to be normative, establishing the rules or standards by which these phenomena are judged. It does not merely describe acts of looking; rather, it determines what can be seen, who is permitted to see, and how what is seen is interpreted and communicated (Wiegman 1995; Jay 2011).

Such is a way to link vision to knowledge, producing an epistemic legitimacy that shapes understanding without relying on violence. These regimes were deeply connected to the creation of a sense of alterity between the West and non-Western societies. Missionary tales, travel narratives, and other forms of visual engagement transformed distant peoples and practices into discernible categories, reinforcing ideas of their alleged orthodoxy while constructing the ‘Other’ as knowable and fundamentally different. Through these practices, seeing and defining became inseparable, and the sight itself became a tool for establishing the boundaries of human, cultural, and moral difference. Accordingly, the books analyzed here reinforced well-established frameworks of scholarship while capturing only one angle of complex societies – the one that was possible to see based on their own logic. That is why their legibility must be read as conditional and mediated, reflecting the interaction between the guests’ curiosity, their doctrinal concerns, and the native’s self-assertion. Thus, the concept of descriptive, spatial, and social translation – mediating not between Central West Africa and Latin Christianity as such, but between distinct and competing Christianities, including an established Kongolese Christian tradition and a post-Reformation Latin Catholicism – stands at the core of this analysis.

Especially telling, this case complicates any assumption of a unified, monolithic Western intellectual dominance: in one respect, these Christian authors render overseas societies as

systematically ‘knowable’, participating in the production of biased epistemologies (as Stefanie Hunt-Kennedy notes, representations of Blackness shifted from the fantastical and exotic toward the supposedly rational and comprehensible) (2020). Nonetheless, their very same writings reveal the limits of that knowledge, as the complexity of the protagonists they described continually exceeded the biases imposed upon them – an irony that underscores both the ambition and the epistemic precariousness of their enterprise.

4. *Semiotic Battlefields and Scopic Power: Negotiating Space, Narrative, and Iconography*

From a theoretical perspective, the said processes resonate with Michel de Certeau’s concept of practice, in which social actors navigate, appropriate, and reinterpret structures imposed upon them. This operation is not only valid for our chroniclers; in the cases studied here, the actions of African subjects shaped the meaning of events even as outsiders recorded them. Likewise, Henri Lefebvre’s notions (1991) highlight that space is not a neutral backdrop, but an active site of negotiation and power (see also de Certeau 1984). Positioned between being present in a foreign land – recording word of mouth or what they encountered – and sending those encounters back home for publication to a readership with whom they shared a common culture, the travelers’ texts, maps, and ethnographies can be read simultaneously as translations, instruments of epistemic ordering and as windows into the negotiated production of space, authority, and social meaning in Central West Africa. These accounts constitute a layer of this socially produced field – legible and codified for their fellow countrymen – yet always refracted through a second layer, the self-directed acts of the people they sought to categorize.

4.1 *Conversion as Spectacle and Text: Cavazzi’s Imagery and Gioia’s Mediation*

Capturing these crossroads was not solely the work of sojourners like Cavazzi. Paolo da Lorena, the engraver responsible for illustrating his manuscript, added a further layer of mediation. Although he reworked Cavazzi’s own paintings – presumably made from life – he did so far from Angola, relying on the chronicler’s descriptions to construct scenes such as Njinga’s baptism. Unlike some images based on eyewitness accounts, such as Ndembo Tembo or the old kings of Angola, the baptism scene was imagined to signify both a historical episode and the Catholic mission’s unfolding triumph. This *a posteriori* process introduced a new spatial dimension: the events that the priest claimed to have witnessed were re-cast in Italy, translated into pictures by someone who never encountered the landscape, the actors, or the ritual contexts firsthand. These engravings were thus not merely decorative. They were ideological instruments that visualized the missionary project, transforming textual testimony into a devotional spectacle. In doing so, they reinforced an imagined geography of conversion – one in which African rulers, depicted in moments of sacramental submission, embodied both spiritual transformation and political alignment. This baptism, like those of other elites, became a pictorial argument for the church’s success: a visual theology that joined artistic practice, missionary ambition, and the spatial circuitry of scopic epistemes.

The baptismal depiction exemplifies this dynamic, symbolizing the progressive integration of Central African kingdoms into Christendom alongside their farewell to false beliefs. Further evidence from letters, records, testimonies, and contemporary scholars supports the notion that these evangelical endeavors were often crafted to forge a lasting alliance between religious and political power (Fonseca 2012, 2014; Mata 2014; Pinto 2014; Glasgow 2018). Examined in this analysis, the portrait underscores these interwoven cultural and spiritual transitions (see Figure 3). By involving these leaders, Cavazzi and others working alongside him sought to bridge cultural

gaps, finding ways to acknowledge and incorporate native views while subtly encouraging the assimilation of Catholicism. Again, this image, which shows Africans and Europeans in worship, helps explain the idea of evangelization as a right of the gentile subject. The precept of the physical and spiritual encounter is integral to God's providential design for new black Christians (Cavazzi 1965). It is very telling, however, how such a narrative conveniently overlooks the centuries-old Christian traditions already present in the region before these missionaries' arrival.

Positional configuration once again serves as a key interpretive device, allowing metropolitan readers to make sense of distant events: this sense of coming together is visible in the classical copy-book model depiction of humans as if they were equal in their belonging to the universal church and universal models of human representation. However, the biases remain. The cross-cultural community of worshipers is mostly separated (with blacks kneeling and whites standing), and skin color and the laws of counterpoise become marks of difference. This positioning reinforces an unambiguous sense of superiority. Visually, it underscores inequality, where the African community is portrayed as needing spiritual guidance while the Western figures are positioned as agents of salvation. It reflects the missionary's fantasy of a superior Christian identity that differs from pagan idolatry.

The *Istorica descrizione* presents, then, a scopic regime that portrays black societies as backward and chaotic, thus positioning them as ripe for European transformation. The anthropogenic and natural landscape is rendered as an unwritten page, needing to be filled with the values, systems, and beliefs of civilizing agents, whose mission is portrayed as benevolent and crucial. At the outset, the African, unworthy of true humanity unless 'redeemed' through conversion, is framed as spiritually and socially deficient. Following this, Cavazzi reduces the population to an imagined state of disorder, failing to recognize the complexity and diversity of native cultural systems.



Figure 2 – Njinga's Baptism, Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi da Montecuccolo (1687), *Istorica Descrizione de' tre regni Congo, Matamba, et Angola*, Bologna, Giacomo Monti, 606³

³ Public Domain, <<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=gri.ark:/13960/t0wq6cp2v&seq=646>>, accessed 1 December 2025.

Moreover, the author ignores the complexity of the relationships between these religious envoys and the local elites. Figures like Njinga leveraged Christianity as a strategic tool for consolidating power and expanding political influence in a rapidly changing context. The text, however, frames these alliances solely through the analytical lights of European benevolence, relegating African rulers to passive subjects of change rather than active participants in shaping these encounters. This viewpoint is further reinforced by the visual rhetoric accompanying the chronicle, which depicts a rigid, hierarchical relationship. Africans are portrayed as occupying a subordinated role, awaiting salvation from their Christian counterparts, who are visually positioned as the enlightened and noble rulers of the world.

Without the pictorial splendor of Cavazzi's work, *La meravigliosa conversione* offers a more restrained perspective, particularly in how Capuchin narratives amplify the ideological power of transcultural encoding. Although attributed to Francesco Gioia, the text is essentially a reworking of a single earlier relation by Antonio da Gaeta, rather than a compilation of letters or a synthesis of multiple accounts sent to Europe. Da Gaeta, who arrived in the region around 1650 and served in Ndongo and Matamba until his death in the early 1660s, provided the original account that Gioia later adapted for publication in Naples in 1669. In his introduction, Gioia (in da Gaeta and Gioia 1669) explicitly states that the work was extracted from the account of another author, making clear that the text does not claim full authorial originality. This admission underscores the mediated nature of the publication and highlights the importance of recognizing how his perspective is shaped by the interpretations, emphases, and intentions embedded in his source. Attending to this mediation is crucial for analyzing how the portrayal of Njinga is filtered and reframed through editorial intervention rather than direct eyewitness testimony, organizing the story within a triumphalist and hagiographic register.

The illustration presented here operates semiotically as a dense visual text that encodes these theological and cultural meanings through a carefully structured system of signs. At its center stands the crucified Christ, vertically positioned as the image's dominant signifier of salvation and sacrifice. The inscription INRI reinforces the biblical narrative, while the wounds and posture anchor the scene in themes of suffering, redemption, and divine intervention. Around a vertical axis, kneeling figures gesture toward the crucifix in postures of devotion. Their gazes redirect the viewer's attention to Christ, semiotically encoding the act of conversion and echoing the Queen's turn toward Christian faith. Text anchors the depiction and amplifies its message. The Latin caption – *Benedictus Dominus Deus Israel, qui facit mirabilia solus*⁴ – frames the scene within scriptural authority, while the Psalm reference guides interpretation toward divine action and truth. The inclusion of terms such as *Ethiopes* and *reges terrae* extends the scene's meaning into a global horizon, casting conversion not as a local accident but as part of a universal evangelizing mission.

⁴ 'Blessed be the Lord God, the God of Israel, who alone works wonders' (Psalm 72:18).

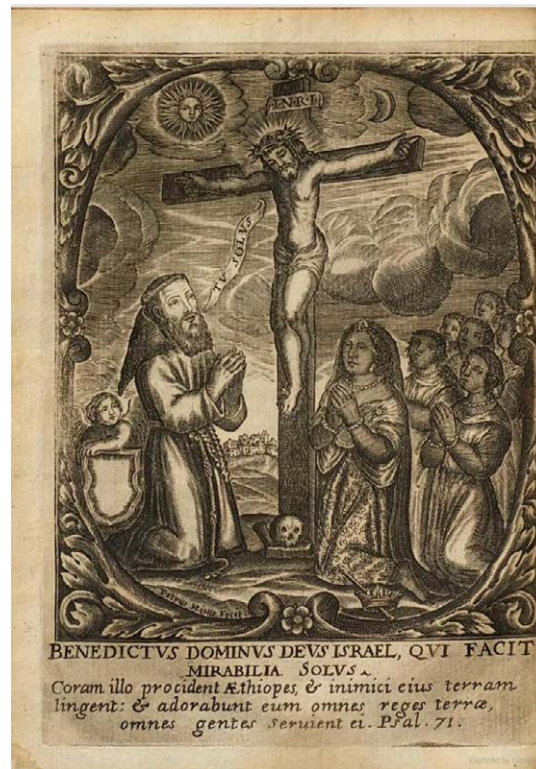


Figure 3 – Frontispiece, Antonio da Gaeta and Francesco Maria Gioia (1669), *La maravigliosa conversione alla santa fede di Cristo della regina Singa e del suo regno di Matamba nell’Africa meridionale*, Napoli, Giacinto Passaro⁵

The previous discussion directs us to another key aspect of the *Istorica descrizione*: the link between knowledge and power, as proselytizing required priests to have a basic understanding of cultural practices to effectively spread the new religion. One possible interpretation of Cavazzi’s account is that the spread of Catholicism required a strategic compromise – demanding patience and a deliberate attempt to understand and document African customs. This approach allowed missionaries to promote the perceived superiority of the gospel while supporting the broader goals of the Church. This approach aligned with the founding of the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith in 1622, which aimed to oversee and coordinate the global transmission of Christian teachings (Zhang 2023). Before this institutional milestone, however, the church’s envoys were already producing detailed diaries, accounts, and treatises that served both as tools of evangelization and intellectual contributions, expanding knowledge of geography, society, and natural history.

Cavazzi reflects this ethnographic tone, offering in-depth examinations of West Central African faiths, political systems, and traditions. Vital to this mission were the maps and engravings produced during the period. The depiction of Angola and its surrounding kingdoms

⁵ Public Domain, <<https://books.google.com.co/books/content?id=-0F0CTJBx4oC&hl=es&pg=PR28&img=1&zoom=3&sig=ACfU3U2TQAgBrJ9LujpeZ9Lo4dBoDL2krg&cw=1025>>, accessed 1 December 2025.

presented before, for example, not only served as instructional tools but also signified the broader spiritual and political reach of European influence. Through the precision of cartography, such maps reinforced the perceived dominance of Western knowledge over the 'ignorance' of the 'African pagans' whom the missionaries sought to convert.

The rationale behind this supremacy was grounded in the notion of a purported Black abnormality. This idea is explicitly introduced in the text through Cavazzi's portrayal of the inhabitants of the area as 'barbarous, ruthless Africans who always crave human flesh' (1965, 72), which corresponds closely with the accompanying visual component. By invoking cannibalism, the missionary dehumanizes Indigenous identity, justifying the need for conversion and reinforcing viewpoints that legitimize the newly asserted orthodoxy as a civilizing force – despite the region's long-standing, though unevenly distributed, Christian traditions. Historical realities help explain this perceived anomaly, which stems from a significant aspect of the early modern visual regime: the influence of ancient authors and travel stories on explorers and writers. These sources often depicted unfamiliar lands as populated by grotesque and fictional races, reinforcing distorted perceptions of the world beyond Europe.

However, epistemological shifts marked a turning point by the time Cavazzi's work was written. The fantastical elements – such as the *Mirabilia* and *exotica* prevalent in previous accounts of exploration and geographical chronicles – were being replaced by a growing emphasis on accuracy and observation. This transition reflected a departure from reliance on myths, as the portrayal of distant lands as monstrous and aberrant began to give way to a more precise understanding of these territories' realities (Sandoval 1956; Aubrey 1993; Vaughan and Mason Vaughan 1997; Ramey 2008; Davies 2016). Yet, these bizarre ideas – that perhaps haunted the readers – left an indelible mark that continues to echo in the perspective of the text. Shaped by Western ideology, Cavazzi cannot escape the influence of his biases despite his attempts to present an objective report. His volume leaves little to the imagination in its depiction of Njinga, a cannibalistic, bloodthirsty figure steeped in devil worship, consumed by a 'bestial hatred against all male children' (Cavazzi 1965, 66).

Njinga, by this time engaged in a war against the Portuguese, is depicted as a horrifying figure, serving as an embodiment of personal monstrosity. This portrayal reflects how the resistance of African peoples is often framed as an aberration – deemed a deviance from the so-called enlightened norms of the sojourners. In Cavazzi's view, Njinga's defiance is not merely a political or military act, but is pathologized as something unnatural, subverting his own ideas of civilization. Such images, however, are not merely descriptions of individual behavior; they are strategic constructions aimed at destabilizing the very concept of African humanity. Her supposed dreadfulness, particularly her inhuman revulsion towards masculinity and the inversion of gender norms, exposes the chronicler's deeper desire for othering. The queen is marked as evil not just because of her resistance to external violence but because she transgresses the boundaries of sexual, power, and racial roles established from afar. Therefore, her representation reflects the need to redefine her as a 'non-person', denying her humanity, agency, and relevance (Erickson and Hulse 2000; Grier, Jones, and Casander 2018; Ndiaye and Markey 2023).

This inverted characterization is further reinforced by Cavazzi's relation of one of Njinga's most famous – and perhaps fictional – episodes, which intertwines both the fear of African women and cultures as alien, bizarre, and treacherous, with the anxiety over effeminizing luxury as a sign of sinfulness. During her 1625 embassy in Luanda, Njinga made a dramatic entrance into the audience room during a meeting with the Portuguese Governor Correia de Sousa. Her arrival was a calculated political move. Dressed in luxurious clothing and adorned with jewelry, she commanded attention

as a royal envoy, fully authorized to conduct one-on-one negotiations with the colonial authorities. However, as the negotiations unfolded, Njinga soon became aware of a well-known symbolic stratagem: while Correia de Sousa sat upon a lofty, opulent chair, the seating arrangement for Njinga – and other local dignitaries – was a series of velvet cushions placed on the floor. This arrangement was intentionally designed to emphasize her subordination. Njinga, however, firmly refused to accept such indignity. In an elegant display of rebelliousness, she arrogantly ordered one of the women from her own entourage to assume a chair position. To the astonishment of the European witnesses, the attendant remained seated in that position throughout the entire conversation.

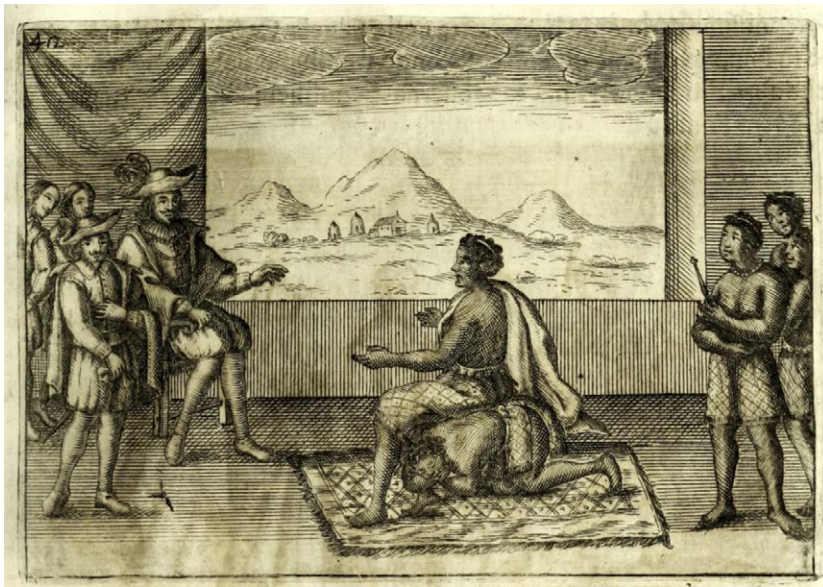


Figure 4 – Njinga Seated on a Servant, Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi da Montecuccolo (1687), *Istorica Descrizione de' tre regni Congo, Matamba, et Angola*, Bologna, Giacomo Monti, 605⁶

Mediated witnessing is fundamental in the subsequent construction of these semi-legendary events. Though Cavazzi did not arrive in Angola until several decades later, he freely incorporated this earlier episode into his rendering. He did so by drawing on a wide range of sources: written reports circulating within the Capuchin network, letters and administrative documents preserved by ecclesiastical and colonial authorities, as well as interviews and sustained discussions with Njinga herself and with her ministers, alongside the oral testimony of missionaries, soldiers, officials, and local informants who claimed direct or inherited knowledge of these incidents (Heywood and Thornton 2007). The religious order itself maintained a strong institutional memory of key moments, particularly those involving conflicts and royal encounters. Given the heterogeneity of these channels, the precise point of origin of particular narrative elements cannot always be securely identified. Significantly, this episode is not attested in the extensive correspondence of De Sousa, who arrived as governor in 1624 and whose letters include both retrospective reflections and ongoing administrative concerns. The essayist, however, wove these

⁶ Public Domain, <<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=gri.ark:/13960/t0wq6cp2v&seq=645>>, accessed 1 December 2025.

materials into a continuous history, framing the past as a necessary precursor to the developments he personally observed. In this way, his chronicle also functions as a selective and retrospective reimagining, rather than a transparent recovery of a single source tradition.

By this very operation, the twofold nature of this semantical sphere – moving between the chronotope of the narrated past and the chronotope of the writer's present – creates a scopical regime sustained entirely by Euro-Christian epistemologies. Here, the ambiguities of hearsay provide fertile ground for the repetition of established truths. Still, like the negatives of a photograph, these layers allow us to infer some sense from what is absent: deliberate or accidental omissions become highly revealing of a certain human will. What is not said can be as telling as what is proclaimed, exposing the contours of desire, intention, and prejudice embedded within the text.

4.2 *Agency Spilling Over the Narrative's Brim*

Abusive as it may appear, the human-chair chapter not only defied the established power dynamics but also exemplified Njinga's refusal to conform to foreign norms, asserting both her autonomy and strength in the face of any attempts at subjugation.⁷ By utilizing the body of her servant in an act of noncompliance, Njinga effectively reclaims control over the symbolic dynamics of the encounter. Her actions signify a deliberate subversion of the prescribed roles of non-European female dignitaries in that situation. In doing so, she constructs an alternative spatial order where the hierarchy is leveled, the colonial authority is no longer elevated, and her own leadership is brought to an equal standing. This episode mirrors the characteristics observed in the other engravings when examined through its graphic system. It presents the contraposition of black and white, civilized and uncivilized, Christian and heathen – all of them oppositions embedded in Cavazzi's pictorial framework. Njinga, however, navigates these semantics in ambiguous ways, and her image, like her legacy, remains contradictory.

I have stated before that the viewpoints on these cultural shocks were not indivisible, that other Capuchin essayists were less inclined to disparage West Africans. Part of the differences in da Gaeta and Gioia's dynamic Njinga and Cavazzi's vilified one stems from their manner of shaping the plot. The latter's moralizing gaze works to discredit her, while the former, though likewise judgmental, channels their evaluations toward constructing her as a female lead. If you are thinking about your target audience, this move succeeds in crafting a recognizable logic pattern – ultimately, it is no different from what other historians have done before. It also has the advantage of revealing agency. While in the previous case, Njinga's power to act spills over the rim of the argument – perceptible to the modern reader almost against the author's intent – in *La meravigliosa conversione*, it appears far more directly. The thirteenth chapter, "The Queen falls gravely ill with quinsy and becomes inflamed with invoking and imploring the help of the Purest Virgin Mary", recounts a pivotal drama: the Queen's sudden illness following the completion of a church. At first glance, this episode appears as a simple medical misfortune. However, when examined through a sign-based perspective, it reveals a complex interplay of meanings and power relations (da Gaeta and Gioia 1669, 127).

The Queen's body becomes a contested site where indigenous cosmologies and Christian teleology struggle for dominance, and the missionary's narrative transforms illness into a rhetorical instrument for legitimizing Catholic religious authority. Symptoms like pain and fever

⁷ This article renders this episode as described in Heywood 2017, 62. Also see the version of Cavazzi 1965, 68.

function as signifiers whose signified oscillates between two semantic avenues. For the story's idolatrous antagonists, the illness indexes punishment for opening the door to the Christian enemy and abandoning ancestral gods, reinforcing their cosmological order. For the narrative truth of the author, possible readers, and for the figure cast as the protagonist, it symbolizes a spiritual trial – a test of faith orchestrated by God to affirm Njinga's sincerity in conversion. This duality illustrates the tension inherent in early transcultural engagements: the same phenomenon is encoded with radically different meanings depending on the code applied.

Unlike Cavazzi, who frames Njinga's femininity as aberrant, *La maravigliosa conversione*'s invocation of the Virgin Mary introduces an iconic and symbolic layer to the text. Iconically, Mary embodies purity and maternal care, offering a comforting visual motif in the face of mortal danger. Symbolically, she operates as a guarantor of spiritual truth, neutralizing indigenous interpretations of the pathology. By framing the Queen's recovery as contingent upon Marian intercession, the text constructs a chain of final causes: sickness, prayer, divine aid, and reaffirmation of conversion. This narrative also aligns with hagiographic tropes, positioning the Queen as a proto-saint whose suffering validates the superiority of Christian womanly virtue.

Supporting this significance is the fact that both the primary agent and the plot trace an arc from precariousness to strength. The physical deterioration serves as proof of vulnerability – not only biological but ideological. Da Gaeta, as is quoted by Gioia, explicitly acknowledges his fear that the Queen's death would render his efforts futile, exposing the fragility of the conversion project. This anxiety underscores the dependence of evangelization on the symbolic capital of elite converts. Njinga's body thus becomes a semiotic battlefield where competing cultural systems – idolatry and Christianity – vie for hermeneutic supremacy. Yet, in the interest of a legible storyline, her survival, framed as God's will, retroactively legitimizes their own enterprise and delegitimizes African deities. When this happens, both the writer and their readership reaffirm their assumption of epistemic centrality.

As we seek to understand figures like Njinga amidst all this complexity, the question arises: can we see her beyond the biased knowledge production that has shaped our perceptions of her? To this point, my analysis highlights the significant role that travel accounts played in influencing views of humanity, exploring the intersection of Blackness, religion, and cultural differences, often framed in exotic terms. However, these depictions also bring to light the tangle of prejudices and naiveties that were widespread at the time. Scholars and artists such as Cavazzi and da Lorena contributed to constructing and maintaining rigid distinctions between 'standard' white societies and so-called 'inferior' peoples, thus reinforcing harmful binaries in Western thinking. It is worth noting, however, that Njinga herself also intervened in this field of representation through a small corpus of letters she authored, some of which have been edited and translated by Heywood. These writings, though limited in number and circulation, nonetheless register a local perspective articulated in her own political voice. Perhaps it is this more empowered Njinga – one that gestures toward a more nuanced African subjectivity – that a different sort of intellectuals, such as da Gaeta and Gioia, allow to come through.

5. *Njinga's Trail in the Wake of Scopic Regimes*

Sadly, the enduring influence of these epistemic regimes remains inescapable in the present. In this section, attention is given to the deficiencies of contemporary historical perspectives on African presences in the archive, which remain profoundly limited, often presenting a unidimensional account that neglects the richness and complexity of these histories. Such a limited

perspective erases the multifaceted dimensions of their presence in modernity, reducing Njinga to an instrument of external historical narratives rather than portraying her as a true queen, grappling with political challenges and asserting agency. As James H. Sweet aptly observes, omission is a pervasive currency in the field:

Approaches largely fail to accommodate African Historical perspectives, either on their own terms or as integral parts of a tightly braided Atlantic world. As one historian recently put it, if the category of the Atlantic is to mean anything, it ought to include Africa, but there seems to be no room for this often overlooked fourth continent in most new versions of the Atlantic. (2014, 4)

Truth be told, the distorting of history through the lens of Western erudition shaped not just the records but the very reality of transcultural exchanges. These actions reified stereotypes and impeded the recognition of these cultures as equal participants in global modernity. The distorted portrayal of their words, deeds, and societal structures ensured that future generations – particularly those within metropolitan powers – viewed non-Europeans as static and in need of control or transformation, rather than as dynamic and self-determining. Again, much of the contemporary perceptions of these issues still reveal these shortcomings.

This raises the issue of whether it is possible to construct an Atlantic history without perpetuating the fetish of African victimization and whether the African role in African history can truly be reclaimed. Sweet (2014) suggests approaching this challenge with a two-tiered framework for source work: prioritizing linguistic, cultural, and social history as a primary base while using inquisitorial records, travel literature, censuses, ethnographies, periodicals, township records, and maps as a secondary base. By integrating these two levels, it becomes possible to transcend the methodological inadequacies of current perspectives. To achieve this, however, the illusion of a transparent historical narrative must also be discarded. Even where African-authored texts do survive – as in the correspondence of Kongolese rulers such as Afonso I, Garcia II, and other early modern kings – their preservation, translation, and circulation are themselves embedded within European archival regimes and priorities. Historiographic work is shaped by the social conceptions of both the past and the present. Historians rank events hierarchically, operating within perspectives that are far from universal or impartial. This begs the question: Who is speaking when early modern incursions into Africa are narrated, and under what conditions are African voices rendered legible?

There are historical instances that strongly validate the self-directed actions of native subjects or communities – instances that require reading carefully between the lines to uncover their full significance. In many of these cases, the narratives frequently underscore the credulity of observers projecting their own expectations onto reality. In this regard, António de Oliveira de Cadornega's description of Queen Njinga as 'uma rainha de grande coração'⁸ in his *História Geral das Guerras Angolanas* is not incidental; it reflects the narrative logic of imperial values (1940, vol. 1, 53). Framed as a military chronicle, the work privileges valor and strategic acumen as central virtues. Within this heroic code, courage becomes a universal currency – admired even in adversaries – because it amplifies the epic tone of the story and legitimizes Portuguese victories. By elevating Njinga to a figure of exceptional bravery, Cadornega magnifies the difficulty of conquest: defeating a formidable opponent enhances prestige.

It must be acknowledged that so many nuances make the recovery of agency complex. Cavazzi and da Gaeta depict Njinga's femininity either as a violation or as an embodiment of

⁸ (a woman of great heart). Unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine.

a female ideal, while Cadornega reframes her through the lexicon of war, allowing admiration without challenging the patriarchal and ethnocentric norms that structure his report. Although their portrayals differ, they ultimately share more common ground than one might assume – two sides of the same coin. In *História Geral*, the queen becomes exceptional, not exemplary, a singular anomaly whose greatness ultimately confirms the inevitability of Portuguese triumph. Her courage thus becomes instrumental, reinforcing a teleological plot that moves from African resistance to European victory. In his account, this victory is not framed as total annihilation but as a providential and symbolic closure: Njinga's peace treaty with the Portuguese and her conversion to Christianity are presented as decisive acts of submission.

Having said that, she emerges as a woman of resolute action – a fact that shapes the antagonisms inscribed in her descriptions. This idea is reinforced by subtextual readings of ancestor consultation, a significant manifestation of authority in seventeenth-century Angola. For Cavazzi, such practices were dismissed as mere devil worship; however, they constituted rituals that legitimized Njinga's power, framing her rule as divinely sanctioned and guided by the wisdom of powerful ancestral spirits. From the perspective of our religious emissary, though, the event is mediated by a pronounced bias, which distorts the true spiritual significance of the practice:

After the death of Ngola Mbandi . . . she gathered some bones from his corpse and kept them in a coffin covered with crudely made silver lids and rich rugs, honoring that infernal putrefaction as their tutelary idol, with all the particular ministers, with sacrifices, pyres, and incense. (Cavazzi 1965, 73)

The remains traveled with the queen's entourage and were consulted in cases of special significance. Ritualized communication with the deceased played a central role in the sociopolitical systems of Central West Africa, and Njinga's reign was no exception (Piętek and Rubinkowska-Anioł 2018). During one of her battles against the Portuguese, messengers from her rivals proposed a new treaty, which included a promise to return provinces previously under European control. Unsure of the best course of action, she decided to consult the remains of her brother for guidance on a matter of great importance.

According to Cavazzi, who was by then engaged in the conversion of a still-undecided queen, the response emerged through a remarkable séance involving possessed *xingulas*, spirit mediums who voiced their judgment on the proposed treaty. Summoned by her former catechist and now principal religious guide, Calixto Zelotes dos Reis Magros, the spirits delivered a clear and uncanny message: surrender would lead to death and the loss of freedom. Njinga chose not to succumb. Rather than capitulate, she interpreted the ritual verdict as authorization to retreat temporarily, later fighting and defeating her enemies under more favorable conditions. Although this strategy ultimately proved short-lived, it nevertheless demonstrated her capacity to translate ritual consultation into decisive military action. That night, with Njinga leading them, the army silently evaded their adversaries.

This passage provides a glimpse into the complex interplay between diplomacy, military strategy, and cult practices surrounding ancestors in Njinga's leadership. The consultation of Ngola Mbandi during a critical moment illustrates the deeply ingrained role of spiritual guidance in royal decision-making. The queen's use of traditional beliefs and her eventual military retreat exemplify her astuteness as a ruler. While Cavazzi interpreted the entire event as yet another example of the African 'savagery' he despised, he may have been overlooking something more significant. His description of Njinga's actions as 'bloodthirsty witchcraft' (1965, 78) reveals his disdain, yet in doing so, he unknowingly preserved a moment that exemplifies the queen's strategic acumen.

That Njinga was exceptionally clever in navigating the diplomatic, economic, and religious challenges of her time is an undeniable truth. Facing the threat of Portuguese expansion at her doorstep, a Dutch army entering the fray from Europe, and local challenges to her authority, she was at a pivotal moment, which she interpreted with remarkable skill. Njinga was crafty enough to offer alliances, military aid, and even the exchange of slaves in return for her family members and other notables. All of this was possible because, although Njinga herself did not speak Portuguese, many officials and members of her court were educated in Western-style institutions.

As Linda Heywood (2009) points out, contact with Catholic culture acquainted the Central African nobility with European political concepts, so, unsurprisingly, Njinga's writings demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of Western views on war, politics, and faith. Heywood has compiled diplomatic correspondence between Njinga and her European counterparts, which showcases her skillful use of religious language, which is employed with a clear political purpose. The following is an excerpt from her letter to the Vatican's Propaganda Fide, dated August 1651. She adeptly played the conversion card to argue that the Portuguese wars were unjust since they were being waged against fellow Catholics:

I confess I am very obliged to Your Lordships for this kindness, for now we have knowledge of the one true God that we did not have before. For this reason; we had remained deceived by our idolatrous beliefs, possessed by the devil. God's compassion toward us is great, even though we are undeserving of his divine mercy on account of our grave sins. Nevertheless, mercy is what He is offering us through the arrival of the *capuchin* father, and now I live with my body and soul at peace. May our Lord Jesus Christ be served by allowing us to reciprocate the benevolence you confer upon us, so that we may not deserve greater punishment for our sins. If Your Lordships send us other *capuchin* friars, we will welcome them with open arms, for there are many people in our kingdom ready to receive the Holy Baptism. (Heywood 2009, 45)

Her rhetoric operates as a form of negotiation: she expresses gratitude for the mission work while aligning herself with the recipient's cause and simultaneously asserting her sovereignty. This strategic skill helps explain why Njinga's legacy cannot be captured through narrow ethnographic accounts or early visual portrayals, which often distort or oversimplify her complexity.

6. *Concluding Thoughts*

Lefebvre (1991) and de Certeau (1984) can help us read Njinga more tactically: her campaigns reorganized political geography, challenging an alleged Western dominance that existed more forcefully in Portuguese claims than in political reality, while her alliances, mobility, and symbolic gestures operated as 'arts of doing' within imposed – and persistently unstable – structures. In the meantime, her capacity for decisive action overflows the male, Catholic, literate gaze that sought to vilify, admire, or instrumentalize her. If we return to the symbolism of the statue in São Miguel, we observe a parallel order of meaning that directly challenges presuppositions of voicelessness. Today, this iconic figure embodies a heroic political ideal, conveying defiance in the face of the immense adversities of her time. Even amidst the tangled strands of her representations, the queen's legacy resonates through local histories and emerges from the cracks in the records.

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Utopia incognita Tasso's Atlantic and the Decolonial Imagination

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Abstract

Set against the backdrop of the First Crusade's conquest of Jerusalem, Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata* (1581) channels both the aspirations and the failures of city-building and destruction. The poem explores probing questions about territorial ownership, religious right, and the materiality of space, extending from the Middle East to its symbolic New World shores. Central to the article's analysis is Canto XV, whose prophecy of Columbus and his distant voyage engages pre-, anti-, and decolonial modes of thought. This prophecy unfolds as two Crusaders approach the Atlantic island of the enchantress Armida, a space charged with imperial tensions. Although resembling an earthly paradise, Armida's island functions as a paradise-prison, a heterotopia generating what the present study terms decolonizing doubts – critiques and counternarratives that arise when one colonial context is forced to assess another. These doubts unsettle the poem's portrayals of conquest, liberation, captivity, and the epistemologies of discovery. Tasso's emphasis on the verbal and visual proof of lands beyond known bounds exposes the anxieties surrounding both colonial and authorial power. By examining the interplay between utopian and decolonial perspectives, the present article brings into relief Tasso's geographical critique of center and periphery, and foregrounds the pivotal role female artistry plays within epic history and its (im)possible future.

Keywords: Decolonial History, Epic Poetry, Prophecy, Torquato Tasso, Utopia

1. Introduction

The painting *Carlo e Ubaldo resistono agli incantesimi di Armida* (Figure 1), completed by Venetian artists Gian Antonio Guardi and his brother Francesco around 1750, depicts a verdant setting bustling in luminous florals. Gathered by a fountain is a pair of playing nymphs. Their facial expressions are notably different: one nymph directs her gaze downward and drifting to the right, revealing a partially curved smile, while her seated counterpart locks eyes with two intruding men, her mouth agape, her limbs twisted, bearing testimony to her startled state. The

Guardi brothers here represent the prelude to the most famous scene from Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata* (1581). Carlo and Ubaldo, the crusading duo mid-way through their journey to retrieve their comrade Rinaldo from Armida's island, have arrived in this bucolic setting dressed for war. Bedecked in armor, helmets, and a shield, each part of the Crusaders' appearance accentuates their status as securely protected. Their bodies, though partially shrouded by nature, stand in contrast to the nymphs' exposed skin, allowing this visual transmediation to pose a question less explicitly articulated in Tasso's poetry: are these bathing nymphs and fortified warriors meeting in a *locus amoenus* or a *locus terribilis*?; if it is the latter, who risks being harmed? Which pair is truly the more vulnerable one?



Figure 1 – Gian Antonio Guardi and Francesco Guardi, *Carlo e Ubaldo resistono agli incantesimi di Armida*, ca. 1750/1755. Oil on canvas. 250.2 x 459.8 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund. Accession number 1964.21.1. Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington¹

The depiction of armed men encountering near-naked women in alluring sites of natural enchantment calls to mind another early modern scene that stokes these same questions. This visual grammar recurs, for instance, in the *Allegory of America* (Figure 2) originally by Jan van der Straet (better known as Stradanus), included in the print series *Nova reperta* (ca. 1600). Stradanus depicts navigator Amerigo Vespucci as he arrives on the shores of the allegorized continent America. The stripped, supine female figure is jolted from her hammock, alarmed by his unexpected intrusion. America's mouth gapes – parted on the cusp of issuing speech – mirroring the terrified nymph from the Guardi brothers' painting. Each female figure conveys the taut vulnerability that brews within a scene of political (en route to the possibility of sexual) conquest.

¹ Creative Commons Zero (CC0), <<https://www.nga.gov/artworks/50255-carlo-and-ubaldo-resisting-enchantments-armidas-nymphs>>, accessed 1 December 2025.



Figure 2 – Theodor Galle, after Jan van der Straet, *Allegory of America*. From *Nova reperta*. Antwerp: Philips Galle, ca. 1600. Engraving. 27 x 20 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund. Accession Number 34.30(2). Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art²

Reasons for connecting Carlo and Ubaldo's voyage with depictions of New World discovery emerge from the *Liberata's* Canto XV. There, as the Crusaders approach Armida's pleasure island, Fortune – an angelic extension of the poem's 'divine partisanship' (Gregory 2009, 153) – issues a prophecy. She speaks in the second person directly to Christopher Columbus, foretelling him (as if he were one of Tasso's readers) of all he will bring about on distant shores, and how poetry will remember him:

Tu spiegherai, Colombo, a un novo polo
 lontane sì le fortunate antenne,
 ch'a pena seguirà con gli occhi il volo
 la fama c'ha mille occhi e mille penne.
 Canti ella Alcide e Bacco, e di te solo
 basti a i posteri tuoi ch'alquanto accenne,
 ché quel poco darà lunga memoria
 di poema dignissima e d'istoria. (*GL XV.32*)³

² Creative Commons Zero (CC0), <<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/659655>>, accessed 1 December 2025.

³ (You, Columbus, will unfurl your fortunate sails toward a new pole / so distant that even Fame, / with her thousand eyes and thousand wings, / will scarcely follow your flight. / Let her sing of Hercules and Bacchus; for you alone / let it suffice that she offers even a brief nod to your posterity. / That little will grant you enduring memory, / worthy of both poetry and history). All citations of *Gerusalemme liberata*, abbreviated to *GL* and listed by canto and stanza number, are from Tasso 2009. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine.

Fortune does not simply say what Columbus will do in the New World; she utters it in the very form he would have been most eager to receive. Prophecy for *Cristo Ferens* ('bearer of Christ', as Columbus felt he was) meant playing the long and patient game: launching expeditions against natural odds – the 'dubbio clima' (doubtful climate, *GL XV.31*) that Tasso imagines – christening those who survive disease and warfare, draining lands of their local resources, and funneling the spoils of imperial journeying to fund a crusade to take back Jerusalem: in short, to give epic poets something to write about.⁴

Tasso approaches conquest critically in the *Liberata's* final cantos, enough to label the Christians 'predatori' (predators, *GL XIX.30*) upon their crossing over Jerusalem's walls. Tasso was sensitive, as this identifier suggests, to what cities look like when they are being destroyed – a sensitivity that renders episodes like the refuge the Muslim princess Erminia finds among humble shepherds especially sheltering within an otherwise theater of war. Beyond Columbus' own visions of expansionist prophecy capable of retaking Jerusalem, what makes Fortune's prophecy curious and complex is its multidirectional temporality. Writing in the second half of the sixteenth century, Tasso designs a poem set at the end of the eleventh century, featuring a prophecy of fifteenth-century discovery. This blend of temporal layers grows in intricacy when considering the other prophecies uttered in the poem. The prediction in Canto X, for instance, is *post eventum*: it anticipates the results of the Third Crusade (1189-1192), a devastating defeat for Goffredo's twelfth-century successors, one that restores Muslim rule in Jerusalem.⁵ Halfway through a triumphal account of the First Crusade (1096-1099), the looming specter of subsequent history jeopardizes the promise of a true Christian victory. History might be written by the victors, but nothing (not even poetry) can fix their crowns beyond challenge. In this light, Tasso's poem reveals not the grandeur of ideologically motivated conquest but its susceptibility to the erosions of time. Through its construction of temporal continuities and reliance upon their ruptures, the *Liberata* unsettles its own historical framework midway through its very own making.

Blurring the edges between past and present, Tasso theorizes the effects of American colonization before they begin to materialize. He stages his epic in a precolonial moment in the history of the Americas, in keeping with a principle articulated in his *Discorsi dell'arte poetica* (1564): the historical setting of an epic should not be too distant from the experience of contemporary readers. The 'right' kind of epic, according to Tasso's neo-Aristotelian logic, must stem from historical events and retain a level of believability adequate to its moral and narrative aims. Such preferences write out of the genre's genealogy works like *Orlando furioso* (1516, 1532) by Ludovico Ariosto. The *Furioso* may be entertaining, Tasso is willing to admit, but it lacks the unity and verisimilitude proper to epic. While Tasso's poetic treatises insist on historical credibility, his poem lingers at the threshold of imaginable alternatives – speculative geographies, prophetic visions, and temporal crosscurrents that draw the *Liberata* into dialogue with futures that had not yet arrived. In this tension between prescription and invention, Tasso adheres to and destabilizes the very epic norms he helped to define.

Tasso was, to echo David Quint, curious about the 'potential *shapelessness* of history as a subject for poetry' (2015, 2021). The wonderment essential to the *Liberata's* fiction – the marvelous that baits Crusaders at nearly every turn – is the same wonderment that renders historical accuracy optional for the narrator. That honeyed disruption, which sweetens and muddies sour truths, slows the Christians' march to Jerusalem announced in the poem's opening octave. So

⁴ On Columbus' ambitions to embark on a crusade to recapture Jerusalem, see Hamdani 1979 and Watt 2017, 130-146.

⁵ See *GL X.22-23* and the extended analysis of this episode below.

does the marvelous loosen the *Liberata* from the tangled knots of history, whose events and imprints it nonetheless aspires to recount. My analysis herewith considers these dynamics more generative than obstructing. Guided by Craig Kallendorf's reading of 'The Other Virgil', that classical poet who 'presented both what is lost as well as what is gained in conquest', my arguments shine a new light on Tasso's progress towards a New World (2007, 15). For Tasso, to herald the achievements of Christian empire is also to mourn their costs.⁶ What Gian Biagio Conte has argued about the *Aeneid* resonates profoundly with the *Liberata*:

a meditation (modulated in various tones) on the reasons why one person or one people has emerged victorious [in] its painful struggle against another ... Victory necessarily involves destroying the rights of others; it may even require the victor to look through enemies' eyes. The epos becomes rich in contradictory registers when right is divided – and so language along with it – as a whole age is torn apart. (1986, 183-184)

The poem's double gaze – one that elicits sympathy from the narrator – has long been a privileged line of discourse in Tasso scholarship.⁷ What I prioritize here are the affective and ideological forces that generate sympathy for events that have not yet happened and, according to some within the poem, perhaps ought not to. Of primary relevance here is the imaginative work the *Liberata* undertakes in asking what an encounter with the Atlantic isles might look like in a world before (and without) New World colonization. What hope is there, Tasso's poem wonders, for a counter-narrative of peace instead of bloodshed, of tolerance rather than obliteration, of coexistence westwards before there is no one left with whom to coexist?

My aim is to move past the traditional view of Tasso as simply a Counter-Reformation loyalist committed to promoting the Catholic Church's need for imperialist speed. I argue instead that the *Liberata* unfolds within a precolonial horizon, and that this horizon unlocks a decolonial imagination – one that operates through the rhetorical logic of the historically impossible yet poetically thinkable. Despite the abundance of primary materials on travel, navigation, and ethnographic encounter, scholarship on decolonial thinking in early modern Italy lags behind advances in adjacent disciplines, our field's immersion in what Steve Mentz has termed the 'blue humanities' still awaiting a fuller tide of critical attention.⁸ Walter Mignolo's call for 'pluriversal' approaches to the premodern world provides a critical lens through which to reassess these materials, opening pathways that Tasso scholarship has largely not yet traced but that prove essential for considering the global dimensions of his epic.⁹ The *Liberata* does not, to be sure, always conform neatly (or willingly) to a Catholic imperialist paradigm; its countervailing visions and voices speak forcefully to that resistance. Such countercurrents come into focus in the poem's Atlantic episode (Cantos XIV to XVI), which rehearses a poetics of coexistence consonant with the epic's broader complexities around conversion and survival, including the ambiguous conversions of Erminia and Armida, as well as the survival of the Muslim Altamoro, whose life the captain Goffredo spares moments before entering Christ's tomb. Considering these dynamics, Tasso's epic proves unexpectedly hospitable to questions now central to decolonial critique.

I employ the term 'decolonial' prudently, cognizant of the multiple connotations it bears in contemporary contexts. My historical thinking gravitates to Raymond F. Betts' capacious understanding of decolonization as 'a global-scale political change', an approach that offers the

⁶ See Cavallo 1999; Fuchs 2001, 24-34; Moudarres 2019, 105-142.

⁷ For this perspective's origins and developments, see Zatti 1983.

⁸ See Mentz 2023.

⁹ See Mignolo 2011.

conceptual elasticity needed to read premodern epic within broader transformations of territory, authority, and cultural contact (2012, 25). Discourses of pre-, anti-, and decolonial imaginations arise naturally from a genre so steeped in politics, history, and geography. Sneharika Roy has formulated a question that places these criteria at the forefront of her reconsideration of the genre: ‘If the epic celebrates the *presence* of territory, ancestral history and a collectively shared culture, what relevance does the genre have in societies shaped by the violent *loss* of territory, history and culture?’ (2018, 2). Tasso’s poem navigates both impulses, a dynamic captured by Lanfranco Caretti’s classic model of ‘bifrontismo spirituale’ (spiritual double-mindedness) – the productively cloudy space in which the ambiguities of the *Liberata* breathe most freely (1961, 90). As has long been observed, Tasso’s poem affirms the epic imperative to commemorate territorial and spiritual victory, even as it registers the displacements and vulnerabilities borne by those on the vanquished side. It is precisely this negotiation that Tasso’s earliest readers and imitators perceived and further pursued. To take only one example, Ascanio Grandi seized the opportunity to extend these questions in *Tancredi* (1632) – his epic poem centered on one of Tasso’s leading heroes – in which encounters with an Amazonian polity and an allegorical America lay bare the racial, gendered, and territorial logics embedded in premodern epic.¹⁰

This essay shows that Tasso himself anticipates such interrogations: his decolonial imagination counter-prophesizes the history of westbound imperialism, working to defer and destabilize its projected effects.¹¹ This imaginative possibility, of course, operates in full view of the brutalities of sixteenth-century colonization – realities Tasso knew and that haunt the very language of his poetic speculation. Even so, he harnessed this knowledge to craft deliberate parallels between the conquest of the New World and the capture of Jerusalem. The *Liberata* may invoke Columbus and his legacy, but it does so, perhaps, to suggest that the world might have fared better without them. In the episodes that matter most here, Tasso’s loosening of an ideological grip on the ideals of Catholic imperialism entailed real risks. It is no surprise, then, that he later doubled down in his revised poem, *Gerusalemme conquistata* (1593), which erases Columbus’ New World altogether. In his *Giudicio sovra la Gerusalemme riformata* (a treatise Tasso began writing in 1593 and which was posthumously printed in 1666), he underscores Jerusalem’s thematic and geographical centrality, thereby validating his decision to excise ‘le navigazioni e le meraviglie dell’oceano, lasciandomi intiero il soggetto per un altro poema’ (Tasso 2000, 154).¹² Though he claims to have set this material aside for a future project, no such return to Columbian travels materializes again in Tasso’s writings. Others, however, took up the very ambitions he had only imagined. At the start of the seventeenth century, Tommaso Campanella championed modern men as worthy subjects for epic poetry, calling for new works about Columbus – the ‘heroum maximum’ (greatest of heroes) – and Ferdinand Magellan, mariner-heroes he regarded as more deserving of immortalizing verse than the legendary warriors of ancient Troy (1954, 1099).¹³ If Campanella imagined Columbus as the natural headliner of a modern epic of exploration, Tasso treats him far more obliquely, entwining his figure with that of the poem’s counter-navigator, the enchantress Armida.

¹⁰ See Foltran 2005, 129-185.

¹¹ Though my conclusions differ, they are informed by readings of Tasso’s poem that foreground its imperialist agenda. For representative contributions to this line of criticism, see Quint 1993, 214-247; Zatti 1998; Cardini 2006, 186-194.

¹² (The navigations and the wonders of the ocean, leaving me the subject intact for another poem).

¹³ Many Baroque poets fulfilled Campanella’s request (see Hester 2017).

2. Weaving Tasso's New World Knowledge

The prophecy about Columbus, as noted above, occurs *en passage* to Armida's Atlantic isle, whose location merits closer attention. Through a network of literary allusions to the earthly paradise, the enchantress' home-away-from-Syria takes shape as a utopic return to unspoiled perfection. Its placement among the Canaries (or Fortunate Isles) – where the ancients placed the realm of eternal bliss – reinforces this association, as does the archipelago's service as a 'conchetto limite' (boundary concept) between old and new worlds (Cachey 1995, 124).¹⁴ The French theologian and cosmographer Pierre d'Ailly had likewise situated the earthly paradise atop a mountain in the Canaries in his *Imago Mundi* (1410), a treatise that Columbus heavily annotated on his voyages and one that may also have proved suggestive for Tasso. As her ambiguous conversion at the poem's end negotiates the future she envisions as ideal, Armida's personal voyage leads her from hell to a figural paradise, echoing the path of Dante's pilgrim in the *Divina Commedia*. Symbolically and morally, Armida's western island occupies the antipode of Jerusalem, aligned with Dante's geography of Mount Purgatory and imagined as the farthest possible terrain from the poem's sacred battlegrounds.¹⁵

Tasso emphasizes the island's western orientation in language that, for a sixteenth-century reader, would have evoked the expanding cartographies and speculative geographies of a desirable New World. Fortune, with Carlo and Ubaldo in tow, steers her boat beyond the Pillars of Hercules and into the boundless sea ('e s'ingolfa in pelago infinito', *GL XV.23*). In a poem fundamentally concerned with the Christian claiming of land, their mission cannot help but resonate with the early modern imaginary that linked distant, ungoverned islands with the prospects of possession. Although the *Liberata* never names a western colonial project outright, the island's remoteness, abundance, and perceived accessibility echo the descriptive language of travel literature produced during the age of discovery: lushness ripe for cultivation, solitude awaiting settlement, and an absence of Christian sovereignty – features that render the island legible as a symbolically conquerable space.

The proximity between Armida's enchanted isle and the earthly paradise casts it as a liminal zone – a charmed Purgatory that must be purged, a paradise-turned-hell before it might be remade as utopia. It is not incidental that Tasso would think in utopian terms in his epic: Thomas More's *Utopia* (first available in Italian in Venice in 1548) offered a conceptual template for imagining islands suited to idealized structuring.¹⁶ Yet More's principle of holding goods in common does not map cleanly onto Tasso's island, whose function for others is markedly different from its purpose for Armida. For visitors like Rinaldo, the island is a dazzling detour – a gilded cage that suspends his participation in the conquest of Jerusalem. For Armida, by contrast, her homeland becomes a transformative crossroads, a bridge between her sinful and redeemed states. Tasso underscores that on Armida's island *arte vince natura*: art outdoes nature by imitating it for sheer delight, producing a space where invention rivals the real ('Di natura arte par, che per diletto / l'imitatrice sua scherzando imiti', *GL XVI.10*). Yet however fully Armida saturates the landscape with her artistry, the episode's function as it concerns her ultimately exceeds her own intentions. The very space Armida fashions as a site of pleasure becomes the unlikely threshold of her transformation: the ground on which Rinaldo's departure exposes the fragility of her

¹⁴ See *GL XV.35-36*. In the final section of his *Works and Days* (lines 166-173), Hesiod elaborates on the location of the Elysian fields and the Isles of the Blessed. For Italian literary appraisals of the Fortunate Isles, see Cachey 1995.

¹⁵ For comparisons between Armida's artistry and the ekphrases of *Purgatorio*, see Treherne 2007, 7-10.

¹⁶ On the Italian reception of More's work, see Spinozzi 2016.

illusions, and from which her trajectory toward repentance and salvation begins. That the same space enables both erotic entrapment and spiritual awakening signals the island's wider symbolic work as a heterotopic enclave of enchantment and constraint, where the deception of others shades imperceptibly into the deception of the self.

Because of these divergent functions, the episodes on and around Armida's island generate what can be termed decolonizing doubts: unsettling fears, critiques, and counternarratives that arise within one symbolically colonizable space (the enchantress' island) as it is set against another contested site (Jerusalem). These doubts register anxieties about a world poised to slip into cycles of conflict, chaos, war, and hostility – the very conditions that necessitate more than one crusade. They do not articulate a clear colonial program; rather, they emerge through the implicit, associative logics of geography and desire: the pull of Western abundance against the imperative to claim Eastern land; the lure of remaking a paradisiacal island versus the duty to conquer a sacred city. In generating these tensions, the *Liberata* tests its own representations of conquest, liberation, and the epistemologies of discovery pervasive in Tasso's own time.

Before Tasso developed his interest in the islands off Africa's Atlantic coast – the springboard for Europe's westward colonial projects – Petrarch and Boccaccio had already expressed curiosity about their inhabitants and customs.¹⁷ Like his predecessors, Tasso drew on a wide range of sources, encountering diplomatic reports from Spain preserved in Giovanni Battista Ramusio's *Delle navigationi et viaggi* (1550-1559), including accounts by Amerigo Vespucci, Andrea Corsali, and Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo. Peter Martyr d'Anghiera's collection of eight travelogues, *De orbo novo decades* (1530), written by Columbus' friend and early chronicler, likewise enriched Tasso's geographical knowledge base. Similarly influential was Girolamo Fracastoro's *Syphilidis sive Morbi Gallici libri tres* (1530), which had already set a poetic precedent for commemorating circumnavigation.¹⁸ Tasso's own engagement with this tradition is evident, for the imprint of Fracastoro's Latin text surfaces in an intermediary stage of the *Liberata*'s development.

Around 1575, Tasso drafted an original version of his Columbus-inspired Canto XV, preserved in the Ambrosiana manuscript R. 99 sup, *La navigazione del mondo nuovo del poema di T. Tasso*. Bound for deeper waters than the published epic permits, Fortune's 'mirabil nave' (marvelous ship, *GL XV.9*) in this manuscript sails along the South American coasts mapped by Antonio Pigafetta in his account of Magellan's circumnavigation. Carlo and Ubaldo see the splendors of Peru and Ecuador, glimpsing Patagonian giants and cannibals. Curiously, Tasso drops the latter term's topographical link to the Caribes and uses instead 'Anthropophagi' (from the Greek *ἀνθρωποφάγοι*), the name Herodotus gives to the Scythian 'man-eaters'.¹⁹ Next, the intrepid crew narrowly traverses the Estrecho de Todos los Santos winding between Chile and the Tierra del Fuego archipelago. From here, they brave onward to Armida's islet home, which has now drifted to Pacific waters, making her a visionary forerunner to Magellan and an author herself of exploration in the New World. The Ambrosiana manuscript thus dates Tasso's early interest in casting his epic as a poem of global navigation – a scope that, as we have seen, he would ultimately relinquish. As Roman reviewers demanded a more doctrinally and formally orthodox Christian poem, and as Tasso pursued stricter adherence to Aristotelian unity, these transoceanic ambitions were progressively pared back.

The New World's fleeting presence in the published *Liberata* indicates that, in the later stages of revision, Tasso was balancing other geographical points of reference, turning toward more

¹⁷ See Cachey 1991.

¹⁸ See Cachey 1992, 328-330.

¹⁹ See Herodotus, *Histories*, Book 4, Ch. 18.

immediate – indeed, geographically proximate – threats: the eastern Ottomans, the southern Moors, and the northern Protestants. Although, as Karla Mallette has shown, ‘the territories known today as “Italy” had diverse experiences of colonization’ between antiquity and the sixteenth century, European powers were on especially high alert following the fall of Constantinople in 1453, the Turkish advance to the gates of Vienna in 1529, and the costly victory at Lepanto in 1571 (2025, 521). These pressures intensified among Catholics a longing for the Christian unity thought to have existed during the First Crusade – long before Columbus and his companions dreamt of gold and glory. Within this climate, Tasso’s Columbian prophecy and its jostling of temporalities register further anxieties about colonial and authorial agency. The poem’s shifting horizons – between Jerusalem and the gateway to the Americas, between past Crusaders and future conquerors – expose how the very question of what may be narrated becomes a source of instability. Across these central juxtaposed cantos, the problem of possible narration unsettles the poem’s ability to signify coherently what one knows, occupies, claims, and may – through the very act of claiming – destroy.

3. *Dreaming up Empire*

The voyage to the Canaries has often been considered a blunt shift away from the poem’s focus on Jerusalem – the city whose etymology, as recalled by Isidore of Seville, means ‘vision of peace’.²⁰ The reading that develops here, which seeks out peace within a poem preoccupied with war, aligns with Andrea Moudarres’ view that the *Liberata* expresses a ‘fundamental longing for co-existence’ (2019, 130). In a world marred by conflict, poetry becomes the medium through which tolerance can be imagined anew, precisely by revealing how consistently humanity has failed to choose co-existence when given the chance. In keeping with Mignolo’s framework recalled above, the poem’s pre-, anti-, and decolonial discourses emerge from the moment that sets Rinaldo’s quest in motion: Goffredo’s dream in Canto XIV. Drawn upward by the spirit of Ugone – a fallen Crusader sent by God – Goffredo ascends to the heavens, where meditations on empire crystallize into visions of islands and their exalted vantage points. From these heights, the poem exposes the tension between the pursuit of ephemeral glory and the more heavily charged discourses surrounding land – its possession, loss, and imagined futures. Guiding Goffredo toward the source of ‘mente eterna’ (eternal intellect, *GL XIV.9*), Ugone speaks with *contemptus mundi*, relativizing and diminishing worldly ambitions:

Quanto è vil la cagion ch’a la virtude
umana è colà giù premio e contrasto!
in che picciolo cerchio e fra che nude
solitudini è stretto il vostro fasto!
Lei come isola il mare intorno chiude,
e lui, ch’or ocean chiamat’è or vasto,
nulla eguale a tai nomi ha in sé di magno,
ma è bassa palude e breve stagno. (*GL XIV.10*)²¹

²⁰ See Isidore of Seville’s *Etymologiae* Book VIII, i, 6.

²¹ (How vile is the motive that down there is / contest and reward for human valor! / Within what narrow circle and among what bare / solitudes is your splendor confined! / Your earth, like an island, the sea encloses round; / and that – which sometimes you call Ocean, sometimes the Deep – / bears no magnitude equal to such names, / but is a lowly marsh and a shallow pond).

Goffredo's privileged, somnolent gaze transforms the globe into an island – an outlook otherwise impossible to attain because of the captain's 'own refusal to stray from the center of the old, Ptolemaic universe', that is, Jerusalem (Tylus 1993, 110). From this elevated perspective, Goffredo glimpses a world unmoored from its usual boundaries. The philosophical weight the canto later ascribes to the ocean's depth dissolves here into a kind of swampy superficiality, as though vast geographies were flattened into the thin, abstract lines of a map.

For a poem centered on a Middle Eastern city, islands play a deliberately pivotal role in prescribing its cartographic ethics – a system of values and consequences articulated through the geographical dialogue among coordinates traced on a map. In doing so, the *Liberata* adopts a poetics of miniaturization, exchanging the fractured image of dividing waters for the unifying sweep of the world itself: 'vide un punto sol, mar, terre e fiumi, / che qui paion distinti in tante guise' (*GL XIV.11*).²² The shrinking effect of Goffredo's gaze accords with Tasso's conception of poetry as a 'picciolo mondo' (little world) in the *Discorsi*, yet it stands in tension with the vision of an ever-expanding globe made possible by Columbus' docking in the Caribbean. Because the divisions in human geography bolster 'servo imperio ... e muta fama' (slavish empire and mute fame, *ibid.*), history and poetry rest at odds here with the prospects of a unified world. Goffredo's dream vision explains that, for 'la nostra folle umanità' (our foolish humanity, *ibid.*), empires thrive on partitions, on multiplying divisions within a world already conditioned by them. Seen through this lens, empire proves more the handmaiden of romance than of epic. Imperialism – the ideological rudder of empire – guides a course of boundless variety that only masquerades as unity, a power that expands without always cohering. (Just ask the Roman Empire). It is little surprise, then, that in his final years Tasso turned to a new kind of epic, *Il mondo creato* (1608), a work devoted to the origins of the created world: a singular, undivided entity teeming with life, not yet splintered into the fractures and partialities of human history.

If *Il mondo creato* looks back to a world before division, the *Liberata* stages the psychic and political costs of living amid its aftermath. Goffredo's dream, accordingly, serves a practical purpose: it delivers precise instructions for how to win the war. It also intimates the possibility of a peace accompanied by something marvelous in its wake. The marble column with which Armida draws Rinaldo to her island is itself an instrument of marvel – what Stephen Greenblatt termed a 'marvelous possession', a persuasive wonder that binds its beholder even before conquest occurs.²³ Perched on the shore of the Orontes river in Syria and addressed to 'chiunque tu sia' (whoever you might be) – read: any Columbus hopeful – the column's golden inscription speaks to those searching for elsewhere: 'O chiunque tu sia, che voglia o caso / peregrinando adduce a queste sponde, / meraviglie maggior l'orto o l'ocaso / non ha di ciò che l'isoletta asconde. / Passa, se vuoi vederla' (*GL XIV.58*).²⁴ Ego-bruised Rinaldo, who has withdrawn from political company in a self-imposed exile, is swayed by the column's two-part promise of wonderment and displacement. The inscription's appeal next pairs coherently with the siren song's critique of ephemeral glory: life is fleeting, fame fizzles fast, and humans are too obtusely ambitious even to notice.²⁵ The siren rehearses some of the sentiments voiced in Ugone's critique of human endeavors. This is notably the second time in this short series of episodes when humanity's chase for shallow glory comes under scrutiny. The siren's encouragement to indulge in carnal bliss rubs friction against

²² (He saw oceans, lands, and rivers as a unified whole, / though they appear here divided in so many ways).

²³ See Greenblatt 1991.

²⁴ (O whoever you might be, whether by choice or by chance, / wandering has brought you to these shores: / neither sunrise nor sunset holds greater marvels / than what this small island conceals. / Pass over, if you wish to see it).

²⁵ See *GL XIV.62-64*.

Ugone's divine reveal and divine authority itself; she urges mortals to ignore threats from the heavens, to trust in their own capabilities and instincts. Yet both figures strike a common chord in their warnings about fame: the songstress deems it ephemeral, while the fallen Crusader sees it as an hourglass, bound to fade into inevitable silence. Petrarch's allegorical *Triumph* had teased out this logic early on: fame yields to time, renown to the passing of generations. It is telling that this shared lesson in human folly emerges from mutually dependent sites: Goffredo's education comes from viewing the world from above, as if it were an island, while Rinaldo's stems from experiencing an island itself, its admonitory voice channeled by one of Armida's proxies.

4. *Fixing Eyes on the Historical Prize*

Reflections on fame and its futility join course with Carlo and Ubaldo's maritime journey. Aboard Fortune's skiff, these Crusaders swap their martial credentials for the title of 'naviganti' (explorers, *GL XV.11*), a label more apt for their overseas voyage. Their trip takes flight through the Bakhtinian chronotope of providential expedition, whereby the convergence of time and space occurs as part of a divinely guided plan.²⁶ Representing Tasso's 'self-conscious incorporation of romance adventure into the [poem's] providential plot', to quote David Quint (2015, 208), Fortune resembles a 'colomba' (dove, *GL XV.5*), bringing into relief her likeness to Columbus. While on board her vessel, Carlo and Ubaldo zoom past lands from the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid*, while the narrator muses about empire and its fragilities: 'Muoiono le città, muoiono i regni, / copre i fasti e le pompe arena ed erba, / e l'uom d'esser mortal par che si sdegni: / oh nostra mente cupida e superba!' (*GL XV.20*).²⁷ The voice of the poem utters here a prophecy that toys with the expectation for lasting political dominance: civilization's partial demise interprets its own success. Cities, kingdoms, and their vitality expire as bodies subject to time. This meditation on temporal erosion finds a powerful analogue in the *Divina Commedia*, where Dante's ancestor Cacciaguida likewise reflects on the corrosive force of time and its effects on successive generations: 'Udir come le schiate si disfanno', he tells the pilgrim, 'non ti parrà nova cosa né forte, / poscia che le cittadi termine hanno' (*Paradiso XVI.76-78*).²⁸ The *Liberata* inherited a similar lesson from Petrarch's *Triumphus Temporis*: 'Passan vostre grandezze e vostre pompe, / passan le signorie, passano i regni: / ogni cosa mortal Tempo interrompe' (ll. 112-114).²⁹ Yet here is where Tasso's poem stops short: the allegorical dream through which Petrarch observes eternity – a sequence that follows Dante's climb to the Empyrean – is inaccessible to the *Liberata*'s terrestrial march toward death. Goffredo reaches only as far as Ariosto's Astolfo had in the *Furioso*'s moon mission: a vision from above that points downward, a perspective onto Earth to glimpse what it is not. Interpreting the junction between the city and the sepulcher, Albert R. Ascoli has keenly noted how Goffredo's entry into Christ's empty tomb constitutes the *Liberata*'s 'culminating confrontation with the paradigmatic otherness and difference of death' (2011, 310). 'Like Dante's poem', Ascoli affirms, 'Tasso's tomb is the sign that true meaning and true life dwell beyond history' (319).

²⁶ See *GL XV.6* for an example of what Barbara Fuchs calls the 'allegory of Christian teleology' (2001, 29).

²⁷ (Cities die, kingdoms perish; / the sands and grass cover their splendor and displays. / Man even seems to scorn being mortal. / Oh, our greedy and prideful mind!).

²⁸ (Hearing how lineages fall apart / will not seem a strange thing or difficult to you, / since even cities have their end).

²⁹ (Your greatness and your splendor pass away, / your lordships expire, your kingdoms fade: / Time puts an end to all mortal things).

If history ultimately proves transient, what, then, becomes of poetry that roots its prophecies in a historical record it suggests cannot endure?

Notably, it is Tasso's narrator, not Fortune, who laments 'nostra mente cupida e superba!' (our greedy and prideful mind, *GL XV.20*). The voice of the poem criticizes humanity's discontent with the limits of a mortal life, defying them through the birth and burning of civilizations. This cyclical-civic machine, much in the style of the regenerating phoenix, gains new life through death, vivacity through demolition. Only rather than mirror the autonomy of the phoenix – the bird that rises anew from its own ashes – Tasso's vision of imperial power and poverty evolves alongside a prophecy that disadvantages the Christians. Canto X reveals that Muslim triumph in Jerusalem is imminent; all it requires is a bit of patience on the part of the Crusaders' enemies. By exposing the fullness of time, Tasso turns Fortune's wheel toward a sharper truth: triumph promises glory, but never permanence.

Canto X is intricate because of its intertextuality. A cloud-encased chariot carries the sorcerer Ismeno (disguised as an aged man) and Solimano, the deposed king of Nicaea who leads an army of Arabs and Turks. A figural stand-in for the eleventh-century ruler of Nicaea, Kilij Arslan ibn Suleiman, Solimano is, as Moudarres notes, 'imbued with a sense of history' (2019, 114), yet he also gains visibility as the poem's 'classic epic hero' (Wondrich 1998, 111). Unaware of his guide's identity, Solimano speaks to Ismeno in the style of Armida's column: 'O chiunque tu sia' (*GL X.18*), approximating the marvels of the *Liberata's* sorceress through the body of its subversive sorcerer. In this moment of uncanny symmetry, Solimano appears a doppelgänger of Goffredo in his eagerness to learn the war's outcome and its greater meaning. The promise of hope takes the place of guarantees, as Ismeno confesses his inability to predict the future. He encourages Solimano with 'osa, soffri, confida; io bene spero' (Dare, suffer, trust: I have good hope, *GL X.21*). Ismeno's lesson turns to the example of Salah al-Dīn Yūsuf ibn Ayyūb – Saladin – the Sultan of Egypt who reconquered Jerusalem in 1187. Saladin had long commanded literary respect in Italian works predating the *Liberata*, as well as in William of Tyre's twelfth-century *Historia rerum in partibus transmarinis gestarum*, one of Tasso's principal sources.³⁰ The sharing of Ismeno's knowledge offers Muslims a sympathetic model drawn from their own history. And because no Christians overhear his projection, the hope he voices remains theirs alone. The poem thus insists that not all confidence is lost: Muslims, like phoenixes, may yet rise and attempt Jerusalem again.

If Fortune introduces Columbus through his ties to a single Italian region ('un uom de la Liguria', a man from Liguria, *GL XV.31*), Ismeno pins Saladin to an entire continent. In doing so, he reprises Satan's anti-expansionist lament, envisioning a world in which imperial designs falter and alternative powers rise:

uom che l'Asia ornerà co' fatti illustri,
 e del fecondo Egitto avrà il governo.
 Taccio i pregi de l'ozio e l'arti industri,
 mille virtù che non ben tutte io scerno;
 basti sol questo a te, che da lui scosse
 non pur saranno le cristiane posse,
 ma insin dal fondo suo l'imperio ingiusto
 svelto sarà ne l'ultime contese,

³⁰ See the representations of Saladin in Dante's Limbo (*Inferno IV.129*); Petrarch's *Triumphus Famae* (II.148-150), where he trails Goffredo; and stories 1.3 and 10.9 of Boccaccio's *Decameron*.

e le afflitte reliquie entro uno angusto
giro sospinte e sol dal mar difese.
Questi fia del tuo sangue. (*GL X.22-23*)³¹

Emilio Russo has referred to canto X as a ‘canto di profezie’ (canto of prophecies); it may likewise be described as a canto of counter-history (2005, 272). Solimano shares a lineage with the historical figure Saladin that stresses the temporal constraints on Christian victory in the Holy Land. This genealogical link bridging history and poetry contrasts with the dynastic prediction issued at this canto’s end. Peter the Hermit undergoes a rapturous, divine vision, and foretells of Rinaldo’s Este descendants, a purely poetic fabrication.³² Though Solimano will die in battle against Rinaldo in Canto XX (107-108), he is gifted the vision of a collective future, one which his descendants will determine.³³

En route to gaining this knowledge, Solimano and Ismeno behold Jerusalem in ruins – a city reduced to blood-soaked rubble in the aftermath of the nocturnal battle of the preceding canto. The narrator’s lament, ‘che spettacolo fu crudele e duro!’ (what a cruel and harsh spectacle it was!, *GL X.25*), is an aerial indictment of the very behaviors the Christian camp permits and perpetuates. This condemnation will resurface in the final two cantos, where the Crusaders are reimagined as spiteful predators and the Muslims as desperate fugitives.³⁴ The mournful vision of Christians abusing their ‘fasto superbo’ (proud splendor, *GL X.26*) and ‘lunga pompa’ (lengthy parade, *ibid.*) also foreshadows the criteria the narrator will later use to censure fallen cities in Canto XV. The sight of Christians gathering not only to strip the Muslim dead of their arms but also to reclaim their own fallen troops visually resonates with the prophecy of eventual Muslim triumph. Yet such symmetry will have to wait to crystallize until after the First Crusade ends.

Ismeno, a magic-wielding convert operating within a Christian epic, fixes his gaze on the historical prize. The events that Tasso’s contemporary readers would recognize as historical fact ultimately fulfill Ismeno’s hope for the future. What he thinks he sees (‘Veggio o parmi vedere’, *GL X.22*) in his shadowy anticipation of Saladin’s reconquest is, in effect, a prognosis of an anti-crusading history. Yet however historically accurate his hopes prove to be, Ismeno’s vision is categorically *not* a prophecy. When Solimano asks him to reveal the future, Ismeno warns ‘troppo è audace desio’ (such a desire is too bold, *GL X.20*). Mortals, he explains, are not endowed with foresight; any impulse to seek it must therefore be quenched. Yet the very term ‘audace’ stands out in Ismeno’s teaching for its resonance with Fortune’s Columbian prophecy. Dante had already offered the *Liberata* a cautionary tale through his portrayal of Ulysses’ ‘folle volo’ (mad flight, *Inferno XXVI.125*), signaling that the drive to pursue ‘virtute e canoscenza’ (virtue and knowledge, *Inferno XXVI.120*) beyond mortal limits is a quick ticket to eternal ruin.

Mapping the same geography traced in Dante’s canto, Tasso’s Fortune recasts Ulysses’ mad flight as a ‘volo audace’ (intrepid flight, *GL XV.26*), doubling down on her affirmative char-

³¹ (A man who will adorn Asia with illustrious deeds / and will hold dominion over fertile Egypt. / I will pass over the merits of his peaceful governance and industrious arts, / a thousand virtues which I cannot fully discern. / Let this alone suffice for you: by his hand, / not only will the Christian forces be shaken, / but their unjust empire will be torn / from its very foundation in the final battles, / its battered remnants pushed / into a narrow enclave, defended only by the sea. / This man will share your blood). See *GL IV.12-14* for Satan’s anti-imperial complaint.

³² See *GL X.73-77*.

³³ Corrado Confalonieri highlights theologian Paolo Beni’s critique of Tasso for using a Muslim sorcerer to reveal this history (9-11). I thank Corrado Confalonieri for kindly sharing the manuscript of his forthcoming study.

³⁴ See *GL XIX.30* and *XX.143*.

acterization of the Greek's 'ardimento' (daring, *GL XV.31*).³⁵ Audacity shapes Tasso's paean to Columbus as a pointed revision that restores a measure of intellectual heroism to his figure. But *audacia* also converses with the poem's many hesitations about boldness itself. Stepping outside the boundaries of one's allotted time is a danger flagged by both Ismeno and Fortune – a caution that sits uneasily beside the poem's larger effort to refashion fragments of history into the palatable order of poetry. It is precisely this tension that renders prudence the core of Fortune's pedagogy. In her capacity to interpret divine order, the providential pilot answers Ubaldo's flurry of questions – curiosities driven by the impulse to emulate Ulysses' transgressive model yet emerge with richer rewards.

5. *Adjusting to Island Time*

Brimming with the eagerness of *Morgante's* Rinaldo and Dante's pilgrim in *Paradiso* XIX, Ubaldo asks whether he and Carlo are the first to cross over the Pillars of Hercules. Fortune's redeeming version of Ulysses' voyage confirms they are indeed not, only fueling Ubaldo's desires. When he asks about the populations inhabiting distant lands, Fortune instructs him in their diverse customs, dress, and speech. Occupying her providential role within the epic, she foresees the spread of 'la fé di Piero' (the faith of Peter, *GL XV.29*) and predicts the baptismal campaigns that would accompany European arrivals in the Americas. This forecast channels Pope Paul III's papal bull *Sublimis Deus*, dated 29 May 1537, declaring: 'Attendentes Indos ipsos, ut pote veros homines, non solum Christianae Fidei capaces existere, sed ut nobis innotuit, ad fidem ipsam promptissime currere'.³⁶ In her vision of Catholicism's global reach, the mouthpiece of Christian providentialism rejects the 'spirito di tolleranza' (spirit of tolerance) cultivated in earlier Italian epics (Zatti 1995, 503), a spirit that would carry over into Giambattista Marino's *Adone* (1623), regarded critically as an epic of peace.³⁷

And yet, tellingly, Fortune's Columbus appears more sailor than missionary, despite his own self-fashioning as the 'bearer of Christ' (*Cristo Ferens*), a title drawn from the Greek origins of his name (*Χριστόφορος*). True to his position as *Almirante del Mar Océano* (Admiral of the Ocean Sea), Tasso's Columbus stands among the ranks of the 'naviganti industri' (expert mariners, *GL XV.30*) that followed in his wake. The poem awards him privileged recognition for reaching the New World first, even through choppy waters:

né 'l minaccievol fremito del vento,
né l'insospito mar, né 'l dubbio clima,
né s'altro di periglio o di spavento
più grave e formidabile or si stima,
faran che 'l generoso entro a i divieti
d'Abila angusti l'alta mente accheti. (*GL XV.31*)³⁸

³⁵ See Boitani 1992, 60-86; Residori 1992; Tylus 1993; Stephens 2000.

³⁶ (Considering the said Indians themselves, as true human beings, they are not only capable of receiving the Christian Faith, but, as has come to our attention, hasten most eagerly toward it). For the reproduction of the Latin text, see Gutierrez 1878, 427.

³⁷ See Bolzoni 2010.

³⁸ (Neither the threatening roar of the wind, / nor the inhospitable sea, nor the doubtful climate, / nor any other peril or fear / considered more dire or terrifying, / will make the generous one restrain his lofty mind / within the narrow straits of Mount Abyla).

What were for Dante's Ulisse impediments to travel in the form of familial obligations (*Inferno* XXVI.94-99) become for Tasso's Columbus nature's 'divieti' – not merely limits, but prohibitions that delineate the very conditions of heroic audacity. Columbus' ship is hailed as the boldest, yet its generosity is more geographical than evangelical, more pedagogical in its mastery of navigation than active in spreading the faith.³⁹

Prophecies elsewhere share similar vocabularies of underwhelming grandiosity. In Canto I, the narrator addresses his patron Duke Alfonso II d'Este with cautioned expectations about his future writing plans. Stranded as a 'peregrino errante' (wandering pilgrim) wading in the waters of inattentive patronage, Tasso wagers that *perhaps* one day his pen *might* dare to write of Alfonso that which his poem can only hint at: 'Forse un dí fia che la presaga penna / osi scriver di te quel ch'or n'accenna' (*GL* I.4). The parallel attitudes towards Alfonso and Columbus sharpen in perspectives voiced in the revised version of the poem. *Gerusalemme conquistata* elects a new patron altogether, Cardinal Cinzio Passeri Aldobrandini, Tasso's late patron at the papal court in Rome.⁴⁰ The *Conquistata* bypasses mention of Columbus' voyage and fame, and shrinks Carlo and Ubaldo's sightseeing tour to a curt four lines.⁴¹ Armida, for her part, transforms almost entirely as a result of Tasso's lengthy edits. Already weary in letters to his Roman readers that Armida appears too much as a leading lady, Tasso relocates her enchanted palace to Mount Lebanon's peak.⁴² With the help of Filagliteo – the Christian wizard substituting now for Fortune – the rescue team of Crusaders (now named Araldo and Ruperto) swiftly find Riccardo (formerly Rinaldo, now divested of his ties to the Este). Araldo and Ruperto convince Riccardo to leave but ensure that Armida cannot before they take flight. While, in the *Liberata*, the Magus of Ascalon equips Ubaldo and Carlo with tools for non-violence, Filagliteo gives Araldo and Ruperto chains with which to bind Armida: 'e con quel laccio sì tenace e saldo / legò le braccia e i piè fugaci e snelli / co' nodi d'amante e di topazio' (*GC* 13.70).⁴³ The Armida of the *Conquistata* lands directly inside the desire she had expressed in Tasso's earlier poem: to be bound up in chains as conquered spoils, a spectacular symbol of the Christians' haughty pride.⁴⁴ Yet she is denied her wish for transport with her trappers: rather than return to Jerusalem as booty for display in the final canto's imitation of a Roman triumph, Armida is abandoned for good. She joins the ranks of other rejected epic women in what is now the poem's mathematical center. Armida in the *Liberata* occupies central themes from the periphery; the *Conquistata* banishes her in reverse order. Departing alongside her is the option for a redeemed ending, or, rather, the project to convert on behalf of Christians. In marked contrast, the *Liberata* holds space for Armida to serve as a protectress (and not a victim) of a symbolic New World order. Sustaining her island's life by letting it fall constitutes the revised focus of Armida's art.⁴⁵

³⁹ Compare the prediction of Rinaldo's descendants (among them Tasso's patron, Duke Alfonso II d'Este) converting populations in Africa in *GL* XVII.94.

⁴⁰ For Tasso's reliance on Aldobrandini's patronage, see Driscoll 2024.

⁴¹ See *GC* 12.84.

⁴² On Tasso's hesitations about Armida's role in the poem, see Gough 2001 and Wainwright 2021.

⁴³ (And with that bond, so firm and unyielding, / he tied her swift and nimble arms and feet / with knots of adamant and topaz).

⁴⁴ See *GL* XVI.48. Note that here Armida anticipates the narrator's label 'predator' to describe her Christian conquerors.

⁴⁵ For more elaborate discussion of Armida's transformations in the *Conquistata*, see Cavallo 1999; Residori 2004; Wainwright 2021.

6. Keeping the Gilded Age Golden

Abetting Armida's defense of her island in the *Liberata* is the Magus of Ascalon's prescription of non-violence. Banned from using arms as a shortcut to fighting temptation, Carlo and Ubaldo are unlicensed to kill. In order to tame the island's natural beasts (e.g., pythons, boars, lions, and bears), the Magus equips them with a magic wand ('verga'), a simple waving of which releases a sharp whistle that calms beasts into submission – its orphic proximity to the aims of Catholic missionary work impossible to overlook.⁴⁶ Carlo, quickly forgetful, fails as a student during his first challenge. Upon encountering a serpent on the sands, he thinks as a military man would and brandishes his sword. Nicolas Poussin's *The Companions of Rinaldo* (Figure 3) (ca. 1633) captures the contrast in the Crusaders' defense strategies. Carlo appears on the right in his state of total oblivion. He wields a sword against the serpent, sinuous with fiery eyes and coiled around itself. Tasso describes this animal as without a known origin: a 'fera serpendo orribile e diversa' (slithering beast, terrible and strange, *GL XV.47*). His creature partially resembles Cerberus, inferno's watchdog prone to docility at the sound of music.⁴⁷ The wand's whistle is not, however, an instrument of sweet suppression but one intended to sow fear: per the Magus' instructions, 'temeranno appressarsi ove ella suoni' (beasts will be afraid to draw nigh wherever it may sound, *GL XIV.73*). Dread, not dominance, is here the Christians' sonic soft power.



Figure 3 – Nicolas Poussin, *The Companions of Rinaldo*, ca. 1633. Oil on canvas. 118.1 x 102.2 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Wrightsman, 1977. Object number. 1977.1.2. Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art⁴⁸

⁴⁶ See *GL XIV.73*. For the symbolic intertextuality between Tasso's wand and Homeric poems, see Quint 2015, 204.

⁴⁷ In Vergil's *Georgics*, IV. 483, the singer Orpheus gains safe passage to the Underworld by enchanting Cerberus with pacifying music. Dante's description of Cerberus as a 'fiera crudele e diversa' (cruel and strange beast, *Inferno VI.13*) resonates further with Tasso's serpent.

⁴⁸ Creative Commons Zero (CC0), <<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/437327>>, accessed 1 December 2025.

Reading in the serpent a metaphor for symbolic New World gold – rotted, neglected, and corrupt – it is no small irony that the beast’s color appears faded:

Inalza d’oro squallido squamose
 le creste e ’l capo, e gonfia il collo d’ira,
 arde ne gli occhi, e le vie tutte ascose
 tien sotto il ventre, e tòscò e fumo spira;
 or rientra in se stessa, or le nodose
 ruote distende, e sé dopo sé tira.
 Tal s’appresenta a la solita guarda,
 né però de’ guerrieri i passi tarda. (*GL XV.48*)⁴⁹

This spectral, decaying serpent mirrors the dulling of gold, the very luxury conquistadors after Columbus sought in plenty, as analyzed by Elvira Vilches (2010).⁵⁰ As Tasso clearly states, the serpent’s are putrid riches, not stones of splendor. Even by Ubaldo’s own admission, this creature acts on the defensive (‘il difensor serpente’, *GL XV.49*); a violent offender it seems not. Still, Carlo first attempts to kill the serpent as an heir to Ariosto’s Ruggiero, who likewise raised his sword against the giantess Erifilla upon landing on Alcina’s island – the closest precedent for Armida’s – before yielding to her plea for mercy.⁵¹

As with the Cumaean Sibyl restraining Aeneas from attacking the monstrous phantoms of *Aeneid* VI (285-294), Ubaldo and the wizard of Ascalon insist on the necessity of avoiding violence.⁵² The wizard’s guidance resonates with the aims of Bartolomé de las Casas, who argued for the peaceful incorporation of the cross-Atlantic populations into the Catholic faith. While it is tough to prove whether Tasso had read firsthand Las Casas’ writings, similar sentiments likely circulated in northeast Italy, where translations of his works flourished in the early decades of the seventeenth century in Venice.⁵³ All the same, Tasso’s Magus and Las Casas harmonize on a fundamental point: carnage has no place in European encounters with figures of difference.

7. *Settling Scores with Armida, the Cartographic Penelope*

Tracing the interplay between the *Liberata*’s utopian and decolonial perspectives clarifies how and why female artistry intersects with epic history – a lesson Armida inherits from Penelope. In the *Odyssey* the queen of Ithaca is responsible for sustaining poetry. Because Penelope weaves and unweaves the shroud for Laertes, successfully keeping impatient suitors at bay, she guarantees the survival of suspense. If Penelope allows for narrative to reach its end, Armida permits narrative to change its course. When readers first meet her, she is instructed to directly imitate Penelope’s art: ‘Tessi la tela’, her uncle Idraote tells her, ‘ch’io ti mostro ordita’ (weave the web that I show

⁴⁹ (It rears its head and scaly crest of pallid gold, / swelling its neck with rage. / Its eyes blaze with fire, / its belly keeps all paths concealed, / and it exhales venom and smoke. Now it coils back upon itself; / now it unwinds its knotted folds, and drags itself after itself. / Thus it appears at the usual watch, / yet it does not slow the warriors’ steps).

⁵⁰ Given both creatures’ resonance with the poets’ contemporary history, Tasso’s gilded serpent invites comparison with Ariosto’s hellish beast Avarice from *Orlando furioso* XXVI.30-36, depicted on Merlin’s fountain as slain by political leaders.

⁵¹ See *Orlando furioso* VII.7. For comparative readings of Ariosto’s and Tasso’s respective island paradises, see Driscoll 2021.

⁵² See *GL XV.49*.

⁵³ Three editions of Giacomo Castellani’s translation, *Istoria, o brevissima relatione della distruzione dell’Indie Occidentali*, appeared in Venice in 1626, 1630, and 1643.

you all laid out, *GL* IV.24).⁵⁴ Cloth immaterializes as discourse in Armida's ruse of distraction. Though her words carry sway, her actions are far more telling. Crucially, her role in the matrix of discovery has little to do with her scandalous reputation and everything to do with her cartographic gifts – her ability to chart, reshape, and even erase land. What is especially pertinent is the language of accumulation and recuperation, of building and recovery, that characterizes Armida as geographically savvy. The elsewhere that Penelope cannot access through the making and unmaking of her art is the very elsewhere that Armida guards through the construction and destruction of her own.

Armida unsettles the logic of settlement primarily to others' disadvantage. Her cartographic defenses thwart Carlo's desire to return to Europe bearing news of her exotic island shores. As becomes clear, his appetite is not for the diversity of distant lands but for the envy he hopes to stir in others by claiming to have witnessed it firsthand:

Carlo incomincia allor: "Se ciò concede,
donna, quell'alta impresa ove ci guidi,
lasciami omai por ne la terra il piede
e veder questi inconosciuti lidi,
veder le genti e 'l culto di lor fede
e tutto quello ond'uom saggio m'invidi,
quando mi gioverà narrar altrui
le novità vedute e dir: 'Io fui' ". (*GL* XV.38)⁵⁵

Carlo's zealous ambitions rehearse what Mignolo names 'the rhetoric of modernity' and read like the quest for double colonization (2011, 14). The ability to say 'Io fui' (I was there) is to foresee the occupation of land in time and space. Fortune, now a killjoy to her would-be colonizing shipmate, reigns in Carlo's hungry zest: it is not yet time, she teaches him, for Europe to set sail on its colonizing projects. In other words, she intends, 'Carlo, you can't be Columbus.'

Yet there is still time, Armida proves, to stall the European colonizing gaze Carlo brings with him. After failing to convince Rinaldo to stay with her on the island, she colors the sky black, conjuring tempests and cursing the destinies of both Rinaldo and the Christian faith. The premodern model of conquest through semiotics, as Tzvetan Todorov has discussed, becomes under Armida's agency a conquest *over* semiotics.⁵⁶ Before flying off to Egypt to recruit a hitman for her now enemy ex-lover, Armida all but snaps her fingers to make her island disappear. She summons three hundred deities from hell, including, it seems, the 'demon fabri' (demon craftsmen, *GL* XVI.1) who built her palace. Together, they raze her home from the earth. In the blink of an eye, what was her utopic paradise becomes an infernal *ού-τόπος*, an unmappable 'no place' effaced from sight:

Ombra più che di notte, in cui di luce
raggio misto non è, tutto il circonda,
se non se in quanto un lampeggiar riluce

⁵⁴ For Penelope and Armida connected in other ways, see Cavallo 2004, 213; Van der Laan 2024, 105-137.

⁵⁵ (Carlo then began: "If that lofty mission / to which you guide us permits it, my lady, / let me now set foot on this land / and see these unknown shores, / see the people and the worship of their faith, / and all those things for which a wise man would envy me, / when it will benefit me to tell others / of the novelties I have seen and to say, 'I was there' ").

⁵⁶ See Todorov 1982.

per entro la caligine profonda.
 Cessa al fin l'ombra, e i raggi il sol riduce
 pallidi; né ben l'aura anco è gioconda,
 né più il palagio appar, né pur le sue
 vestigia, né dir puossi: "Egli qui fue." (GL XVI.69)⁵⁷

A counter-figure to Hercules and Ulysses, Armida eliminates the discursive prospects of westbound colonization, the lexis of enviable experience that Carlo so voraciously craves. Virgil's Dido self-destructs when Aeneas opts for destiny over their love tryst; Armida flattens the metaphorical grounds upon which others might follow in Aeneas' or Columbus' footsteps. Her fractured world evades spatialized chronicle – the compulsion among Crusaders and future colonists to say 'I was there'.

Armida draws new boundaries when she destroys old lands, redefining what epic boldness can look like on a map. Her topographical excision challenges the claims others might stake on still farther foreign shores – a commanding gesture within a poem centered on the reclamation of territory held by opposing forces. Through an emphatic five-fold negation of place, trace, speech, and the senses, Tasso's maker of westernmost creation marks the new bounds of western expansion. 'Né dir puossi: "Egli qui fue"' evokes the anti-imperial motto *Non plus ultra* traditionally inscribed on the Pillars of Hercules. From a sixteenth-century perspective, this becomes a decolonial refusal of Emperor Charles V's emblem and counter-motto *Plus Ultra*.⁵⁸ Armida's erasure thus reasserts a limit that imperial ideology insists on transgressing, turning the *Liberata's* western horizon into a site where expansion encounters its own undoing. Reduced and preserved as a *utopia incognita* – an unknowable no-place off-limits and out of sight – Armida's island is able to survive, transformed just as she is.

While Rinaldo may emerge, as Jane Tylus has suggested, as the poem's 'would-be Columbus', Armida thrives as the anti-discoverer (1993, 104). Opposed to providential designs, she stands as much as an anti-Columbus as an anti-Magellan, an anti-Cortez, and an anti-Charles V – the imperial heroes and 'nuovi Argonauti' (new Argonauts) championed in the third and final edition of Ariosto's *Furioso*.⁵⁹ Because in the *Conquistata* Armida's island disappears into namelessness, its plotting in the *Liberata* casts these negative associations into sharper relief. The Canaries would become, as Tasso knew well, 'il porto del mondo' (the world's port, GL XV.63) in the history of European conquest. Yet the *Liberata's* fusion of hybrid temporalities render this space also available for a decolonial alternative: a utopia transformed into a no-man's land, a world not new but deliberately nullified. Armida's history lesson is clear: if humanity lost Eden through the fault of female sin, then Europe forfeits its progress toward the New World through the reckless ambitions of men.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ (A shade darker than night's, in which no ray / of light mingles, surrounds everything, / except when a flash briefly gleams / through the deep murk. / At last the shadow gives way, and the sun weakens its rays; / nor is the air yet pleasant, / nor does the palace appear anymore, nor even its traces, / nor can anyone say: "It was here").

⁵⁸ See Moudarres 2012, 298. Tasso was familiar with the ambitions associated with Charles' emblem, as evidenced in his dialogue *Il conte overo de l'impresa* (1594). See Tasso 1998, vol. 2, 1196.

⁵⁹ See *Orlando furioso* XV.21-36. Mention of the 'nuovi Argonauti' occurs in *Orlando furioso* XV.21 and hints at the exploits of Vasco da Gama, Ferdinand Magellan, and Columbus. Ariosto had presented a copy of this edition to Charles V when they met in Mantua in November 1532, prompting the emperor to reciprocate reportedly with the title of poet laureate. See Moudarres 2012, 294-299.

⁶⁰ On ties between Eden and Armida's isle, see Venturi 1999.

8. *Purgatory Found or Atlantis Sunk?*

When Armida levels her island home, might she gesture proleptically to her post-conversion aims? After enjoining herself to the troops assembled in Gaza, she arrives on the poem's final battlefield with archery in hand, ready to kill Rinaldo and then turn violent against herself. A tender reunion between the former lovers in a secluded setting softens Armida's resolve, further swayed by Rinaldo's pledge to be her 'campione e servo' (champion and servant, *GL XX.134*). The Christian hero vows sincerely to serve Armida and to restore her political dominance, displaying his heart thusly:

Mira ne gli occhi miei, s'al dir non vuoi
fede prestar, de la mia fede il zelo.
Nel soglio, ove regnàr gli avoli tuoi,
riporti giuro; ed oh piacesse al Cielo
ch'a la tua mente alcun de' raggi suoi
del paganesmo dissolvesse il velo,
com'io farei che 'n Oriente alcuna
non t'agguagliasse di regal fortuna. (*GL XX.135*)⁶¹

Attracted by these political prospects, Armida dissolves her wrath and dedicates herself to Rinaldo in return. She is perceptive to the contract he has proposed: *if* she converts, he will be her henchman. Yet it is not necessarily Armida's faith that she alters, but the weight of the words she utters in reply. She repurposes the promise the Virgin Mary makes in her response to the angel Gabriel at the Annunciation: 'ecce ancilla Domini' (behold the handmaid of the Lord, Luke 1:38). Armida might assert 'ecco l'ancilla tua' (behold your handmaid, *GL XX.136*), but her acceptance of Christianity is nowhere explicitly stated.⁶² What she submits to is collaboration in Rinaldo's geopolitics. Command and law – the stakes in Armida's promise – converge in her pledge of obedience but only because Rinaldo holds her up a new Alexander, destined to become indomitable among all women in the East. Providential Fortune, who stood at the helm as guide to Armida's Atlantic island, is reconfigured as the 'regal fortuna' the enchantress now chases at the poem's conclusion. Looking toward the east while the Christians prepare to return home in the west, Armida prospers (temporarily) as a New World protectress. By withdrawing her island from Europe's expectant gaze, she stages a preemptive defense of what will become of the Americas, vulnerable and vigilant, as in Stradanus' allegory.

Armida's erasure of space to thwart human greed invites comparison with the sinking of fabled Atlantis, as recounted in Plato's dialogues. Both islands – each a vanished utopia – warn against unchecked hubris and embody an ideal that recedes the moment one tries to grasp it. These islands catalyze the enchantment of exploration even as they expose the ethical failures of those who would explore. Yet in Armida's case, what becomes colonizable is not her island but divine power. Through the act of destruction, she appropriates a divine prerogative, guarding the allure of what remains unsettled. In doing so, Armida revives and preserves the marvelous,

⁶¹ (Look into my eyes, if you do not wish to trust my words, / and witness the zeal of my faith. / I swear to restore you / to the throne where your ancestors once ruled. / Oh, would it please Heaven that some of its light / might dissolve the veil of paganism that clouds your mind, / I would ensure that no woman in the East / could rival you in royal fortune).

⁶² On Armida's questionable conversion, see Migiel 1987; Stephens 1989; Cavallo 1999; Gough 2001; Ramachandran 2007; Van der Laan 2024.

vividly captured in the painting that opened this essay. Like the Guardi brothers' circumspect nymph, Armida's island is both palatable and vulnerable to the European gaze. But as a utopia outside of time and space, it ultimately resists that gaze's compulsion to seize and transform – holding fast at the threshold where would-be conquerors must decide whether their ideal worlds will sink or swim, or whether they were never meant to be claimed at all. With this decolonial option, Tasso and Armida offer readers an elsewhere protected from the violence of possession, a *utopia incognita* shimmering beyond the reach of desire adrift.

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