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POETICS AND POLITICS OF NATURE IN THREE EARLY MODERN ENGLISH POEMS

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Abstract: *During the latter half of Elizabeth's reign in England, the pastoral genre gained inordinate popularity, and the figure of the shepherd poet became a staple in romance and pastoral texts. But why did the aesthetics of erotic love and courtly pleasures migrate to the rustic hut? What is there for the sophisticated courtly lover to seek in an imaginary countryside defined by moderation and frugality? In this paper, I read together three shepherd poems – Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepherd," Raleigh's "The Nymph's Reply" and Donne's "The Baite" – in order to trace how the pastoral mode incorporates the aesthetics of courtiership with a discourse of a different social register, that of vernacular humanism and an emphasis on frugality and thrift. In the context of these poems, the pastoral genre attempts to reinvent a courtly culture based on landed property, shielded from the corrupting influence of global trade and the moral dissolution in the city, but that reconciliation is not an easy task. In Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepherd," the very world of material objects and their origin which is foreign to the pastoral calls into question the rustic identity of the shepherd. Raleigh's poetic response further exposes the figure of the shepherd poet as a disingenuous pose that lacks internal coherence. Yet, it is Donne's piscatorial version on the same theme that uses the very language of nature to make a critique not only of the intrigues typical for the court, but also of the very desire to dominate nature that defines that uses of the pastoral genre from that period.*

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