

## **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.

The pair of poems on shepherd love, Christopher Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" and Walter Raleigh's "The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd," are an all-time favorite of anthologies of British literature and poetry. One of the features that warrants their inclusion in the canon is the simplicity of the language and the vernacular turn of the phrase that offer to the reader a more accessible and demotic version of Renaissance courtly lyric. The Renaissance pastoral poem is charming and witty without being pompous or pretentious; it continues to speak the language of courtly love, but now liberated from the contrivances and metaphorical conceits, from the elitism, artifice, and pomp of courtly discourse.

Christopher Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" begins as an amorous call, an invitation to the beloved to join in rustic pleasures offered by the countryside. The addressee of the poem, however, remains vague and abstract, and the

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poetic blazon of the lover's beauties, typical for a form like the Petrarchan sonnet, here is replaced by a description of pastoral pleasures that form a progression. The poem begins with the varied, undulating features of the rustic landscape, the valleys and rivers from the first two stanzas, then moves to the soft garments made from wool to be pulled "from our pretty lambs" (14), and then arrives at the comforts and bounty that is to be consumed within the household, "belt of straw and ivy buds" (17), "the silver dishes" (21) set on an "ivory table" (23), as well as the shepherd dances described at the end.

This progression from the expansive eagle-eye view of the landscape towards the shepherd's abode plays an important rhetorical role in the poem. The first line begins with the invitation:

Come live with me and be my love,  
And we will all the pleasures prove (1–2)  
The final two lines mirror and complement the beginning:  
If these delights thy mind may move,  
Then live with me and be my Love. (27–28)

Thus, the very progression from the valleys and hills in the beginning to the bed and the table in the second half of the poem in fact already performs the motion of coming and moving. By the end of the poem, the stanzas of the poem have staged a virtual trip in the countryside, and the mind of the reader has been "moved," transported and thus persuaded through the very devices of poetry.

Yet, this movement and migration to the idealized shepherd hut is not that simple and unambiguous as it may seem. Traditionally, the pastoral poem implies a renunciation of the corruption found in the cities and return to the simplicity of nature, and here the implicit, unmentioned detractor against whom the speaker is marching all his rustic pleasures is the form of conspicuous consumption of foreign luxuries and commodities that has become emblematic of the city of London at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. In a sense, the suggested purpose of the 'proof' is to create an alternative realm of delightful sights and toys located outside the growing markets of London. The objects that attest to the joys of the countryside continue to bear unmistakable resemblance to the world of courtly pleasures, but unlike fashions brought from abroad, everything in this miniature pastoral is home-grown rather than obtained from the market: the embroidery made of myrtle leaves, the gown spun from the finest wool "which from our pretty lambs we pull" (14), the cap of flowers and the belt of ivy buds, all these are made from materials found in some natural, pristine state, located outside an economy of trade and petty mercantile considerations. The adornments listed here continue to bear a resemblance to courtly pleasures, but the poem consciously performs a gesture of estrangement, of presenting familiar luxury items in an unusual setting and context, and transposing them into a domain of domesticity that speaks not to a household economy based on frugality – as "beds of roses" (9) would prove utterly impractical – but rather to a domestic economy based on the consumption of pleasures one already holds in possession. A certain

aristocratic ethos of leisure and idleness, hitherto belonging the domain of the court and courtly poetry, here is being given a popular version translated into a vernacular phrase that appeals to a common readership even as it praises a rustic utopia inaccessible to the same common readers it seems to be wooing on its face.

Christopher Marlowe, himself a man of letters, soldier, and something of a prodigal, certainly could not claim a membership in the class of the landed gentry, but his literary career drew on courtly patronage. A very apt phrase to describe the mixture of courtly sensibility and humble setting perhaps is provided in Steven Mullaney's formulation of early modern "estrangement through familiarity" (132), or the propensity of the early modern English stage to rehearse and study the dominant institutional and cultural paradigms and scenarios, without necessarily reinforcing them. The poem preserves the theme of aristocratic pleasures adorned with silver, gold, and ivory, but it also achieves a surprise effect by transposing them to an atypical, rustic setting, thus giving them a new, emphatically domestic form. Indeed, the presence of ivory is awkward in this shepherd world as it reminds us of the trade of commodities obtained from the African continent. The "coral clasps and ember studs" (18) speak about a maritime trade that exists outside the pastoral, and the golden buckles and silver dishes mentioned in fact imply the necessity of mining and extraction of metal ores – a violation of nature and a taboo in a typical pastoral realm – but what warrants the presence of such objects is still the aura of being 'natural' or derived in some imaginary, pure manner outside the realm of merchants and intermediaries.

The arresting image of the gown made out of lamb's wool evokes the English export of wool which peaked towards the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and constituted a significant source of wealth for the realm's economy, and thus today we can interpret the poem less as some proto-ecological call for a return to nature and more as the manifestation of anxiety about consumption driven by the import of foreign commodities at the expense of domestic production. Marlowe's play with the pastoral genre reproduces a logic of defiance to trade similar to the one underling the current rhetoric of "green jobs" in the U.S. where the very term appeals to a culture of environmental awareness and activism, while it also makes a desperate attempt to re-imagine the possibility of revitalizing a domestic economy after many industries have fled to different points of the world as a result of the larger logic of global capital.

The material world described in the poem is partially organized by the desire to surprise the reader. The shepherd seeks to "move" the mind of his auditor, and the wonder and effect sought here proceed precisely from the discovery of the pleasures and entertainment that is to be found in the rusticity and plainness of the English countryside. The collapse of the courtly into the natural aims at and thus generates an effect of surprise and wit, but does that mean that we should relegate the poem to the exercises in poetic wit and invention that were so typical for the early modern courtly poets?

Here, we may turn briefly to the history of early modern lyrics in England, in order to position Marlowe's poem not merely as a fashionable invention, but also as an intervention in the development of two literary discourses and forms of literary

authorship, those of humanism and courtly lyric. Marlowe's "Passionate Shepherd" is likely the one most anthologized exemplar of an English Renaissance poem, bar Shakespeare, as editors do tend to select it for the vernacular turn of the phrase and the varied imagery, in comparison with the repetitive patterns of preceding courtier poetry.<sup>1</sup> Marlowe's language indeed gives the semblance of vernacular, more natural speech, but his "Passionate Shepherd" remains a vernacular version of what is still a set of themes inherited from courtly poetry.

In her *Framing Authority: Sayings, Self, and Society in Sixteenth-Century England*, Mary Thomas Crane identifies two major cultures of public writing that determined the literary and textual landscape in England during the sixteenth century. On one end of the spectrum, she positions the men of letters who came from the lesser gentry and the urban middle classes and were trained in classical rhetoric and the humanist tradition. The humanist poets amongst them modeled their writing on citation, excerpting, and rhetorical strategies adopted from the commonplace book, which provided a universal model for the gentry of "owning" and using their education as cultural capital without threatening the existing social distinctions. On the other end Crane posits the courtier poets who identified with and spoke an aristocratic discourse of aesthetic pleasure or heroic themes.

Thus, the history of English poetry in print knew an older, different strain of poetic expression which preceded the flourishing of courtly poetry. It grew out of the commonplace book and the collection of moral aphorisms, didactic teachings, and abstract principles of conduct, excerpted from humanist texts. Commonplace books were a major source for humanist poets between the 1550s and the 1570s, but the didactic nature and the imported, classical origins of such poetry never produced a distinctly English tradition to merit an inclusion in the English literary canon. The English Renaissance canon instead more than often begins with the sonnet form and thus with courtly poetry, where the humanist concern with duty and morality has been superseded by lyric narratives with an emphasis on the private and more personal complaints of a lyrical subject.

The separation between humanist and courtly discourses became less stark towards the end of the century, and the figures of the profligate, or the "prodigal son" did provide one compromise position that allowed for the incorporation of humanist and courtly discourses, accommodating the humanist demand for moral education and knowledge with themes of social mobility that were more popular amongst courtiers (Helgerson 159–60). The pastoral mode inaugurated most prominently with Philip Sidney and Edmund Spenser, then, provides a further link in this history of lyrics in print, as it preserved some traces of English humanist education, chiefly the emphasis on frugality and moderation, while at the same time the pastoral genre dismissed the formal features

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<sup>1</sup> Such is the praise for the poem given in Isaac Walton's *The Compleat Angler* in 1653. For a brief survey of contemporary critical responses to the "Passionate Shepherd," see Patrick Cheney, "Career Rivalry and the Writing of Counter-Nationhood: Ovid, Spenser, and Philomela in Marlowe's 'The Passionate Shepherd to His Love'."

of that older humanism and the notions of learning, studiousness, and laborious acquisition of classical heritage.

The early modern pastoral genre thus accommodated elements of the simple and frugal life championed by humanism into narratives that belonged to courtly lyric. In his own poetic answer to Marlowe, Sir Walter Raleigh, himself a notable courtier, challenges the stability of the pastoral ideal. If Marlowe's "Passionate Shepherd" is an attempt to imagine healthy forms of leisure and entertainment and insert simplicity and innocence into a genre that belongs to the court, Raleigh's answer to Marlowe, "The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd" (Marlowe 159–60), dismantles the appeal of the pastoral vision. Both Marlowe's "Passionate Shepherd" and Walter Raleigh's "The Nymph's Reply" appeared together in print, first in the collection of poetry *The Passionate Pilgrim* (1599) and then in *England's Helicon* in the following year. Raleigh's reply is spoken from the mouth of a nymph, an amphibious creature that inhabits both forests and rivers. The lesson taught by the poem is that nature is synonymous with mutability and change and thus can offer no enjoyment that is secure against the passing of time and the change of seasons. Raleigh's nymph challenges "the truth in every shepherd's voice" (2) and "the honey tongue" (11) assumed by Marlowe's lyrical speaker, thus driving a wedge between the appearance of rhetoric and true reason. In the world of seasonal change, argues the Nymph, one has to reckon with the cold and hardship brought by wintertime. The gifts promised by the shepherd – the gown, the shoes, the bed of roses, and the kirtle made of leaves of myrtle – are subject to decay: they "[s]oon break, soon wither, soon forgotten" (15). Marlowe's shepherd, according to Raleigh, speaks from a position of a "reason rotten" (16), a pseudo-universality that loses its secure hold once it has been placed in the context of temporal change and uncertainty, which are given a distinct sea-time character in the nymph's reply to the shepherd. If simplicity and natural beauty have been elevated to a status of a higher "truth" by Marlowe's shepherd, Raleigh's nymph is questioning the equation between truth and nature and instead asks about the possibility of constancy that exists outside time. If this is a political lesson, then the trope of constancy surely points out to the figure of the Queen as the sovereign of England and the center of a court otherwise marked by intrigues and shifting loyalties.

The violent intervention of time that drives away the flocks in "The Nymph's Reply," the raging rivers and rocks growing cold, the "wayward winter" (10), all these evoke the imagery of a sea storm where weather change is in fact brought to the land from the outside, from the sea. The ending of the poem insists on a return to the more conventional courtly themes of loyalty and constancy. The ending of Raleigh's poem extends a call for youth that lasts and love that still breeds, thus effectively reinstating the need for a relationship of unconditional political support and "love" between courtier and patron, the Queen.

In the context of these literary exchanges, John Donne's "The Baite" (Donne 36), published in 1633 but most likely composed in the period 1593–1600, is the more interesting and complex one. The courtly themes of amorous pursuits and titillation remain strong in "The Baite," which voices distinct suspicion of the pastoral innocence

and ‘landed’ certainty assumed in Marlowe’s “Passionate Shepherd.” The rustic pleasures here are translated into a pastime of fishing, a markedly elite, aristocratic sport that cancels out any false appeals to rusticity and simplicity. These are “new pleasures” as opposed to the more conventional delights in Marlowe’s poem, and here Donne, like Raleigh, is making a point that about temporal change and novelties that render the pastoral and its promise of security untenable. Anthony Low reads Donne’s “The Baite” as “anti-pastoral” reaction more characteristic of the poet’s loathing of the court than of any particular interest in the stakes of the genre (74–88), but the poem still shows a keen understanding of the conventions and affects deployed by the pastoral mode. “The Baite” collapses the pastoral theme borrowed from Marlowe into a piscatorial river realm of baits and fish where uncertainty and mutability are represented not simply as an external threat but rather as a logic internal to and inherent in this world. The courtier who speaks in the poem drops off his mask of assurance and self-confidence and finds himself in the position of the amorous fish. The luxurious objects from Marlowe’s poem have been transformed into treacherous objects of violence and torture: the razor-sharp “angling reeds” (17), the “shells and weeds”(18), the “sleavesilke flies” (23). The poem renders insignificant the very distinction between a land of permanence and a sea of trouble that still operates in both Marlowe’s and Raleigh’s shepherd poems. In a signature Donne-like fashion, the poet also collapses the distinction between the human and the animal world and replaces the flocks of sheep from the traditional pastoral with the school of silly fish trapped in pursuit of baits and flashy objects which likely will cost their lives. The courtiers are here allegorized as a school of fish who suddenly find themselves in the position of the bait and prey. Donne allows the trope of country “love” to consume its own object of desire which culminates in a moment of surprise and discovery, but what is revealed in this is the incapacitating dependency that underlies courtly patronage. The speaker in the poem continues to plead his own allegiance to the beloved, but only after he has stripped off his own poetic persona from any agency and authority.

That could possibly leave us with another Ovidian love poem of temptation, pursuit, and abandonment that transforms wholesale the human subject into animal forms, were it not also for the fact that this Ovidian transformation also turns upside-down the major assumption of the pastoral, that of human dominion over nature. If there is indeed a distinct genre of anti-pastoral as some critics have claimed (Gifford) rather than simply disparate attempts of rewriting Virgil and Theocritus, then Donne’s “The Baite” must be an anti-pastoral since the poem destabilizes the very assumption of human property over land.

The title of the poem takes the name of an object, the bait, and, poetic authority itself in “The Baite” arises out of a position of displacement and disenfranchisement shared with the “bedded” or trapped fish (22). Both Marlowe’s and Raleigh’s perspectives are spatial, or situated in a specific relationship to land: that is the position of land proprietor in Marlowe, and the external perspective of distance from the land as viewed from the sea, in Raleigh. Raleigh’s nymph confronts Marlowe’s shepherd from a different gendered perspective, that of the nymph, also a creature partially associated with

water, but with Donne, his poetic intervention is staged from the vantage-point of radical animal alterity, that of the fish. If the speaker-fish ever speaks from a particular location, that is the “strangling snare,” the “windowie net” (20) and the “slimy nest” (21), and, here, the location is less a matter of ontological difference and being, and rather one of knowledge.

The position of authority, if we can still use this concept in the peculiar case of Donne, is the position and the knowledge of the possessed, captured object. Marshall Grossman has suggested that Donne tends to privilege “critical epistemology” over “metaphysical ontology,” (166–167), or – to put it more bluntly – that his poems produce knowledge rather than a subjective state of being. “The Baite” offers an emblematic example of an epistemology produced by temptation and falling. This is no longer the humanist valorization of instrumental knowledge and reason, but rather the knowledge produced from below, from a “natural” perspective, so to speak. “The Baite” offers us a different epistemology, the particular knowledge of the trapped animal and the caught fish, and as such, this is also knowledge common and shared across species but no longer related to the humanist ethos of reason that Sir Philip Sidney for example appropriates in the *New Arcadia*. This is the knowledge produced by the singularity of ‘animal’ experience, rather than the form of legal reason and ratio used to resolve the entanglements at the end of Philip Sidney’s *New Arcadia*. The narrator in Sidney’s *Arcadia*, for example is able to claim natural reason as a shield against the violent sway of political passions in Arcadia. Donne, on the other hand, teases out the inherent forms of dependence and possession that still underlie any pursuit of patronage and privilege. In this piscatorial poem, Donne insists on a type of knowledge and subjectivity that is obtained not by distancing oneself from passions and objects of desire but rather through merging with them and coming to see the world through them.

But then, how does Donne’s poetic idiosyncrasy relate to the pastoral genre? Nature in more conventional pastoral or topographical poems does yield too easily and joyfully to human authority. In his poetry, Donne may indeed harbor a “scorn for manual labor,” thus rejecting both pastoral and georgic appeals to the lore of the countryside as critics have argued (Low 78), but he is also keenly aware of the stakes and material relationships that make pastoral idylls conceivable in the first place. One of the most vivid examples of an accommodating and obliging landscape that parades its bounties in the fashion of a courtier is Ben Jonson’s country house poem “To Penshurst” (1616). In “Penshurst” the forest yields itself too readily, the birds give a free consent to be cooked and eaten, and “officious” fish form a peculiar realm of fawning servants swarming in numbers to present themselves as dishes on the table of the lord of the estate. Written much later than the Elizabethan pastoral poems, the country house poem becomes a pastoral celebration of landed property where the very estate begins to speak with the tongue of an obliging courtier. The knowledge and the particular vantage point of authority in “The Baite” do not arise out of a human dominion over nature, as one of the predicaments of the pastoral setting organized for the specific purpose of human delight and pleasure; rather, the knowledge that

organizes the narrative in the poem is that knowledge possessed by the object, by the fish caught up and turned into a trophy and property.

But that brings us to a fundamental question about the levels and horizons of meaning in Renaissance pastoral poetry. Is the pastoral world a fantasy realm of innocence and beauty where the imagination is left free to dwell on the joys of a lost Eden, as Marlowe's playful "Passionate Shepherd" suggests, or is it a darker world of allegories about the social games and fantasies that dominate the court? A generation of critics, including William Empson, Raymond Williams, and Annabel Patterson among others, have sought in the pastoral genre a glimpse of the social and political upheavals of the times, and the present article itself remains within that more socially oriented line of analysis.

More recently with the rise of environmental criticism, scholars have attempted to bring to the fore the importance of nature and the changes in the relationship between early modern men and the natural world. In his *What Else Is Pastoral?*, for example, Ken Hiltner argues that the traditional focus on the political content of the pastoral genre "unabashedly marginalizes the role of the environment" in Renaissance texts (2). This debate, however, itself replicates the familiar binary division between culture and nature and the problems which arise when the critical focus of the reader falls on one or the other. The choice between the aesthetics and politics of the pastoral, on one hand, and the natural world associated with the countryside, on the other, is already problematic, as it signals an underlining epistemological split produced by the proverbial fragmented consciousness of modernity. As the dynamics between the three poems discussed above shows, poets from the early modern period were themselves keenly aware of the loss of knowledge entailed by each of these choices, and the contradictions of the pastoral genre demand from us as critics to attend precisely to the gaps and traumas of early modernity.

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