

Reading Green in Early Modern England. Leah Knight.

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Readers familiar with Bruce Smith's scintillating *Key of Green* may pick up Leah Knight's new book with some skepticism: do we really need, within a five-year span, two cultural histories of the color green in early modern England? To its credit, *Reading Green* amply convinces us that, yes, we do. Whereas Smith gauges the valence of green in Renaissance acoustics, color theory, painting, alchemy, and gardening manuals, Knight explores a similarly eclectic range of secondary texts to capture the role and agency of green stuffs in the fundamental human acts of seeing, reading, breathing, writing, carving, walking, and healing. Collectively, the chapters demonstrate that early moderns — and literary types in particular — valued the green world as a salubrious place of both physical and psychic renewal.

Chapter 1 offers a fascinating account of Renaissance theories of green as an “optical restorative” (18). Knight assembles abundant evidence that seventeenth-century

physicians prescribed gazing on verdure as a cure for eyestrain. The marked tendency of writers and editors to advertise their collections or miscellanies as metaphorical forests or gardens can be explained, Knight proposes, as a bid to infuse such volumes with a green sheen that would ameliorate the eyestrain caused by reading them. Early modern scholars who have spent summer afternoons in the British Library squinting at Gothic blackletter will no doubt relate. Who knew the Renaissance developed ergonomics in response to the new technology of the book? The second chapter advances an analogous claim that early moderns regarded poetry as an antidote to the pestilential air of London. According to Knight, the Renaissance commonplace of lyrics as “sweet airs” is more than a simple metonymy: in an urban atmosphere menaced by plague and increasingly choked with coal smoke, pastoral poems uncorked a vicarious whiff of verdant country air that functioned as a kind of aromatherapy.

Chapter 3 chronicles how humans imposed control over nature through botanical taxonomies. Orpheus’s legendary capability to incite motion in trees mirrors the poet’s rhetorical command over the emotions of his or her audience. The tree catalogues composed by poets such as Ovid and Spenser stand as literary equivalents of herbals that seek “to transport and assemble the world’s fauna into civilized and legible array” (79). In chapter 4, *Reading Green* scrutinizes the pastoral motif of inscribing poems on tree bark. Knight suggests that early modern writers imagine tree carving as an organic alternative to print publication. Yet rather than betoken a mystical equilibrium between nature and culture (a realization of the book of nature), tree-carving incidents by and large offer evidence of the “disruptive and violating force of humanity in non-human nature” (107). The final chapter on the “green” wound suffered by Marvell’s Mower is perhaps the least successful. While Knight’s expertise in botany is in full flower, *green* here is an adjective (synonymous with fresh) rather than a substantive. Nevertheless, one admires the candor in the author’s annotations to an earlier draft of the chapter before she discovered that Marvell’s editors had already noted his debt to Gerard’s *Herball*.

Some readers may be surprised to encounter a book entitled *Reading Green* that — to some extent — eschews an overtly ecocritical perspective. Knight worries (and not without cause) that ecocriticism has now achieved a virtual monopoly in studies of human relations with the nonhuman environment. Outright condemnations of “the violating force of humanity” are thus relatively rare. Knight instead recovers the phenomenological import of green before the color possessed the environmentalist overtones it has today. In her own words, Knight undertakes “to read green, not read greenly” (5). Such historicist integrity is welcome, and many readers may find it as refreshing as the green-infused air Knight analyzes in chapter 2. On the other hand, ecocritics are precisely the audience most likely to read this book and to apply its insights. If Knight refrains from unraveling the ecocritical stakes of her invigorating study, one can bet that many readers of *Reading Green* will — like the vegetation animated by Orpheus — be quickened and stirred by her words to do exactly that.

TODD A. BORLIK, *University of Huddersfield*