

## *Book Reviews*

### **PRE-1800**

MARY THOMAS CRANE. *Losing Touch with Nature: Literature and the New Science in 16th-Century England*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014. Pp. 248. \$49.95 (cloth). doi: 10.1017/jbr.2015.204

In *Losing Touch with Nature*, Mary Crane argues for the importance of a large (if gradual) shift in early modern approaches to the natural world for a fuller understanding of late-sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century English literature. This particular shift entailed a movement away from intuitive, experiential, and commonsense approaches to the natural world toward counterintuitive, experimental, and strikingly abstract formulations for how the world worked. The “slow erosion of the Aristotelian world view” (5), alongside the gradual rise of new powers of abstraction and counterintuitive thought, Crane argues, created a volatile mix of responses to a changing natural world that were registered in the writings of Spenser, Marlowe, and Shakespeare. By synthesizing a series of changes in early modern approaches to nature, from new theories of heliocentrism, atomism, the void, and an unfixed cosmos signaled by the 1572 supernova, to the unsettling potential of the Hindu-Arabic “zero,” Crane considers how abstract thought began to replace everyday experience as a means to comprehend the truth of nature.

In the process of establishing the framework of such an epistemological shift, Crane complicates some familiar assumptions about the rise of modern science in early modern England. The well-known movement in natural philosophy away from a reliance upon ancient textual authorities to an emphasis on empiricism, and thus direct observation, for example, is complicated by Crane’s consideration of how certain aspects of Aristotelian “book knowledge” were in fact deeply intuitive and observationally based, and how empiricism often entailed a reliance upon forms of knowledge that exceeded the capacities of direct observation. Thus an overemphasis on the shift from ancient texts to the “book of nature” itself can be understood to obscure a more striking movement from an intuitive, embodied approach to nature to a counterintuitive and abstract one.

Crane's opening chapters focus on a number of early modern scientific writers and practitioners in order to demonstrate an awareness, in England, of the epistemological stakes of contemporary challenges to Aristotelian, Galenic, and Ptolomeic world views. These chapters map out a historical moment marked, in part, by a "sundering of an embodied, intuitive grasp of the world from the specialist's increasingly abstract accounts of how things really worked" (2) and thus by new questions—within and beyond communities of scientific practitioners—about the limits of ordinary experience in relationship to truth.

In the second half of the book she then shows how literature registered contradictory responses to the new science, mingling "elation and horror" (2). Crane first argues that *The Faerie Queene* was "strongly influenced by the breakdown of Aristotelian naturalism and the epistemological issues that accompanied it" (95). By arguing for Spenser's engagement with the "uncertainty about the legibility of nature expressed by the English writers of natural philosophical treatises during the sixteenth century" (95), Crane provides a fascinating new angle on critical questions about the elusiveness of truth in the poem.

Moving from Spenser to Shakespeare, and from astronomy to physics and mathematics in "Shakespeare and New Forms of Nothing," Crane reconsiders the power of nothing as a source of abstraction and innovation in Shakespeare's sonnets and *King Lear*. The sonnets, she argues, particularly the procreation sonnets, engage with the power of abstraction enabled by mathematical thinking in the Hindu-Arabic tradition, in which the logic of place value and the power of zero opened up new cognitive models. Crane considers how a shift within early modern mathematics that moved from a largely concrete and object- and practice-oriented arena of inquiry to a more abstract domain of thought—not least through the power of zero—occasioned new ways of thinking about reproduction, sexuality, and even erotic triangulation. The sonnets "register the appeal of this new way of thinking as well as the anxieties that it caused" (124)—with the "appeal" evident in the procreation sonnets and the "anxiety" in representations of female sexuality in the later sonnets. Crane then shifts to explore how *King Lear* "pursues only the anxieties" of abstraction integral to new forms of "nothing." *Lear*, she argues, is informed by the specter of void space central to theories of atomism in circulation in the early years of the seventeenth century. More specifically, she brings discourses of atomism involving questions of invisible materialisms, the infinite divisibility of nature, and the function of weight as an index of matter to bear on the play's engagement with the dramatic logic of abstract thinking, the weight and matter of existence, and embodied and affective experience. In doing so, Crane offers a series of dazzling insights that will be of particular interest to scholars of Shakespeare and science.

In the final chapter, Crane turns to the relationship between science and projections of colonial power in the drama of Marlowe and Shakespeare. Crane draws on meteorology and matter theory to argue that *Tamburlaine* and *Antony and Cleopatra* both reflect an awareness of "contemporary problems in matter theory" (148). She demonstrates that *Tamburlaine*, in part one, attempts to appropriate the power of phenomena such as earthquakes and, in part two, emerges as a figure who imagines himself able to transgress "the lunar boundary, repeatedly imagining himself as able to change or destroy the realm of the fixed stars," thus aligning himself with the new science as it unsettled Aristotelianism and otherwise settled views of the universe. *Antony and Cleopatra*, in contrast, emerges as a play already nostalgic about an "Aristotelian system of elements and humors that was, by 1606 ... at the beginning of the end of its dominance" (156). Here Crane reiterates her overarching argument that the "end of belief in the Aristotelian elements meant the end of a system in which human sensory experience of the world was thought to give unmediated access to truth about it and in which humans and the world were interconnected in various ways" (158). Crane reads the differences between Rome and Egypt in the play in terms of new and old world views, respectively: Rome anticipates "a Cartesian mind-body split, in which self-contained individuals are separate from and gain mastery over their environment," and Egypt incarnates "an earlier view that environment shapes subjects" (159). Shakespeare's dichotomy, she suggests, "may mark an originary site of

the disciplinary division into the two cultures of literature and science which has so deeply structured modernity” (166). Crane thus closes the chapter with a sense of what literature may have lost, rather than gained, through the rise of the new science.

In sum, Crane’s *Losing Touch with Nature* stands as an important and innovative contribution to the study of literature and science in late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth-century England.

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MICHAEL BUNDOCK. *The Fortunes of Francis Barber: The True Story of the Jamaican Slave who Became Samuel Johnson’s Heir*. London: Yale University Press, 2015. Pp. 282. \$35.00 (cloth). doi: 10.1017/jbr.2015.205

Among the most noted of the several thousands of the free blacks in England in the second half of the eighteenth century was Francis Barber. Unlike others, such as Olaudah Equiano, Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, and Ignatius Sancho, whose claim to attention was their roles as former slaves who became authors or active in the abolition movement, Barber, born a slave in Jamaica, was freed when taken to England in 1750, and he served as Samuel Johnson’s servant on and off for more than thirty years, until Johnson’s death in 1784. Barber’s claim to fame was primarily for being Samuel Johnson’s servant while Johnson was working on his *Dictionary of the English Language* and for the attention he received as heir to the bulk of Johnson’s estate after Johnson’s death.

Barber was not, then and now, an invisible presence, as he figured somewhat favorably in the descriptions of Johnson’s life in James Boswell’s *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791), but treated considerably less favorably by John Hawkins in *The Life of Dr. Samuel Johnson* (1787). Michael Bundock, the author of *The Fortunes of Francis Barber*, is a longtime Johnson scholar who also published several articles on Barber and Johnson and is generally quite sympathetic to Barber’s action and thought. This book is primarily a biography of Barber, but it also describes various aspects of racial attitudes, laws, and judicial cases regarding blacks in late eighteenth-century England and about attitudes towards blacks and slavery. Although Barber’s life was rather atypical for a black in England at that time, his relations with blacks and whites were extensive enough to cast some interesting light on patterns of English race relations.

Barber was born a slave on a large sugar plantation in Jamaica in the early 1740’s. Then named Quashey, he was owned by Colonel Richard Bathurst, a member of the Jamaican Assembly. When Bathurst’s plantation was failing, he sold his plantation, including most of the slaves, and returned to England in 1750, taking Quashey, then seven or eight years old, with him. After arrival, Quashey spent several years at schools, probably the only black there, before Bathurst’s son gave him to his friend Samuel Johnson in 1752. He became Johnson’s resident servant, residing in Johnson’s home with several other people until Johnson’s death. In between his residences as Johnson’s servant, he worked for an apothecary in London, before serving voluntarily in the Royal Navy from 1758 to 1760. Barber died in poverty in 1801, having exhausted his inheritance. He had been an important source for Boswell’s *Life of Johnson*, and other works.

There are some problems in any attempt to use Barber to define British racial beliefs and actions. There is only a limited amount known about Barber’s own thinking on many issues, so Bundock, of necessity, needs to resort to reasoning back from his behavior. This difficulty is most acute in the discussion of Barber as a slave in the West Indies, where there is almost nothing established in the way of his experiences, and we are led to references from the relevant works of James Walvin, Michael Craton, and others. While we are given some