

The Indistinct Human in Renaissance Literature. Jean E. Feerick and Vin Nardizzi, eds.

Early Modern Cultural Studies 1500–1700. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. xi + 292 pp. \$105.

As we now live in a new geological epoch — the Anthropocene — and on a planet almost wholly transformed by humanity, many humanists are turning their attention to accounts of human beings living in different kinds of relationships with nature. Laurie Shannon’s *The Accommodated Animal* (2012), for example, looks at the process by which humans came to be tyrants over what had once been a “cosmopolity” of “living things.” *The Indistinct Human* is indebted to Shannon’s work — her essay “The Eight Animals in Shakespeare” serves as a “Head-Piece” to the volume — but it is also indebted to Aristotle’s account of the “ensouledness of all things” in *De Anima*. The editors’ own concerns — Vin Nardizzi is the author of *Wooden Os: Shakespeare’s Theatres and England’s Trees* (2013) and Jean E. Feerick of *Strangers in Blood: Relocating Race in Renaissance Literature* (2010) — indicate their interests in materiality in a broad sense, most notably in the relationship between human bodies and “the sentient and stony things that surround, inhabit and constitute” them. The volume’s introduction lays out the position of early modern humans in the wider sphere of creation: beneath the angels and above all other “creatures of this inferior world” (1), yet nonetheless only contingently and precariously distinct. “The potential for human indistinction,” the editors argue, “is the dark underside of Renaissance celebrations of man’s preeminent place within the cosmos” (2). Officially skeptical of both Renaissance and human exceptionalism, the volume presents a humanity embedded among creaturely life, and, as

such, it is rather romantically committed to both the alterity of the past and the connectedness of all things. There is a strong sense in the volume of the “great chain of being” famously articulated by E. M. W. Tillyard in *The Elizabethan World Picture* (1942), an account of the period violently rejected during the heyday of New Historicism, but currently coming back into vogue. The reasons are many: Foucault’s *The Order of Things* made arguments about natural correspondences and systems sexy, and contemporary critical interest in the mutual constitution of subjects and objects, Galenic humoralism, and atomism, among other things, has reinvigorated scholarship on human and nonhuman interdependencies. While the editors argue that the essays “guard against a proleptic awareness of what is to come” (4), they nonetheless follow Shannon in seeing Descartes as the endpoint for the reign of human indistinction. The “prevalence and usefulness of cross-species identification” is characteristic of “this pre-Cartesian moment,” but not, alas, our own.

Following Laurie Shannon’s “Head-Piece,” the collection is comprised of two parts, “Modes of Indistinction” and “Indistinct Bodies.” “Modes of Indistinction” includes essays on the relations between humans and dolphins and humans and whales; on the literalization of the saying “you are what you eat” (*Bartholomew Fair*’s Ursula the Pig-Woman is the case study), and the relationship between botanical grafting and embryonic development (Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi*); and on grafting (this time in Shakespeare’s *Lucrece*) and wooden prostheses (primarily Stump’s in *A Larum for London*). “Indistinct Bodies” includes essays on vegetable reproduction and greensickness, on hearts of stones and statues come to life (*The Winter’s Tale*), and on human earth-boundedness and invertebrate life (*Hamlet* as a play less about subjectivity than about the “enwormed” human).

As is often the case in edited collections, there is some crossover — two essays on stony hearts and enlivened statues seems excessive — and some weaknesses. A number of essays do little more than read animals as metaphors for human actions (few of us will be surprised to hear that whales “are generally emblematic of sovereignty, grandeur, and appetite” [53]), and others make overblown claims (do dolphins really “supplement humans at their limits” [40]?). But the book is rich in what Shannon calls “zootopian” representation — less a utopia than “a domain constituted by a more pervasive cognizance of [life forms] other than our own” (16). We learn that early moderns believed that dolphins used to be human; that plants reproduced themselves without sex; that greensickness, probably a combination of what we now call anemia and depression, was a kind of virgin rot necessitating (hetero)sexual intercourse as its cure; and that “for most early modern natural philosophers, maggots, not flowers, most powerfully represented life’s absolute fertility” (254).

I like Tiffany Werth’s argument that vibrant matter is distanced from dull matter in the period “along an axis of faith” (181) — indeed I wish there had been more on divine efficacy — and the connections Vin Nardizzi makes between the ways audiences were required to speculate upon a boy actor who undresses and the ways they were compelled, when looking at an actor wearing a wooden leg, to think about what,

exactly, comprises the human body. My favorite essay in the volume, Marjorie Swan's "Vegetable Love," argues that given that early modern people believed that plants reproduced nonsexually, "to experience 'vegetable love' was to enter a sex-free zone" (140). This essay will certainly affect how I teach Marvell's poetry, not only "To His Coy Mistress" but also "The Garden," which is indubitably the work of "a poet who yearned to model human existence on the nonsexual otherness of plants" (141). If the "vegetable love" of "To His Coy Mistress" grows "vaster than empires, and more slow," this volume asks us to look at the early modern world before what Rob Nixon calls the "slow violence" of environmental devastation changed both it and our literary engagement with it.

JULIE CRAWFORD, *Columbia University*