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Jessica Rosenberg. *Botanical Poetics: Early Modern Plant Books and the Husbandry of Print.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022. 376 pp. ISBN 9781512823332. \$75.00 hardback.

As a seasoned community gardener, one part of me read *Botanical Poetics: Early Modern Plant Books and the Husbandry of Print* for advice about how to think with plants in the humanities, and the other for instruction concerning actual fields and gardens. I was not disappointed on either front, as I found Rosenberg’s interdisciplinary research to be stunningly persuasive, detailed, and original. *Botanical Poetics* disrupts perceived ways of reading literature, recovers and champions books cast aside as forgotten and irrelevant practical manuals from an agrarian economy, and ends by challenging origin narratives built into the Scientific Revolution. It develops an aesthetics of mid-Elizabethan reading, composing, and printing in dialogue with poststructuralist-material ecocriticism influenced by Bruno Latour and Michael Marder. Rosenberg begins by bringing together the miscellanies, practical manuals, and translations known as “plant books,” which are usually “close in form but distant in genre” (227) to the mainstream volumes seen as fundamental to the English literary canon. This “motley archive” (29) of English plant books centers on the mid-sixteenth century (1567-1583), where a surge of alliterative, botanical titles gleaned from the STC include experimental books of natural history, prose dialogue, devotionals, and miscellaneous poetry collections, many of which were drawn together by stationers such as Henry Denham, who recycled identical verbal and visual framing devices. Despite divergent content, a botanical title (nosegay, bouquet, bower, garden, arbor, or forest) typically promised a volume that bound together disparate slips, fragments, and cuttings for the reader to select, reorder, apply, or gift to others, judiciously and sparingly, as occasion deemed fit. Most of these collections and miscellanies remain “marginal to literary and intellectual history” (12). Yet, as

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Rosenberg argues, they illustrate a praxis: “early modern writers joined plant-thinking and book-thinking according to these shared capacities: the vital sufficiency of the fragment, the possibility of relocation, the many potential paths of growth and propagation” (3). This style of plant-thinking—what Rosenberg calls a “botanical poetics”—governs the “relation of form and meaning across a range of settings, on the printed page, planted field, and in the kitchen garden,” (8) and reveals a literary practice resistant to authorial control and textual property.

After its Introduction, the rest of the book’s chapters make a strong case for reading beyond the mainstream canon (including works by Thomas Tusser, men of the Inns of Court, stationers, and authors of practical guides) to understand the mainstream canon (focused here on authors including William Shakespeare, Isabella Whitney, Edmund Spenser, and George Gascoigne). We come to see plant studies methodologies gleaned from husbandry and gardening as not optional but integral to our understandings of book history, printing and composition, and works by Shakespeare and Spenser. Structurally, *Botanical Poetics* applies its own theories in its use of visual architecture, its two short “branches” into the canon, and in Rosenberg’s gift of her ESTC plant book data set. In the spirit of dispersal and inclusivity across “unknown landscapes of reception,” (vii) Rosenberg generously offers her “complete data set of early modern plant books” (141) to grow anywhere, for anyone who visits her webpage.

Chapter One, “What Kind of Thing I Am”: Plant Books in Space and Time,” surveys a gathering of Elizabethan plant books as defined by two practices: the books frame their content as “diverse raw materials” (ranging from practical advice to poems) within an enclosed architectural setting modeled after garden design, and they emphasize the shared labor of “author, stationer, and reader” (38) through future-oriented husbandry analogies. The books exist therefore as both objects and ongoing events in time, inviting the active participation of the reader with familiar analogies of harvest, seasonal repetition, and promises of yield. Rosenberg’s work on the built environment of the plant book is the first of its kind, and offers a long-overdue examination of the visual logics uniting garden and text. The chapter details how stationers Henry Bynneman and Henry Denham began to use similar typeset, modular ornaments known as “arabesques,” across the gardening manuals they printed, arranged to reflect homologies between the book and the garden. Reusing border ornaments throughout a book of poems and prose epistles or a practical manual (as

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was the case) in bordered title pages served to divide and organize its contents and promoted non-linear reading, energized by “a vegetable lexicon” (53). Rosenberg’s extended work on Thomas Hill, author of almanacs and gardening manuals, Thomas Howell’s *Arbor of Amitie* (1568), and H.C.’s *Forest of Fancy* (1579), closes the chapter on husbandry, the “passive virtue” (64) of patience, and the risks and rewards of textual circulation as experienced by still-maturing writers as they developed their craft in the 1570s.

The book’s second chapter, “On ‘Vertue’: Textual Force and Vegetable Capacity,” explores the early modern concept known as “vertue,” a sovereign agency that exists in words, books, and plant life, and which requires collaborative force to be actualized. “Vertue” (unlike “virtue”) referred to “the latent force and potential utility of different kinds of matter” (83), including herbs, stars, and metals. In George Puttenham’s *Arte of English Poesie* (1589), rhetorical tropes and figures employed the same inventory of virtues (uses, effects, purposes) as plants in herbals. Similar analogies appear in Henry Peacham’s 1577 *The Garden of Eloquence* and John Northbrooke’s *Poore Mans Garden* (1571), where “virtues” in poetic slips achieve the same impact as plant simples that heal and cure the body. These miscellanies were veritable storehouses of tools, supplies, and practical advice that became activated upon readerly selection, consumption, and dispersal. Moral handbooks of rhetorical virtues imitated the garden knot, handful, or bouquet to emphasize the importance of diversity, plurality, and *copia* skillfully assembled. By thinking through plants, readers could be guided to access “vertue” (even from weeds) with a sufficient use of prudential deliberation, which therefore placed moral responsibility on the reader and away from the author or printer.

The findings from the first two chapters explain a crucial aspect of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, the subject of the book’s first “branch:” specifically, the challenge to tragedy posed by its young, everyday heroes, who are initially fixed, as Rosenberg observes, as “two children in seasonally overdetermined developmental narratives” (121). The play’s traffic in minutiae—angelica, wormwood, letters, and other material things—however, exposes their deep and complex agency. The play’s lyric culture of aubade, sonnets, and epithalamium gleaned from 1570s miscellanies circulate latent power that exceeds such objects’ size. Compact matter (as Friar Laurence observes of simples) and compact language are both endowed with material

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virtue. The play proves that the “outsized force” (114) of small things accidentally purloined or mishandled can result in cataclysmic tragedy.

Chapter Three, “Sundry Flowers by Sundry Gentlemen” addresses a subset of 1570s garden-inspired miscellanies written by members of the Inns of Court, including George Gascoigne, Hugh Plat, and John Grange. These volumes, a mixture of prose and verse, combine opposing impulses of openness and hospitality with risk, enclosure, and errancy as their authors “elaborately imagine possible futures for themselves” through the language of “harvest, yield, or redispersal” (141). In these texts, young authors proclaim the need for the discriminating reader-herbalist to weed carefully without uprooting text or author to protect future growth. Even (or especially) prodigal wild oats and poetic first fruits should be left alone and spared critique, given analogous damage to the soil in the lifecycle of the vegetable world. The fourth chapter, “Isabella Whitney’s Dispersals,” reads Whitney’s *Sweet Nosgay, or Pleasant Posye* (1573) as an alternative to the enclosed gardens of the previous chapter’s male authors. Rosenberg emphasizes Whitney’s cartographic imagination in how she presents the nosegay as an herbal text with medicinal value that is open, public, and accessible for all (again, when appropriately and skillfully used). As Whitney walks in London, refusing the enclosures of the day, she positions the slips as portable, salutary “sweet air to encompass the bearer who carries them abroad through city streets” (183). For Whitney, vegetable life is non-sedentary and can circulates in small pieces to disperse concentrated power, in this case as a defense against the plague.

The book’s second branch responds to the previous two chapters with an “archetypal bad reader” (206): the swine, the garden’s worst enemy. “How to Read Like a Pig” explores the context for the popular metaphor of the pig as the destructive, anonymous reader who criticizes, uproots, and feeds without discernment on the text. The swine emblemizes the unworthy reader who ignores truth and uproots ideas, art, and textual content just as a pig destroys vegetal life in the fields it invades. A book’s future could be eliminated by a reader who lacks taste, destroys a printed book, or convinces others to do the same. Good taste, the chapter asserts, is associated with “restrained stewardship, the qualities of the good herbalist and well-governing prince” (210). It is ironic, then, that Spenser’s Guyon destroys the Bower of Bliss but insults Gryll in *The Faerie Queene*, leaving the Palmer to command, “Let *Gryll* be *Gryll* and

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have his hoggish minde.”¹ Rosenberg notes that Spenser specifically destroys the media forms and miscellanies of the 1570s dedicated to arbors, banquet-houses, and pleasure gardens. The “landscape of the Bower,” she writes, “reads like a graveyard of printed volumes” (214).

The book’s final chapter brings Shakespeare’s 1609 *Sonnets* into richly productive dialogue with Thomas Tusser’s *A Hundreth Good Pointes of Husbandrie* (1557). Chapter Five, “Richard Tottel, Thomas Tusser, and the Minutiae of Shakespeare’s *Sonnets*” dissects poetic form, husbandry, and pedagogy to explore the ways in which bite-sized sententiae direct the management of fields, homes, and texts toward increase and prosperity. Rosenberg’s painstaking analysis of roman type, white space, indented lines, punctuation, and other printing mechanics related to structure across four editions of Tusser’s 1557 *Pointes* and its calendar persuasively develops a new genealogy for the 1609 sonnets. As she argues, the couplet (often criticized as a sign of “conceptual disunity” (223)) functions as an agricultural point to be stored, recalled, and repeated at the right moment, and would have been recognizable at the time as one of the small verse forms carrying potential throughout “the pedagogical traditions of husbandry” (221). Each couplet, or, “point,” effectively memorializes content by fragmenting the preceding lines both visually and conceptually. Its size, rhyme, and position allow it to be stored, repeated, and dispersed in ways that are not necessarily loyal to the rest of the sonnet in which it appears but integral “to some future provision, as a seed of something outside of the poem” (229). This critical approach through husbandry strengthens sonnet and couplet, and rescues both from “critical dissatisfaction” (247).

A refreshing and powerful Latourian epilogue closes the book. Rosenberg asserts that early seventeenth-century “heaps of experiment,” secrets of nature, and recipe books published by Hugh Plat, Francis Bacon, and others continue the work of mid-century plant books and Elizabethan verse gardens. We should think of them “not as early pioneers” of a profound epistemic shift toward objectivity and science, “but as belated participants in an aging discourse” (257) that stressed piecemeal composition, nonlinear reading, accessible raw material, detachable slips, gathering and reordering, the willing labor of active readers who replicated trials, and agentive matter.

¹ Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. by A.C. Hamilton et al. (London: Pearson Education [Longman], 2001), II.xii.87.

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In one of its most important contributions, the book springs with provocative ideas about how premodern critical race studies and botanical poetics intersect. Potential crossings abound: the “differently complected readers” (195 and 199) who buy, read, and travel with Isabella Whitney’s nosegay; an imperative toward a “custodial environmental ethic—the gentlemanly privilege” (156) and the correct handling of resources that seems to encode whiteness through rank and access; scattered references to Nicolás Monardes and New World bioprospecting (see 184); and Spenser’s relegation of Gryll and swinish cultural consumers to delight in racially-coded “filth and fowle incontinence” (212).² The epilogue’s reference to the late-seventeenth-century colonial ambition of Sir Hans Sloane to collect “more than twelve thousand boxes” (266) of plant material from across the globe leads the reader to recall the work of William Turner and John Gerard, where herbalists were in the process of defining whiteness throughout early modern colonial routes. I strongly recommend others pursue the seeds sown here in this excellent book for disparate futures in print, in the study of Spenser, and beyond.

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² *FQ*, II.xii.87.