

**"from a Zeale to the common good":  
Cultural Botany from a Renaissance Literary Perspective**

Eight-Week Summer Research

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Katarzyna M. Lecky

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## Project Proposal

### A. *The research question:*

At the turn of the seventeenth century, English writers of renaissance literature turned to vegetable life (later known as the study of botany) in an effort to define the universal soul. As a response to England's stormy political climate, herbalists such as Nicholas Culpeper, Abraham Cowley, and John Parkinson explore social justice, national identity, and belonging by drawing comparisons of the workings of the plant world to that of human society. Milton's *Paradise Lost* paints a Garden of Eden full of exotic spices and herbs and all manner of teeming trees, grasses, ferns, and mosses, which introduces ideas such as equity, diversity, and inclusion. In *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser's Belpheobe and Amoret are exposed to the daily practice of herbalism while addressing equality, love, ethics, and virtue. Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* imagines the landscape of slavery and servitude within the relation of cedar stoops and shrubs. In the preface of his famous work, *The Herball, or generall historie of plantes* (1597), 16th century English herbalist John Gerard suggests that plants provoke humanity's most profound interrogations into the "just and worthy causes" that underpins individual and collective life (5). Years later, Nehemiah Grew (the Father of Plant Anatomy) would compare colors of flowers and plants with human skin color, exposing early English racial classification and division. That plant life drew an analog to human life is an understatement.

In this proposal, I am re-applying for the Program for Undergraduate Research grant that I was honored to be awarded March 6th of 2020 to study Renaissance literature and herbals on plants at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC. Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all funds were cancelled. It is my goal this year to conduct this research in an effort to question nativism and its effects on social justice: how a nation, its culture, and its people is or isn't shaped accordingly. For instance, herbalist William Coles, weaves together the threads of social justice in *Adam in Eden* (1657), affirming that an herbal's ultimate purpose must not be greediness, "but from a Zeale to the common good" (7). Disturbed by England's class divide, he argues that profit--above the general good--"hath been a bait that hath caught the vulgar" (9). Confronting elitist privilege, he becomes the shepherd of a movement that would begin to advocate for public access to medicinal knowledge via cheaper print. Ironically, Coles' work is a large, fantastical leatherbound herbal which, more than likely, would not have fit into any average commoner's pocket. Being granted eight weeks at the Library of Congress (COVID-19 permitting) with direct access to Cole's original work (and many others') would allow me to unravel themes of inclusivity, equality, and justice not only in light of plants, but also in light of renaissance print culture. In addition, it would grant me access to its vast special archives collection as resources have been partially digitized due to the pandemic and thus remain accessible despite the threat of the continued closure of the Library. I would explore how class functions as a categorical exclusion by researching the in-fighting between historically marginalized groups.

Rejecting earthly "systems," Coles--and me included--questions what it means to be native: Who's included? Who is excluded? Are invasive species to be welcomed and included in Europe and in England? What is the impact of xenophobia on ideologies, such as justice and democracy (who has the right to rule or experience life as we know it)? How does the idea of nativism in the plant world parallel with the human world and vice versa and how does it influence past and current marginalization? In John Parkinson's *Paradisi in sole paradisus*

*terrestris* (1629), for instance, we discern a focus on the rise of English nativism. In simple terms, nativism refers to the policy of protecting the interests of native-born or established inhabitants against those of immigrants. But in whose interests and for what inhabitants? Though Parkinson's work is in essence an herbal of the very English *for* the English, it simultaneously questions not only what it means to be native, but also what it means to be foreign. He fuses religion and science together, exploring and challenging what the English climate does. He confronts the original intent and measure of the Garden of Eden, paralleling it to an imperfect description of England herself, claiming that, if we only know plants enough, we perhaps can know human perfection; a commonwealth filled with the meshing of herbs and flowers (and a diverse people) all throughout.

Furthering this aim at social justice, Nicholas Culpeper (known as both the "rebel" and the "people's" herbalist), produced *The English physician or an astrologo-physical discourse of the vulgar herbs of this nation* (1652) along with the *Royal College of Physicians of London, Pharmacopoeia Londinensis, or, The London dispensatory* (1653). His work includes an English translation of Latin descriptions of various plants and their medical uses, making herbal remedies even more accessible. His fascination with nature, stars, metaphysics (abstract concepts such as being, knowing, substance, identity, time, and space), Aristotle's approach to knowledge and reason, the harmony of the macrocosm, and philosophical questioning of the why and how behind the work of famous herbalists heavily influenced his research and methods. This "bad boy" of herbs was a reluctant theologian, astrologer, botanist, and physician, championing healing for the masses and affordable treatment for all. A healer of the poor, he sympathized because, he too, had experienced their struggles. His argument rang that medical treatment should not be limited to the few and the privileged, though he himself belonged to such a class. He instead desired that herbal medicine be made available for all people. While prices for medicine and herbals skyrocketed, Culpeper continued and advanced what Coles began.

The scientific study of plants (as members of a collective) is the uniting force that connects the anthropoid to that of nature, deeming that to be human is to be vegetable-like. By looking at Renaissance literature and herbals from an objective as possible, distant perspective, we can trace the long history of plant and print culture, nativism, social justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion. As such, these histories of plants, reflecting deeply upon nature's biodiversity, served to reveal, to confront, and to juxtapose to humanity all that it was, could be, or should be--part of a collective ecology, of something greater than itself.

#### *B. Project description, methods, and anticipated outcomes:*

My growing interest in cultural botany from a Renaissance literary perspective began to cultivate rapidly during my first semester at Bucknell. Already an avid reader of Milton, Shakespeare, Chaucer, Marlowe, and Spenser, I took a course in *Cultures in the English Renaissance* with Professor Kat Lecky fall of 2019, where the study of Renaissance herbalism and literature explored early English nativism, plants and virtue ethics, culture, politics, social justice, and more. That course set the stage for the past and this current proposal and faculty mentoring relationship. Last semester, spring of 2020, I attended *Shakespeare Before Shakespeare* (with Professor Kat Lecky), where his botanical play, *Titus Andronicus* (mentioned above) was a major focus. This semester, spring of 2021, I am exploring Spenser's gardens as well as Marlowe and Raleigh's Shepherd and Nymph poems. This is an added layer to a research foundation already having been sculpted on the subject.

Since archival access is essential to my project, the summer research would be best conducted at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC over an eight-week period (June and July) with access to its special collections archives. However, due to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, this research most likely will be conducted online via its now partially digitized archival records. Of special interest is herbalist John Gerard's work *The herball, or, Generall historie of plantes / gathered by Iohn Gerarde of London, Master in Chirurgerie* (London, 1597). Held especially in reserve for Prof. Kat Lecky by special arrangement on an extended loan from the Folger Shakespeare Library, it contains fascinating annotations made by a Renaissance woman (a first) dated 1632. Prof. Kat Lecky intends to work closely with me on this herbal (as well as other collections). Our work together on these sources will offer invaluable perspectives to a Renaissance world vastly dominated by a patriarchal hierarchy that still affects us to this day.

This summer project will also finalize my Honors Thesis during my senior year. My goal is to continue this research as I attend graduate school and pursue a career as a professor of Renaissance literature and scholarship.

#### C. *Research value:*

This undertaking is a valuable investment of time and resources as it explores the early modern ideologies of nativism, social justice, democracy, marginalization, diversity, equity, and inclusion as seen through the eyes of English Renaissance herbalists, playwrights, and poets. Much can be learned from this history and when closely attended to, acts as a revealing factor in its continued effect on current cultural and political climates.

Not only will this research help me grow as a scholar, researcher, and a future professor--it will add immense value and new information to the field of Renaissance literature itself, while contributing to a community of scholars, modern doctors, pre-med students, literary critics, and ordinary readers alike in an effort to challenge what it means to be a citizen and human in a diverse and natural world "apparelled with plants..." (Gerard, p. 4).

#### D. *Sharing the Results:*

In addition to the Kalman Research Symposium 2022, I would be presenting my results at the Medieval and Early Modern Studies Conference at Moravian College or via Zoom. I would also be publishing an article for Bucknell's *The Humanities Review*.

#### E. *The Faculty Mentoring Relationship:*

In order to achieve the work proposed in this project I am asking for eight weeks over the course of June and July of 2021 to work consistently with Professor Kat Lecky at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC (COVID-19 permitting) or online via its digitized archives. We will convene regularly discussing notes whether in person or via Zoom, literature readings both assigned and discovered, and consulting on end product, presentation, and publishing options. We will share emerging themes while I generate drafts of my findings that I will revise and edit based on feedback from Professor Lecky. This will be a continuation of an already established close collaboration and mentoring relationship with a high degree of intellectual engagement.

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