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Nicholas Terpstra

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Experiencing the Environment in the Early Modern Period: Seasons, Senses, and Health

NICHOLAS TERPSTRA

University of Toronto

The rapidly expanding field of early modern environmental history is showing us ever more about how early moderns interacted with the natural world.¹ They tested the weather, looked out for floods, tallied declining forests, described unknown animals, and cautiously tasted new foods. Existing intellectual frameworks stretched and pulled under their efforts to accommodate new knowledge, and political forms expanded through their efforts to control or exploit resources. Whatever was done deliberately was eclipsed by what happened as early moderns went about the daily business of subsistence, with the Columbian Exchange as perhaps the greatest example of that. As we aim to take the measure of the Anthropocene, and particularly to consider whether its origins are early modern, we are exploring more deeply how those in the period encountered and experienced the environment, how those experiences shaped them, and how they in turn shaped the places and people they encountered around the globe. They were certainly no slouches at deliberate and destructive environmental action. Yet the greater impact of early moderns on the natural world was likely what happened simply as a consequence of their movement through it. They left clear traces on it, and one question that bears more exploration is what traces the natural world left on them.

This collection of articles aims to pursue some of these questions, looking in particular at how histories of seasons and of time intersect with histories of the senses and of emotions. We open with Cecilia Hewlett and Roisin Cossar reminding us of how much the seasons shaped social activities, particularly in rural areas where transhumance was common. As male agricultural workers

1. This collection was developed within the framework of a larger research project, *The Body in the City*, organized through the Prato Consortium for Medieval and Renaissance Studies (PCMRS) and funded in part by Monash University. The papers on which these articles were based were first presented at the annual meeting of the Renaissance Society of America in Toronto (2019); editors Nicholas Terpstra and Cecilia Hewlett wish to express their thanks to all who participated in those sessions and to William R. Bowen for his interest in publishing the collection.

moved seasonally to follow crops and animals, patterns of violence changed, governments adjusted their expectations, and women took on roles in church and society formally forbidden to them. Yet these were not “exceptions.” Environmental rhythms shaped rural life at the core, and so seasonal adaptation itself was the norm that should govern our expectations, rather than any abstract prescriptions we may find in contemporary texts. Sharonah Fredrick explores how Iberian colonizers could on the one hand uphold these texts in their ecclesiastical and political institutions, and on the other set them aside in the immediate matters of health and medicine. While Iberian rhetoric gave no quarter, Iberian settlers increasingly deferred to Mayan and Aztec healers when they faced the challenges of sickness and health in the Americas. The main points of exchange were the existing cities, which retained the size, complexity, and sophistication that had characterized them for centuries, and mixed-race households, which were new but ubiquitous. The Indigenous pharmacopoeia had a stronger foundation in environmental experiment and observation than later historians recognized, and this contributed to its wider acceptance in colonial urban society.

If rural people’s experience of the environment shaped their social patterns and understanding of bodily health, urban dwellers encountered it more immediately through their senses. People smelled bad air and feared for their health, but what exactly made that air bad or dangerous? Julia Rombough and Alexandra Logue show how those living in crowded cities like Naples and London developed ever more acute measures of what made air light or heavy, thick or thin, dangerous or healthful. Smells might sometimes rise out of the ground or waft off the water, but it was more often particular human activities—both natural and industrial—that were blamed for polluting miasmas. The results brought neighbours to blows or to court and led governments to expand regulations around settlement and sanitation. There was an immediate existential urgency to this environmental legislation, which was driven less by concerns over the sensory quality of life than by anxiety over whether life would even continue. The death rates in ever more crowded cities made the fact of environmental degradation incontrovertible, even if the science behind it was only dimly grasped and the expanding intellectual, legislative, and judicial responses were only marginally effective.

Death multiplied fears of the environment and, then as now, obscured how people understood and took responsibility for their actions within it.

Nicholas Eckstein contrasts the image of serenity and competent governance, so vital to all absolutist regimes, with the frantic eliding of space and time that overtook Tuscans whenever plague struck. In these emergencies, which Eckstein calls “Plague Time,” the ducal regime arrogated to itself even more totalitarian authority as it aimed to deal with death while also assuring its subjects that it was the supreme guarantor of life. The final article gives another view of the world turned upside down, though in festivity rather than fear. Delia Moldovan explores how the Venetian artist Leandro Bassano (1557–1622) overturned the common rural environmental motifs used to depict February and March in painted cycles of the seasons and months, replacing them with images of Carnival and Lent that drew on both the *commedia dell’arte* and on religious themes. These were certainly far closer to most Venetians’ own urban experience of the seasons than the stereotypical images of rural life repeated in many other painted cycles. Moldovan here brings us back to where we began: urban and rural people experienced seasonality and the environment differently, and these diverging experiences shaped their festivities, governance, worship, and culture deeply and differently.

Much has been written about rural/urban differences, sensory experiences and seasonal rhythms, and popular anxieties over health and sickness. Each theme has its own rich history, and we hope that layering them here gives more nuance to the dynamics of their early modern interaction and more clarity to their interaction with issues of race, gender, and class. Social historians have written much about the efforts of social, political, and ecclesiastical authorities to extend order over subordinate populations through both external measures and internalized discipline. As we aim to understand the Anthropocene, we see that the environment was often a driving force behind these authorities’ efforts to expand social control. Yet the immediate effects of the environment, and the sensory and emotional responses to it, often undid their efforts and left them speaking into the wind.