

# BOOK REVIEW ON *BOTANICAL POETICS: EARLY MODERN PLANT BOOKS AND THE HUSBANDRY OF PRINT*

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Jessica Rosenberg, *Botanical Poetics: Early Modern Plant Books and the Husbandry of Print*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022. 376 pages.

In the beginning of her book *Botanical Poetics: Early Modern Plant Books and the Husbandry of Print*, Rosenberg explains that in the mid-sixteenth century, in a tradition dating from Aristotle, plants were understood to have life in every part of them. That explained plants' ability to grow from grafts, slips, and seeds even after being cut, gathered, and spread. She writes that colonialism led to an increase in this understanding, as it led to increased global traffic in plants and plant materials. Rosenberg's central argument posits botanical poetics as a dominant form of thought in the early modern period that placed texts in the same category as plants: materials defined by their plurality, their capacity to circulate in parts, and their potential future reuse. "Plant books" demonstrate this connection. This is a term Rosenberg uses to refer to texts that comprised the popular trend of having botanical terminology such as *Forest*, *Arbor*, or *Nosegay* in their titles. The purpose of this, or to otherwise incorporate botany in design or content, was to indicate their intended function: to be taken in hand, used and reused, and propagated in whole or in parts. Botanical poetics, too, determined form as these plant books were often small and portable, or contained collections, lists, or indented poetry that could be spread as fragments separate from the whole.

The first part of *Botanical Poetics* defines plant books and their features in both form and content; poetic anthology, horticultural metaphor, and floral designs all demonstrate an engagement with botanical poetics. These plant books would also demand skilled readers, as successful gardens require skilled gardeners, in order to reap value from the text. This section of *Botanical Poetics* ends with a case study of William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, examining how this textual philosophy is

reflected in the play, primarily through the multitude of small objects that have a vegetable capacity for movement and growth. The second part of *Botanical Poetics* focuses on materials from what Rosenberg calls “the long 1570s,” when plant books experienced peak popularity. Here she examines how botanical poetics governed access to and affected the perceived value of texts, particularly poetry. This section also ends in a case study on the metaphorical representation of pigs as bad readers, which presents books as gardens despoiled. The third section examines the poetic couplet as a botanical form, easily able to be cut, gathered, and spread, and utilized by authors such as Thomas Tusser to convey horticultural advice. The volume concludes with an epilogue looking at the ways in which the vegetal-textual philosophy lingered into the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

*Botanical Poetics* is in conversation with Joshua Calhoun’s 2020 book *The Nature of the Page*, which examines book history in Renaissance England through both environmental and bibliographical analysis. This represents a trend in book studies scholarship of considering the importance of plant materials to bookmaking. *Botanical Poetics* also belongs to the developing field of critical plant studies, which takes a vegetal lens to philosophy and literature, exemplified by the work of Michael Marder, Natasha Myers, and Jeffrey T. Nealon. Building off of this scholarship, the historical philosophy identified in *Botanical Poetics* could be developed as a non-anthropocentric model for textual survival that centers neither posterity nor preservation but views books, like plants, as things that “might persist or decay” naturally.<sup>1</sup>

Ultimately, Rosenberg has written a successful inquiry into the poetics of sixteenth century English publishing. She uses field-specific terminology which makes *Botanical Poetics* best suited to an audience already acquainted with book history. The work serves as an elegantly written argument for the existence of a philosophy that linked books with plants primarily through their ability to spread. This concept could inform future thinking about the nature of texts over time.

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<sup>1</sup> Jessica Rosenberg, *Botanical Poetics: Early Modern Plant Books and the Husbandry of Print* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2023), 8.