

of scholarship taking up the issue of questions of From Life picturing, regardless of geographical focus, and more broadly to scholars of the early modern period concerned with notions of verisimilitude, accuracy, reproductivity, and naturalism in the arts. Instructors of seventeenth-century art will find the first chapter on Caravaggio especially helpful for refreshing approaches to this canonical artist, and the volume is accessible for advanced undergraduate and graduate-level students in the field.

Joshua Calhoun. *The Nature of the Page: Poetry, Papermaking, and the Ecology of Texts in Renaissance England*. Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020. xii + 212 pp. + 30 illus. \$55.00. Review by CYN DIA SUSAN CLEGG, PEPPERDINE UNIVERSITY.

In his “Reminders” (epilogue) to *The Nature of the Page*’s principal chapters, Joshua Calhoun concludes that “If readers of this book can never again look at paper, especially in an archival library, and see it as blank or white, then *The Nature of the Page* is at least partially successful” (153). Only in an ill reading of Calhoun’s book could one escape its success in fixing our attention on the early modern page’s plenitude. The page’s material nature—the pulp from which paper is made (whether flax, straw, or wood); the animal glue that coats/sizes the paper (or doesn’t); the detritus the paper traps—both inspired seventeenth-century writers and shaped how readers read and interpreted the words printed. This study centers upon the premise that the material page is intimately related to natural materials which, despite human efforts to shape them to our own ends, experience recurring cycles of abundance and scarcity. To illustrate this, Calhoun sketches a history of materials that record written words—from wax, to papyrus, to parchment, to paper made from rags, and later, from plants like straw and wood. At each stage abundance gives way to scarcity, which gives rise to adaptation.

This model of abundance, scarcity, and adaptation suggests that *The Nature of Page* is an ecological history of making paper. It is not, although it certainly refers its reader to important histories of paper.

Instead, the idea of one material supplanting another is a means for Calhoun to think about literary ecology—on the one hand, about literary texts' dependence on natural materials and thereby their vulnerability to natural processes, and on the other, about how literary texts engage the ideas inspired by the materiality of paper with its shrives, wormholes, blots, and erasures. This is especially true among some seventeenth-century authors who were caught in the tension between the printed word's capacity to replicate and eternalize the author's ideas and paper's vulnerability to decay. According to Calhoun:

It is easy to imagine humans as the point of origination, as if the materials used to make paper, to make ink, to make printing type, and so on simply existed in abundance, waiting to be harvested. In reality, ecological vulnerability and scarcity make certain kinds of human records possible; at the moment those possibilities are realized and integrated into textual forms, textual corruption and disintegration begin. (2)

Seventeenth-century writers, Calhoun says, recognized this, but they seem not to have “fully registered how much the nonhuman materials of writing and revising influenced the metaphors they used to understand human narratives of achievement and failure” (69).

The Nature of the Page is divided into two parts. Part 1's two chapters on “Legible Ecologies” call our attention first to the materials from which paper is made, and then to paper's varying qualities. The first chapter juxtaposes Henry David Thoreau's reflections on the paper futures of ships' sails (ca. 1840) with the Water Poet John Taylor's *The Praise of Hempseed* as a paper source (1620). Both express a confidence in the availability of resources to make paper, while the remainder of the chapter focuses on Mathias Koops's *Historical Account of the Substances ... for the Invention of Paper*, which posits the model of abundance and scarcity upon which Calhoun relies. Chapter 2, cleverly titled “The Word Made Flax,” turns to Bible printing in early seventeenth-century England and the varieties of paper and printing quality that seem to inspire Henry Vaughan's poem, “The Book,” which “looks to the Bible and the Book of Nature for truth” (69). Part 2, “Indeterminate Ecologies,” expands upon the kind of literary analysis that Calhoun touched on in Chapter 2 with Vaughan's poem. Chapter 3 is interested in traces of paper materials like minerals from

the water used, hairs, and shives that remain in the finished paper, but mostly the chapter considers ink blots. Calhoun is especially interested in a blot that appears on a page of *Henry IV, part 2* (5.2) in one of the Folger Shakespeare Library's Shakespeare First Folios and offers a reading of the play as an effort to blot and erase earlier histories. He also observes, more generally, that the appearance of blots on the printed page reformed biblical language about sin, in particular, in Psalm 51, which in the King James Version asks for sin to be blotted out. He suggests that the audience's familiarity with blots somehow influenced the choice the King James Version's translators made. Chapter 4 moves from blots to sizing. It explains the manner in which paper was sized (at a sacrifice to some animals), and then considers "sinking" in which ill-sized paper could not hold its ink. This gives rise to a variety of metaphors including the likening of sinking paper to ephemerality and unrequited love. The last chapter, which attends to the poetics of decay, returns to a fuller analysis of Vaughan's "The Book," to John Donne's "Valediction to his book," and, briefly, to Shakespeare's sonnets. The chapter ends with a curious juxtaposition between the thematizing of decay in seventeenth-century poetry and the efforts of archival libraries to preserve the very books these poets envisioned as ephemeral. Such efforts to preserve texts printed on seventeenth-century paper come with greater costs to the natural environment than the costs to nature itself in the production of these early papers. According to Calhoun,

we must study the "nature of textual transmission" not only in an abstracted bibliographical sense, but also in a material, ecological sense. The nature of textual transmission now includes our active, intentional attempts to stop decay, and we have HVAC (and fire retardant) systems to thank, at least in part, for the "wealth of surviving manuscript[s]." (149)

Texts, Calhoun concludes, are embedded in the ecosystems in which they were created and in which "they will cease to be" (150).

The Nature of the Page achieves its intended end of compelling us to think about paper—indeed to think about it in multiple ways—as a medium with a message, as an environmental micro-history, as literary inspiration. It is a well-researched study, and

what Calhoun refers to as his “case histories” effectively illustrate this book’s working premises. Its wit delightfully mirrors the seventeenth-century literature it considers; unusual—sometimes jarring—juxtapositions unsettle comfortable assumptions and demand that we take seriously the ecology of reading. As much as I like this book, the jars did not always work. To read Mathias Koops’s early nineteenth century *Historical Account of the Substances ... for the Invention of Paper* against seventeenth-century poets whose poems thematize paper’s transience seems anachronistic since Koops writes about resource scarcity at a time when paper manufacture had taken hold in England, while in the early seventeenth century, English printers relied heavily on Continental manufacture. Similarly, using the example of mass-produced, small format Bibles on cheap, thin Bible paper to illustrate that poor textual production “muddled” the “communication of godly ideas” (51) in Chapter 2 is inexact. Calhoun seems to miss the point that such Bibles were printed in Amsterdam and imported illegally into England, and while these Geneva Bibles, indeed, were immensely popular, they have little to do with the problems related to authorized English Bible printing, which was privileged exclusively to the King’s Printer. The remarks on Bibles Calhoun quotes from Michael Sparke in *Scintilla* and William Prynne in *Histrion-mastix* thus lack proper historical contexts—not to mention that these highly polemical writings may not be the most reliable sources. Finally, while I read with pleasure about blots and *Henry IV, part 2*, I have some difficulty with the idea that the King James Bible translators’ use of the word “blot” reflected a linguistic modernization in keeping with current usage. Here Calhoun relies on Hannibal Hamlin’s observation that Psalm 51 (one of the penitential psalms) “played a vital role in the liturgy of the English Church” and thereby influenced major English writers (95). The King James Bible, indeed, uses “blot” in Psalm 51, but the Coverdale Great Bible was used liturgically in the Book of Common Prayer for Epistle

and Gospel readings until 1662, when the text of these readings changed to that of the King James Bible. Even then, though, the liturgical use of Psalm 51, and indeed the entire Book of Psalms printed in the Book of Common Prayer, continued to use the Great Bible's text. Thus, "do away mine offences" remained in Psalm 51 from 1662 onwards. If "blot" came into popular usage in the seventeenth century, its source was the printed page rather than the English liturgy. I raise these objections not so much to reflect unfavorably on *The Nature of the Page*, which I enthusiastically recommend, but to propose a *quid pro quo*. A book that successfully challenges us to seriously see, read, and consider paper might itself put to rest some of the tired assumptions it perpetuates about printers, printing, and printing trade practices in seventeenth-century England.