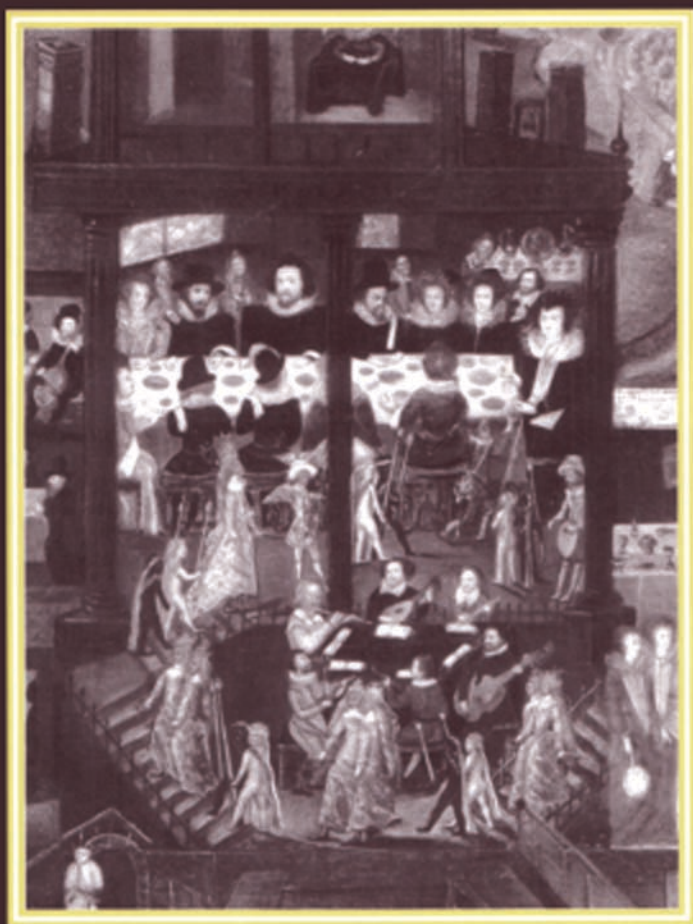


Country House Discourse in Early Modern England

A CULTURAL STUDY OF LANDSCAPE AND LEGITIMACY

Kari Boyd McBride



COUNTRY HOUSE DISCOURSE
IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND

For my mother

Country House Discourse in Early Modern England

A cultural study of landscape and legitimacy

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Routledge

Taylor & Francis Group

LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2001 by Ashgate Publishing

Published 2017 by Routledge

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017, USA

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

McBride, Kari Boyd

Country house discourse in early modern England : a cultural study of landscape and legitimacy

1. English literature - Early modern, 1500-1700 - History and criticism 2. Country homes in literature 3. Social classes in literature 4. Women in literature

I. Title

820.9'355'09031

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

McBride, Kari Boyd.

Country house discourse in early modern England : a cultural study of landscape and legitimacy / Kari Boyd McBride.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-7546-0381-4 (alk. paper)

1. English literature--Early modern, 1500-1700--History and criticism. 2. Country homes in literature. 3. Literature and society--England--History--16th century. 4.

Literature and society--England--History--17th century. 5. Home economics in literature.

6. Housekeeping in literature. 7. Land tenure in literature. 8. Landscape in literature. I.

Title.

PR408.C65 M38 2001

820.9'355--dc21

2001022823

ISBN 13: 978-0-7546-0381-8 (hbk)

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Acknowledgments

Any study like this one—hybrid and synthetic—draws on scores of monographs and archival research projects, and my debt to those must be acknowledged in footnotes rather than through a lengthy (and inevitably incomplete) list here. In brief, however, I want to acknowledge my gratitude to those colleagues who have supported my completion of this project. Meg Lota Brown, Naomi J. Miller, and John C. Ulreich of the English Department at the University of Arizona have been generous beyond measure in sharing their wisdom and insight; John graciously offered to read and comment on the manuscript in its final form, as did Gordon K. McBride and Matthew Wagner. Thanks also to the reader at Ashgate, who offered invaluable suggestions; to Sindie Kennedy, who helped check this book's many citations; and to the students in my summer 2001 Patronage and Politics class, my first real-world readers. Special thanks go to my colleagues in the Women's Studies Department, especially Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy, for her unfailing encouragement; Laura Briggs, who was my sounding board through the revision process; and Lisa Dryden, Pat Hnilo, Lauren Johnson, Tania Lanphere, and Jo Ann Troutman, who, with boundless expertise and patience, have supported me in doing my best work. A grant from the Women's Studies Advisory Council (WOSAC) in 1998 made possible an uninterrupted summer in which to draft the book. Heather Dubrow, Marshall Grossman, and John T. Shawcross have been generous mentors to my research here and elsewhere, and John read an early version of the manuscript.

My mother first taught me to think about the ways in which esthetics and scholarship are implicated in the exercise of power. Like many women of her era, she earned a degree in home economics and taught cooking, sewing, chemistry, and, it turns out, the history of domestic furnishings. She used to tell of the time she had lectured on Queen Anne furniture only to learn that one of the students in her class lived in a home where crates and pallets served as the family's only chairs, tables, and beds. That was a defining moment for her, I think, one that made it afterwards impossible for her to consider art or its study as benign. And though she continued to love beauty in color and design, she taught me an awareness of its political implications. In many ways, then, she was the mother of this study, and it is dedicated to her, "whose virtues lodge in my unworthy breast, and ever shall, so long as life remains, tying my heart to her by those rich chaines." Are you listening, Mom? This one's for you.



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Chapter One

Mapping Country House Politics

The past is never dead. It's not even past.
William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun*

Rather in the same way that the late twentieth-century invented the 1950s, defining the suburban nucleated family as signifier of the right stuff, domestically speaking, early modern England invented (from an equally selective memory) the late-medieval country estate as the symbol of good housekeeping: a moral economy wherein all classes and all peoples lived in right relationship with each other and with the rest of creation—in Andrew McRae's words, "a static, hierarchical socio-economic structure . . . which gives to every individual an immutable social and geographic place and fixes all within a network of duties and responsibilities. . . . The landlord stands at the centre of this structure as a paternal figure: a steward of the land and its dependants rather than an owner with absolute proprietary rights. Under him the manor operates with the goal of a comfortable self-sufficiency."¹ This ideal grew in significance during the protracted evolution during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries from manorialism in its various manifestations to the agrarian capitalism that ultimately came to define the rural landscape, from the medieval ideal of the "three orders" to a society dominated both economically and politically by the middle class.² The fictions created in response to this

¹"Husbandry Manuals and the Language of Agrarian Improvement," in *Culture and Cultivation in Early Modern England: Writing and the Land*, ed. Michael Leslie and Timothy Raylor (Leicester: Leicester Univ. Press, 1992), 35.

²Here and throughout, I rely on Denis E. Cosgrove's understanding of "landscape" as denoting "the external world mediated through subjective human experience . . ." It is "not merely the world we see," but rather "a construction, a composition of that world. Landscape is a way of seeing the world." Further, it is "a social product, the consequence of a collective human transformation of nature." *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape* (London: Croom Helm, 1984), 13, 14. See also James Turner's extended discussion of "The Ideal Form of Landscape" in *The Politics of Landscape: Rural Scenery and Society in English Poetry 1630-1660* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979), 8-35.

economic and social revolution emerged in the network of “country house discourse,” everything from the polemic of protest, to “descriptions” of England, to paintings, to architectural plans, to proscriptive literature, to country house poems.³ Together they constitute a discourse field that articulated a web of socio-economic concerns about the right use of land and the social relationships that land engenders, concerns that cohere in the symbol of the country house. In contrast to the changes visible on the landscape and within domestic spaces, country house discourse drew on idealized feudal social and economic relationships, represented most conspicuously through the theory and practice of hospitality, invoking a utopia of medieval nostalgia that stood as a rebuke to all that was new while, paradoxically, accommodating the very change it excoriated.

I have chosen the Foucauldian concept of discourse—encompassing for my purposes both linguistic and plastic representations as well as the practice of “the real”—to describe this cultural process in order to highlight both its dialogic nature and the significance of semiotic structures in the production and regulation of meaning. However, I take seriously Don E. Wayne’s caution that we must situate “categories like ‘discourse’ and ‘representation’ . . . within a historical narrative that gives an account of the way social hegemony (as distinct from direct political control by the state) functions in a specific mode of production.”⁴ I understand country house discourse to have both a diachronic and a synchronic dimension, both metonymic and metaphoric poles.⁵ Across the “horizontal” trajectory of history, one might think of it in terms of Raymond Williams’s evolutionary categories—emergent, dominant, and residual ideologies; or, again, one might use the image of Foucauldian epistemes to

³In attempting to name this phenomenon, I have chosen the somewhat anachronistic term “country house” rather than “manor” because it represents the social, economic, and architectural modes that the discourse enabled rather than the older cultural forms it recalled. The term also recommends itself because of its particular association with the country house poem. The *OED* notes the earliest occurrence of the term in the 1592 phrase “countrey house, field tent, or shepheards cote,” where the country house is a substantial, if not necessarily aristocratic, dwelling. *Sub verba* “country-house.”

⁴Don E. Wayne, “‘A More Safe Survey’: Social-Property Relations, Hegemony, and the Rhetoric of Country Life,” in *Soundings of Things Done: Essays in Honor of S. K. Heninger, Jr.*, ed. Peter E. Medine and Joseph Wittreich (Newark: Univ. of Delaware Press, 1997), 261.

⁵Roman Jakobsen, “The Metaphoric and Metonymic Poles,” in Roman Jakobsen and Morris Halle, *Fundamentals of Language* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971).

explain the transient usefulness of certain truths.⁶ The discourse also has a “vertical” dimension, a metaphoric field that limits the range of terms that will serve to mediate meaning. Certain terms and concepts—hospitality, virtue, nobility, chastity, and lordship, among many others—circulate like currency within the discourse to market cultural values and to negotiate change. At the same time, as Foucault has reminded us, power is never static; it cannot be held, but must be continually exercised in order to be sustained. Within the realm of country house discourse, legitimacy never rested in a noble “house”; *pace* the conservative political discourse that linked noble status absolutely to blood and lineage, pretensions to legitimacy required repeated iteration and invocation. To borrow Judith Butler’s schema regarding the production of gender, legitimacy was “an ‘act,’ as it were, which [was] both intentional and performative.”⁷ Legitimacy required a certain kind of agency: one “did” nobility, just as one did/does gender in any of its multifarious varieties. And the performance of legitimacy demanded a particular public stage (the great hall of the country house), costume (hence, in part, the revival of sumptuary laws in the sixteenth century), and a retinue of supporting actors (from peasants, to tenant farmers, to chaste wives, to “blackamoors”). Country house discourse, then, provided the script, set, and cast for the performance of legitimacy.

Country house discourse centered on the aristocracy, the landed class for whom, in Michael Bush’s words, “the estate was not simply a source of income but also an expression of lordship, a means of local influence and a mark of social position.”⁸ While this “gentle” class encompassed both the great peers of the realm and those families with an income of under £100 a year, and while “peers and gentlemen only associated in certain contexts” and “were likely to be differentiated by role and scale of interest,” they shared “values of landownership and the desire for political control [that] transcended these

⁶See Raymond Williams, “Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory,” in *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London: NLB, 1980), 31-49; Michel Foucault, especially *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1972).

⁷Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 139.

⁸Michael Bush, *The English Aristocracy: A Comparative Synthesis* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1984), 4. I follow Bush in his inclusive definition of “aristocracy,” which, following contemporary chroniclers, does not make a distinction in terms of class between gentry and peers, but sees them as being of the same social order. See Bush’s discussion, 2-5. This landed elite and their characteristics and attitudes were referred to as “gentry” in the period under discussion here; only later are the gentry distinguished from the most wealthy and powerful landowners.

contrasts.”⁹ Bush argues that they formed a class that “esteemed birthright,” that “readily accepted that its members’ social advantages were rightfully imparted by inheritance rather than performance.”¹⁰ However, during the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, many factors impinged on this static definition of lordship, undermining what had seemed a natural and divinely-ordained social structure built on the trinity of birth, land, and wealth and making the performance of nobility not merely a privilege but a necessity.¹¹ These disruptions to order—the agrarian revolution, a rising population, inflation, an active land market, the rise of the middle class, nascent capitalism, exploration and colonization, the woman controversy, the emergence of alternative religious, social, and political perspectives and subjectivities—forced both a renewed articulation of traditional justifications for privilege and, at the same time, an accommodation of newness: new titles, new families, new expressions of power. There was no abrupt or absolute change from earlier discussions about the land; rather, traditional apologies and critiques begin to be merged with discussions of class relationships, gender relationships, gender roles, “race,” patronage, order, legitimacy—the social forms and practices regulated within the country house and, at the same time, by the country house as the metonymy for English male aristocratic hegemony.¹²

The salience of class to country house discourse can practically go without saying, but it is less apparent, perhaps, how central race and gender were to the articulation of legitimacy and status. Race—or, more particularly, whiteness—emerges as a marker of noble status in the sixteenth century as one of the effects of empire when black servants appear in the English households of explorers and merchants and as black servants become a fashionable feature of aristocratic portraits in the second half of the seventeenth century. Similarly,

⁹Felicity Heal and Clive Holmes, *The Gentry in England and Wales, 1500-1700* (Basingstoke, England: Macmillan, 1994), 16.

¹⁰Bush, *The English Aristocracy*, 4.

¹¹David M. Posner notes that, while in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, “the nobility found itself, or—more importantly—perceived itself, to be in a period of difficulty, tension, and transition, in which certain previously secure ideas of what it meant to be ‘noble’ were being challenged, modified, or replaced,” one must also consider “[w]hether these pre-existing models of nobility were in fact as stable as their adherents wished them retroactively to have been.” *The Performance of Nobility in Early Modern European Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999), 3.

¹²I follow Kim F. Hall in using the terms “race” and “racialism” to describe the semiotic structure that privileges whiteness, a structure present and operative in early modern England, even though those terms themselves have a later linguistic provenance. See Hall’s discussion in *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1995), 2-4.

gender is an integral—and often invisible—feature of nobility throughout this period. I do not mean merely the positioning of particular women within households (whether they were part of the increasingly feminized household staff or members of that elite caste of wealthy, independent women who managed their own estates) but rather the way in which nobility and legitimacy were understood to be fundamentally and ontologically male. That is, the exercise of power depended on a distinction between masculinity and femininity or, more accurately perhaps, on the control of everything associated with the feminine by those who claimed the fullness of masculine privilege. Good husbandry was revealed fundamentally in the management of a wife; indeed, as Lorna Hutson has suggested, “supervision of wife and household” are inseparable from each other and are “synecdoches” for noble praxis: husbandry is “a form of cultural production which enables the government of peoples.”¹³ And, as country house poems, conduct literature, and private writings demonstrate again and again, the virtuous wife is central to the ideal estate, her virtue both dependent on and significant of her husband’s particularly noble virility. So Hutson has illustrated the repeated analogy in sixteenth century treatises between horse-breaking, tilling, and the training of a wife.¹⁴ The country house—the *oikos*—may have been the proper sphere of gentlewomen, but its management—its *oikonomos*—was ultimately the concern of the noble man. Within this discourse of husbandry, then, the wife could never be more than *locum tenens* for her husband, to whom belonged the rights and responsibilities for the household’s virtuous ordering. His legitimacy was most visible in the invisibility of his cloistered wife, his ventriloquized voice audible in her chaste silence.

¹³Lorna Hutson, *The Usurer's Daughter: Male Friendships and Fictions of Women in Sixteenth-Century England* (London: Routledge, 1994), 35, 34. See also Karen L. Raber’s argument that William Cavendish’s treatises on horsemanship “reformulate codes for aristocratic behavior and purpose”; his “construction of horses who are ‘reasonable creatures’ valorizes a definition of individual consciousness that will ultimately subvert aristocratic claims to special status.” Thus, the treatises “both resist and unconsciously encapsulate and contribute to one of the most far-reaching transformations of everyday early modern English life.” “‘Reasonable Creatures’: William Cavendish and the Art of Dressage,” in *Renaissance Culture and the Everyday* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 43.

¹⁴Op. cit., 96. Similarly, the *OED* defines “tillage” (l.d.) as “sexual intercourse (with a woman),” citing Shakespeare’s Sonnet 3: “For where is she so fair whose unlearned womb / Disdains the tillage of thy husbandry.” Compare John Donne’s “Sappho to Philaenis”:

Thy body is a natural paradise,
In whose self, unmanured, all pleasure lies,
Nor needs perfection; why shouldst thou then
Admit the tillage of a harsh rough man? (35-38)

Complete English Poems, ed. A. J. Smith (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), 128.

Ideals of moral economies and societies are, of course, particularly associated with the rural landscape, with what is implied in the world of the “country” as opposed to the “court.”¹⁵ As such, country house discourse intersects with pastoral forms, which are articulated primarily in explicitly literary genres—Edmund Spenser’s *Shepheards Calendar* and Sir Philip Sidney’s *Arcadia* come to mind in particular.¹⁶ But country house and pastoral discourses function very differently. I do not wish to distinguish here between an imaginative discourse (pastoral) and a discourse of lived reality (country house), for pastoral is the political discourse *par excellence*, while “the real” is always a product of literary (and other) modes. And even within the discourse that is my subject here, there is no absolute divide between, for instance, the media of literature, art, and political theory and the world of the real. The actions, expenditures, and dress of early modern English aristocrats are signifying practices, as much part of the discourse field as an *ekphrastic* poem. Further, both “country” and “pastoral” imply a moral purity and even paradisaical innocence in contrast to the perfidy and corruption of the city and the court, and their meanings emerge significantly in that contrast. And country house discourse is certainly opposed both to the social and economic modes engendered by the city.

However, I would suggest that, while pastoral and country house discourses are related, they do different kinds of cultural work. What distinguishes country house discourse from the pastoral is a concern with the disposition of space and of people and objects in that space, both within and without the country house itself. That is, like its literary manifestation, the

¹⁵The significance of these terms for early modern England has been delineated by Perez Zagorin in *The Court and the Country: The Beginning of the English Revolution* (New York: Atheneum, 1970), to which I am much indebted. Heal and Holmes also discuss the term “country” as “an ideal type . . . [that] indicated a concatenation of virtues.” *Op. cit.*, 206.

¹⁶Similarly, many historians of literary genres, including Raymond Williams, Alastair Fowler, and Heather Dubrow, have noted that the country house poem is neither pastoral nor neo-pastoral. As Fowler says, “pastoral knows nothing of estates, or gardens, or houses, or seasonal employments, or hunting,” and he classifies country house poems as a species of georgic. *The Country House Poem: A Cabinet of Seventeenth-Century Estate Poems and Related Items* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 1994), 16. See also Heather Dubrow, “The Country-House Poem: A Study in Generic Development,” *Genre* 12 (1979): 162, and Raymond Williams’s discussion of “country” and related terms in the Appendix to *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973), 307. I would also distinguish between country house discourse and the *beatus ille* theme, which is characterized, Maren-Sofie Røstvig argues, by a Stoic search for internal and external peace exemplified by the “humble husbandman.” Country house discourse is, at the very least, about the appropriate use and display of wealth. *The Happy Man: Studies in the Metamorphoses of a Classical Ideal 1600-1700* (Oslo: Akademisk Forlag; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1954), 72.

georgic poem, country house discourse is concerned with the ordering of society and legitimate exercise of power that is both visible in and engendered by the right relationship of human beings to land that has been mapped, tilled, and walled—land that confers relative rank and power upon those who inhabit the noble house that dominates it, not Arcadian landscapes populated by piping shepherds, however persistently and obviously they may represent the actors at court. Further, while both pastoral and country house discourse are constituted through the contrast between an idealized past and a corrupt present, country house discourse relies on the articulation of a historical past, often a near past, that inheres, if imperfectly, in the land, the landscape, and its buildings, rather than in the utopias of Arcadia. So, while pastoral poetry emerges in the late sixteenth century, according to Louis Montrose, to finesse the fact of large-scale sheep farming as well as the disappointments of courtier life—and invokes a “fictional time-space [world] . . . structured by the diurnal rhythm of shepherding” into which “gentlemen escape temporarily from the troubles of the court”¹⁷—in contrast, as Heather Dubrow notes in her discussion of “To Penshurst,” country house poems are “firmly located in a recognizable and specific locale The allusion to James I’s visit . . . roots the poem in time.”¹⁸ Or, as Alastair Fowler suggests in his delineation of genres, while pastoral is identifiable in its “simplifying abstraction” and “language of feeling incapable of particularization or detailed description,” georgic (and, I would add, country house discourse) is characterized by “delightful details—description of landscape particulars . . . or sensuous representation of seasonal change, . . . a specificity and sensuousness, fertility and richness.”¹⁹ Country house discourse, then, is profoundly defined by a sense of time and place, by the *haeccicity* of a particular estate.²⁰

¹⁷Louis Adrian Montrose, “Of Gentlemen and Shepherds: The Politics of Elizabethan Pastoral Form,” *ELH* 50 (1983), 427. Don E. Wayne cites Montrose in his discussion of the evolution of “forms of literary expression within the elite culture,” a move from pastoral eclogues (appropriate to England’s agrarian economy of the late sixteenth century) to topographical poems (better suited to “the institutionalization of a business ethic in the managerial apparatus of the state”). See “‘A More Safe Survey,’” 262.

¹⁸Heather Dubrow, “The Country-House Poem,” 162.

¹⁹Alastair Fowler, “Georgic and Pastoral: Laws of Genre in the Seventeenth Century,” in *Culture and Cultivation in Early Modern England: Writing and the Land*, ed. Michael Leslie and Timothy Raylor (Leicester: Leicester Univ. Press, 1992), 83.

²⁰For an alternative perspective on the function of georgic modes in this period, see Anthony Low, who “use[s] ‘georgic’ in the same general sense that literary critics have agreed to use ‘pastoral.’” His book argues that a “georgic revolution . . . took place in England between about 1590 and 1700,” a revolution that had been impeded by “a fundamental contempt for labor, especially manual and agricultural labor, on the part of England’s leaders.”

Furthermore, while both pastoral and country house discourse efface labor, as Raymond Williams first observed, they do so quite differently.²¹ Pastoral effectively obliterates the class structure of the country, replacing shepherds with aristocrats in rustic drag. London and the court do not cease to be the center of the social and economic world; pastoral *otium* is a fleeting getaway from the real world to which, inevitably, the courtiers will return. But, consonant with the neo-feudal world it invokes, country house discourse suggests instead that the estate is the origin and source of political, economic, and social power. If London and the royal court exist at all, they do so as a result of the country house and all that it represents. In pastoral poetry, on the other hand, the country exists to serve the city, a kind of colonial vacation spot for overworked courtiers fleeing the metropolis—even when the supposed values of the country criticize city excesses (as, notably, in Spenser's pastoral works). But country house discourse invokes a world in which the political relationships articulated in and by the country house form the very structure of society upon which royal power depends absolutely.

In spite of its obsession with the past, the function of country house discourse was not to stop time or prevent change. As Stuart Hall notes in his discussion of ideology and contemporary media, discourse has "the effect of sustaining certain 'closures', of establishing certain systems of equivalence between what could be assumed about the world and what could be said to be true. . . . New, problematic or troubling events, which breached the taken-for-granted expectancies about how the world should be, could then be 'explained' by extending to them the forms of explanation which had served 'for all practical purposes', in other cases."²² In the case of country house discourse,

The Georgic Revolution (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1985), 7, 6, 5.

²¹Williams says that the "magical extraction of the curse of labour is in fact achieved [in Jonson's and Carew's poems] by a simple extraction of the existence of labourers. The actual men and women who rear the animals and drive them to the house and kill them and prepare them for meat; who trap the pheasants and partridges and catch the fish; who plant and manure and prune and harvest the fruit trees: these are not present; their work is all done for them by a natural order. When they do at last appear, it is merely as the 'rout of rurall folke' or, more simply, as 'much poore', and what we are then shown is the charity and the lack of condescension with which they are given what, now and somehow, not they but the natural order has given for food, into the lord's hands." *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973), 32. See Don E. Wayne's discussion of Williams's observations in "'A More Safe Survey,'" 268-70. See also Alastair Fowler's rebuttal to Williams in "Country House Poems: The Politics of a Genre," *The Seventeenth Century* 1 (1986): 9.

²²"The Rediscovery of 'Ideology': The Return of the 'Repressed' in Media Studies," in *Culture, Society and the Media*, ed. Michael Gurevitch, Tony Bennett, James Curran, and Janet Woolacott (London: Methuen, 1982), 75.

one might here invoke Raymond Williams's understanding of "residual" forms or cultures, those "meanings and practices" that are so significant that they cannot simply be dismissed but must be "reinterpreted, diluted, or put into forms which support or at least do not contradict other elements within the effective dominant culture."²³ Rather than denying or impeding the cultural revolutions of early modern England, the (re)articulations of country house discourse served ultimately to mediate change, doing the cultural work that allowed for the transfer of power from one group to another, for the renegotiation of social and economic relationships, and for the emergence of new subjectivities. It was only by connecting what was new to what was known—by giving innovations the *imprimatur* of age and by painting the *novi homines* with the patina of venerable respectability—that the revolution could be effected.

In this sense, country house discourse interpellated (and, thus, constructed) social identities; gender, race, and class in particular did not precede revived and redefined cultural practices like hospitality or cultural forms like the country house or the country house poem; rather, marked subjects emerged out of both the architectural and poetic works. So the "white, middle-class, woman poet" did not entirely precede Aemilia Lanyer's "Description of Cooke-ham," but rather emerged discursively in the process of the poem, part of the work it accomplished.²⁴ Likewise, though Robert Sidney certainly had a life prior to and outside of Ben Jonson's "To Penshurst," his existence as a type of the Good Lord, as well as Penshurst's analogous existence as a model of the ideal economy, gained a reality or perhaps hyper-reality from Jonson's poem that was (not insignificantly for this argument) in contrast to Sidney's and Penshurst's extra-poetic existence, which were anything but ideal. The poems, then, like the country houses they celebrated, like the literature of hospitality that informed them both, projected an image of the ideal, historicizing it, paradoxically, as natural. The ideal then both authorized and justified privilege while undermining its real-world incarnation, which remained dependent on a model to which it did not conform, dependent ultimately on the enactment of a discourse that could maintain the fiction.

I was first moved to think about this project by the many splendid studies of the country house poem. That (sub)genre of brief efflorescence has inspired a remarkably large body of work, with most readers from the beginning

²³"Base and Superstructure," 39, 40.

²⁴On Lanyer's "whiteness," see especially Barbara Bowen, "Aemilia Lanyer and the Invention of White Womanhood," in *Maids and Mistresses, Cousins and Queens*, ed. Susan Frye and Karen Robertson (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1999), 274-303.

observing the relationship between the poetic form and architectural forms, the country houses of the Great Rebuilding of England.²⁵ G. R. Hibbard's 1956 article on "The Country House Poem of the Seventeenth Century" usefully defined the features of the genre, but Hibbard tended to see the social and economic ideals depicted in, for instance, Ben Jonson's "To Penshurst" as accurate depictions of Robert Sidney and his relationships to land, family, and retainers. William A. McClung's study of *The Country House in English Renaissance Poetry* delineated developments in aristocratic domestic architecture and their representation in poetry. Raymond Williams's groundbreaking work on *The Country and the City*, along with his and others' development of cultural materialist theory and cultural studies in general, opened up new ways of viewing the country house poem as a medium for the articulation of social and economic perspectives—for class concerns. At the same time, in related work, Mark Girouard's many studies of English country houses, their designers, builders, and inhabitants, placed the buildings in their socio-economic milieu as monuments to power, not simply to art and architecture, as did Alice T. Friedman's study of *House and Household in Elizabethan England*. Inquiry into the country house poem was revived by Heather Dubrow's 1979 article that traced its generic development, tying it to the political history of the seventeenth century. And Alastair Fowler's article on "The Politics of a Genre" placed the country house poem—or "estate poem," as he prefers—in relationship to other genres and their development (as does the introduction to his recent collection of *Seventeenth-Century Estate Poems and Related Items*). Don E. Wayne's 1984 study of the semiotics of Penshurst, the poem and the house, showed the disjunction between the house's expression of traditional and aristocratic power and the articulation in the poem of alternate, middle-class values. The re(dis)covery of Aemilia Lanyer's country house poem, "The Description of Cooke-ham," prompted reassessment of country house genre as a species of patronage poem, evident particularly in Barbara Keifer Lewalski's work. More recently, Hugh Jenkins's *Feigned Commonwealths* traced the relationship between country house poems and other

²⁵Alastair Fowler traces the flourishing of this species of georgic not to economic change, the decline of housekeeping, or architectural evolution, but rather to the "revaluation of labour" and poets like Jonson's interest in new thinking about agricultural improvement and the stewardship of land. The impetus to the revival of the genre was to "revalue an activity necessary to society—in this case the landlord's role as user of an estate's resources." "Country House Poems," 6, 12.

genres in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, demonstrating the cultural work they did in imagining and realizing an ideal community.²⁶

In sum, the great majority of those who have studied the genre have explored the relationship between the emergence and evolution of the country house poem and larger cultural concerns, the genre's "embeddedness in contemporary political and social tensions," in Heather Dubrow's words.²⁷ This study builds on that insight—in a sense, realizes the potential of the cross-disciplinarity that has defined inquiry into the country house poem. In addition to seeing the country house poem as a genre that circulated in the economy of patronage or that paralleled developments in architecture, however, I want to propose the country house as an icon for power, legitimacy, and authority that pops up in all kinds of places (including, of course, literature). The country house poem was merely one of many contiguous sites for articulating country house discourse, sites that were useful for a time as vehicles for accommodating change and that then outlived their usefulness.²⁸ At the beginning of the sixteenth century, the country house itself functioned as a chthonic *source* of legitimacy, the place where power was constructed, conferred, and displayed;

²⁶G. R. Hibbard, "The Country House Poem of the Seventeenth Century," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 19 (1956): 159-74; William A. McClung, *The Country House in English Renaissance Poetry* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1977); Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973); Mark Girouard, *Life in the English Country House: A Social and Architectural History* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1978); Alice T. Friedman, *House and Household in Elizabethan England: Wollaton Hall and the Willoughby Family* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1989); Heather Dubrow, "The Country-House Poem: A Study in Generic Development," *Genre* 12 (1979): 153-79; Alastair Fowler, "Country-House Poems: The Politics of a Genre," *The Seventeenth Century* 1 (1986): 1-30, and *The Country House Poem: A Cabinet of Seventeenth-Century Estate Poems and Related Items* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 1994); Don E. Wayne, *Penshurst: The Semiotics of Place and the Poetics of History* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1984); Barbara Keifer Lewalski, "The Lady of the Country House Poem," in *The Fashioning and Functioning of the British Country House*, ed. Gervase Jackson-Stops, Gordon J. Schochet, Lena Cowen Orlin, and Elizabeth Blair MacDougall (Hanover: Univ. Press of New England, 1989), 261-75, "Rewriting Patriarchy and Patronage: Margaret Clifford, Anne Clifford, and Aemilia Lanyer," *The Yearbook of English Studies* 21 (1991): 87-106; and Hugh Jenkins, *Feigned Commonwealths: The Country-House Poem and the Fashioning of the Ideal Community* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne Univ. Press, 1998).

²⁷This "embeddedness . . . clearly invites an exploration of the relationship between literary forms and social formations." Heather Dubrow, "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner? Reinterpreting Formalism and the Country House Poem," *Modern Language Quarterly* 61 (2000): 67.

²⁸As Maren-Sofie Røstvig has argued in a related context, reinterpretations of signifying traditions "occurred at regular intervals throughout the seventeenth century." *The Happy Man*, 8.