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Humanism and its Discontents

A defining term for the Renaissance, “the human” is today a perilous term. But is it still a useful one—or is its intellectual history in early modernity too fraught, too deeply implicated in critiques of anthropocentrism? This essay argues for a reappraisal of “humanism” as a philosophical tradition and suggests how the history of “the human” in the early modern period already contains its postmodern and posthumanist unraveling. As a humanist’s humanist, Spenser plays a key, emblematic role in this history as his careful and sparing use of the term “human” in its various forms points to the idea of humanity as a boundary condition, a description of a limit. The essay concludes with a reflection on the continued importance of humanist modes of reading through an understanding of the text’s own agency.

The word “human” appears very rarely in the Spenserian corpus. There are only eight instances of it in all its forms (humane, humaine, humanity) across the poetry and it appears only twice in the Vewe. And yet, the appearance of the word—its novelty in the sixteenth century—alerts us to something unique about Spenser’s writing. It is part of an early modern vanguard that had returned to a central philosophical question: what does it mean to be “human”?

Both banal and urgent, the question of “the human” seeks to pin down perhaps the most fundamental and most intangible aspects of our object of study—whether literary, theoretical, political, or pedagogical. The human is embedded in the lexicon of humanism and the humanities, in the post-Cartesian and Enlightenment legacies of anthropocentric rationalism, and
in the period-designation of a Burckhardtian Renaissance whose notion of the individual as a work of art permeates an intellectual and aesthetic history of modernity. But the “human” is now a perilous word. Fraught with an intellectual and socio-political history that is both universalizing and exceptional, the privileged ontological status of the “human” has come under increasing fire, as scholars have questioned just who and what deserves that label.\(^3\) We bring this question to *Spenser Studies* in this special issue as an experiment and an invitation. What do recent theoretical accounts of the human in its various classifications, contexts, juxtapositions, and relations have to offer studies of Spenser’s work—and conversely, how might studies of Spenser (and other early modern writers) reshape the debate on humanism and posthumanism?

In the last two decades, critical theorists and historians of philosophy have grappled with the legacy of humanism in its various guises—from Cicero’s celebration of *humanitas* to Heidegger’s rejection of Kantian idealism, from Descartes’s shaping of modern subjectivity to Derrida’s embrace of the animal. If early posthumanists sought to subvert categorical distinctions between human, animal, and machine, more recent waves of theory (new materialism, actor-network theory, object-oriented ontologies) have aimed to move beyond and beside the human, strategically ignoring and decentering it to shift our attention to other agents, events, actions. This struggle over the place of “the human” in our contemporary intellectual framework and critical practice has particular resonance for scholars of the early modern period. For we have long taken humanism and anthropocentrism to be one of the defining characteristics of our object of study—whether we have received this with reverent celebration or with skeptical critique.

To open the question of “the human” in the context of Spenser studies is thus to bring the critique of humanism to one of its most privileged sites, for Spenser is frequently described as a humanist’s humanist whose work seems to embody the very “idea of the Renaissance.”\(^4\) In doing this, however, our goal is more than merely to offer up a hitherto neglected literary archive for theoretical scrutiny. Instead, as we attend to the many conflicting aspects of being “human” in the work of a writer who places that very question at the philosophical center of his project, we hope to interrogate the claims of both humanists and posthumanists with new eyes. In her companion piece to this essay, Melissa E. Sanchez brings a new theoretical perspective to Spenser studies by teasing out the interpretive possibilities enabled by posthumanist engagements with Spenser’s oeuvre. The
task of my present essay, however, is to suggest how and why we can—and should—still engage with Spenser’s humanism, perhaps even more so now in our posthumanist, posthistorical, and postcritical moment.

Caricatured as much for its naïve, antiquated faith in human potential as for its complicity in discourses of imperial and colonial exploitation, ecological destruction and systematic structures of oppression, humanism remains a crucial force in our time. But in order to reappropriate it for our current critical practice, we must look squarely at its origins in the Renaissance and recover its nuanced, inflected meanings. Spenser’s work is a particularly important site for such rethinking both because of his continuing cultural centrality within the European canon and because the poet was an especially engaged thinker with regard to the challenges posed by thinking about the human. Spenser was educated in the tradition of humanist pedagogy, steeped in the textual traditions and classical models valorized by the umanisti, deeply aware of the traces of the past in the present, and preoccupied with defining the bounds of human ethical choice and action. To unpack the multiple dimensions of “the human” in his oeuvre is thus to enter into some of the fundamental theoretical and historical challenges to the period-concept itself—as well as to our methods of studying it.

Spenser stands metonymically for a historical period that organized its own self-understanding around the notion of “the human.” But his experiments with the processes that enable and inhibit becoming human also touch upon our own desire both to embrace and distance ourselves from what it means to be human. If contemporary theoretical currents have urged us to look away from and beyond the human, Spenser urges us to look insistently at it, around it, under it, over it and inside it. His writing urges us not to take the category of “the human” as a “matter of fact” but rather as a “matter of concern,” to invoke a useful distinction coined by Bruno Latour—in other words, to worry less about deconstructing taxonomies and hierarchies, but to attend with care and caution to the things we cherish.

By confronting the much-invoked humanism of Spenser and of the Renaissance, I want to suggest why it might be useful to look at “the human” once more, particularly in the wake of Weberian disenchantment and posthumanist critique. There is no question that the consequences of early modern humanism and its Enlightenment avatars include self-aggrandizement on a global scale. The long political and philosophical emphasis on human self-consciousness has generated a species narcissism that
has paradoxically made us less conscious of larger networks of action and consequence in which we are enmeshed as but one kind of actor among many others. But to come back to “the human” with such recognitions and review its intellectual foundations is to become aware of a different history, and thus, of different possible futures as well. This essay unpacks some of these alternate histories and trajectories for “the human” by going back to Renaissance and Spenserian commonplaces. It finds there an alternate, dynamic humanism, not reducible to anthropocentrism, but one posited on the idea of the human as a boundary condition, as a process of becoming.

I. Human Exceptionalism: An Alternate Genealogy

Though posthumanism has recently forced us to reconsider what it means to be human, this line of inquiry has a distinguished genealogy. Classical, medieval, and early modern philosophers and theologians had long pondered the question of what distinguished human beings from the natural and supernatural worlds that surround them: the quest to uncover the precise “essence” of humanity and to place humankind within the structure of the cosmos is a recurrent theme from Plato onward. But the early modern period marks an important turning point in the history of thinking about the human. Though often taken as a defining moment for the invention of “the animal,” Descartes’s distinction between the self-consciousness of the human cogito and the automatic motions of the bête-machine itself emerged from a thorough investigation of the nature and essence of humanity that energized much fifteenth- and sixteenth-century thought.  

Encompassing paradigmatic and much-cited historical moments— from Pico’s Oration on the Dignity of Man to Descartes’s Meditations—European early modernity is almost inextricable from the idea of the human as a fundamental category, which was most fully defined and given a hitherto unprecedented ontological priority in the period between 1450 and 1700. Not only is it frequently characterized by the emergence of a (new) anthropocentrism, it is often identified as a watershed for modern subjectivity. In Cary Wolfe’s seminal book, What is Posthumanism?, for instance, its legacy is distilled into “ideals of human perfectibility, rationality and agency” which come under critical scrutiny and are implicated in the critique of enlightenment universalism. Indeed, for almost two centuries
now, the ideals of *humanus* and *humanitas* have been tightly entwined with the idea of the Renaissance itself. But these terms undergo radical reinvention between 1450 and 1700 as they shift from a classical concept of education (translating the Greek *paideia*) to include an incipient “philosophy of man.” And yet, despite this familiar critical narrative, the word “human” itself is a more inflected, more ambiguous label in the period: it is an indeterminate and uncertain category derived from a consciousness of vulnerability as much as of power.

“Human” is, in fact, an unusual word in English in the early modern period and only acquires its current meaning and orthography by 1700. But the sixteenth century sees an explosion of the word in other forms—*humaine, humain, humane, humanity*—registering lexical traces of its import from Latin and French and a new conceptual interest in the category. More frequently used as an adjective than as a noun, the early modern “human” is a term of contrast or exception rather than a universal, collective, gender-neutral category. Derived from the Latin *humanitas*, it appears early on in rhetorical treatises and religious tracts, connected on the one hand with humanistic study (as the thing that makes one most fully human) and on the other with the ontological status of the human as distinct from animals or supernatural entities and forces. Both meanings depend on a constructivist notion of the human as something *made* or developed, rather than as an innate quality. Moreover, the congruence of both meanings points to an important conjunction between the idea of the human and our study of it.

The early moderns themselves were very conscious that the condition of being human was tied to the complex lexical history of *humanitas* as both an idealized goal and a state of being. Writing in late antiquity, Aulus Gellius already notes the confusion of meaning with some irritation: “Those who have spoken Latin and used the language correctly do not give the word *humanitas* the meaning which it is commonly thought to have, namely what the Greeks call *philanthropia*, signifying a kind of friendly spirit and good feeling towards all men without distinction; but they give to *humanitas* about the force of the Greek *paideia*; that is, what we call ‘erudition in the liberal arts’ (*eruditionem institutionemque in bonas artes*). Those who earnestly desire and seek after these are most highly humanized. For the pursuit of that kind of knowledge, and the training given by it, have been granted to men alone of all the animals, and for that reason it is termed *humanitas* or ‘humanity.’” Philanthropy and pedagogy, fellow feeling and the pursuit of knowledge—these become the two poles of
humanist thinking, the fundamental bases upon which the question of the human would be built and explored for a millennium. We might think of these as the ontological and epistemological dimensions of the human; the former finds expression in discussions of the relations between the soul and the body, the nature of human “being,” while the latter manifests in rhetorical and scientific discourse, defining the human as the creature who seeks to speak and know the world.

In each case, however, the idea of “the human” is permeated by ambivalence and by an anxiety that it may be subsumed into and under other categories. This view is already present in Aristotle’s *De anima*, the primary ontological basis for early modern theories of the human, which lays out a taxonomy of creaturely life that successively incorporates souls of lower forms into each subsequent higher grade, so that humans are on a continuum with nonhuman creatures. This framework permeates the writing of theologians such as Augustine and Aquinas, humanists such as Ficino and Pico, and the Reformation debates of Luther, Melanchthon, and Erasmus. For such thinkers, humanity manifested itself through the exercise of faith and reason; the absence of these attributes fed a broad cultural fear that human beings could become indistinguishable from beasts. Allegorical texts from Dante to Milton use the trope of bodily metamorphosis from human to animal or plant to highlight the categorical fluidity of creatures and of matter itself, even as they probed more deeply the connections between body and soul as the key to the essence of human *being*.

But a key moment of transformation occurs in the *Essais* of Michel de Montaigne (1580). In the “Apology for Raymond Sebond,” hailed as the first instance of modern philosophical skepticism, Montaigne engages in a polemic that strikingly anticipates posthumanist critique as he questions the presumption of human privilege and interrogates the very basis of human identity:

The most calamitous and fragile of all creatures is man, and at the same time the proudest. He sees and feels himself placed here in the mire and dung of the world, attached and fixed in the worst, most lifeless, and most corrupt part of the universe, on the meanest floor of the house and the farthest removed from the vault of heaven . . . and he goes installing himself in his imagination that he makes himself God’s equal, that he ascribes to himself divine attributes, that he winsnows himself and separates himself from the mass of other creatures, determines the share allowed the animals . . . . How does he know,
by the effort of intelligence, what inwardly and secretly moves the animals? . . . When I play with my cat, who knows whether she is not making me her pastime more than I make her mine?13

Montaigne’s brutal stripping away of all human claims to perfectibility, rationality, and agency undercuts the period’s more grandiose interpretations of the Aristotelian scale of being. Humans are most distinct from the animals in their fragility, in their risible and almost tragic desire for ontological privilege rather than because of any essential distinction. The human, for Montaigne, is not Pico’s Adam, but Lear’s “unaccommodated man . . . a poor, bare, forked animal.” Not surprisingly, the “Apology” haunts Jacques Derrida’s reflections on human-animal relations many centuries later, reminding us just how integral a reappraisal of early modern thought on the human might be to contemporary concerns.14

Lurking behind Montaigne’s attack in the “Apology” is a complex ontology that understands the scala naturae both as a strict hierarchy and a slippery continuum of being—a vision shared by Pico in his iconic declaration of man’s centrality to the cosmos:

At last the best of artisans ordained that the creature to whom He had been able to give nothing proper to himself should have joint possession of whatever had been peculiar to each of the different kinds of being. He therefore took man as a creature of indeterminate nature and, assigning him a place in the middle of the world, addressed him thus: “Neither a fixed abode nor a form that is thine alone nor any function peculiar to thyself have we given thee, Adam. . . . The nature of all other beings is limited and constrained within the bounds of laws prescribed by Us. Thou, constrained by no limits, in accordance with thine own free will, in whose hand We have placed thee, shalt ordain for thyself the limits of thy nature. We have set thee at the world’s center that thou mayest from thence more easily observe whatever is in the world. . . . Thou shalt have the power to degenerate into the lower forms of life. . . . Thou shalt have the power . . . to be reborn into the higher forms, which are divine.15

As Joseph Campana notes, the Oration is “ambiguous” and casts the human in “a state of exception” because here “human dominion over other creatures is a compensation for a fundamental privation with respect to capacities and endowments.”16 There is nothing inherently special about
Pico’s human, who is a motley assemblage of all the other creatures. What distinguishes the human here is freedom and choice, though elsewhere the text is conflicted even with regard to these qualities. Ironically, despite its constant invocation as a model of the Renaissance’s ringing affirmations of anthropocentrism, Pico’s description of the perilous status of the human who is gifted with an “indeterminate nature” hinged between animal and divine, opens the door to Montaigne’s skeptical denunciation as much as to Enlightenment idealism.

Located at either end of the period, both Pico and Montaigne issue a call to rethink the human. And both draw energy from a wide-ranging attempt to rethink Aristotelian ontology in confrontation with a myriad new texts and philosophic systems uncovered by Renaissance humanism—in that second sense of scholarship, education and pedagogy. Pico’s Conclusiones Nongentae for which the Oration was written as an introductory speech, is among the earliest attempts to square the philosophic circle and make sense of the often contradictory accounts of human being and the human capacity for knowledge inherited from antiquity. Writing a century later, Montaigne ridicules any such possibility—though he too alludes to prior authors and texts (Raymonde of Sabunde’s Liber creaturarum, a key work that articulates man’s place in an ordered universe, and Sextus Empiricus, among a host of others) to articulate crucial questions about human exceptionalism with which subsequent thinkers will wrestle.

By the early seventeenth century, when Descartes would begin his radical revision of philosophical method, scholastic Aristotelianism had dealt with assaults from several alternate theories of the human, gleaned from philosophers such as Plato, the Pre-Socratics (particularly Epicurus, via the Roman poet Lucretius), and the skeptics (particularly Sextus Empiricus), medical texts (especially Galen and Hippocrates), and geographical texts (Strabo), which emphasized the congruence between climate and physiology. At the same time, the rapid expansion of the known world brought with it new questions about the nature of the human, exploding as many myths about monstrous peoples as inventing new ones. When Amerigo Vespucci dwells on the peculiar sexual mores of the indigenous peoples in his travel account, Mundus novus, he treats them as exotic species rather than fellow beings—an attitude that would acquire ethical and political stakes in the scramble to control the New World and establish the nature of the Amerindians’ humanity and natural rights. From early tussles over settlement to the horrific economics of the transatlantic slave trade, the period’s understanding of humanity as a boundary condition works in
strangely opposite ways: it legitimates the oppression and exploitation of those considered less than fully human, while it enables the compassion and fellow-feeling necessary to invoke discourses such as toleration and universal human rights.

The significance of the *umanisti* (humanists)—those teachers of the *bonas artes*—to both philosophical revolution and colonial expansion should not be underestimated: for the *studia humanitatis* and its almost obsessive recovery of the textual tradition was premised on a notion of the human as a thinker, whose essence was to know the world and reconstruct it in language. In a widely cited passage from *De natura deorum*, which becomes a kind of touchstone in the early modern period, Cicero suggests that the nature of “the human” inheres in the act of contemplation: “everything else except the world was created for the sake of some other thing . . . for example the horse for riding, the ox for ploughing, the dog for hunting and keeping guard; man himself however came into existence for the purpose of contemplating and imitating the world; he is by no means perfect, but he is ‘a small fragment of that which is perfect.’”\(^{18}\) Humanity is particular but microcosmic, linked to the cosmos not (only) by analogy but by the desire for knowledge. It is this desire which gives humans priority and a claim to dominion. But it is also this apprehension of particularity that grounds the human in multiple networks of association, subverting the desire for control, and awakening a receptivity to other things in the world. In Cicero’s words, cited for instance as the epigraph to Abraham Ortelius’s *Theatrum orbis terrarum*, the first world atlas (1570), we can see an epistemological vision of the human edging past the primarily ontological considerations of Aristotle—both of which would converge powerfully in Descartes’s *Meditations*.

The emergence of an individual modern human subject is often traced to Descartes’s famous maxim: *cogito ergo sum*, I think therefore I am. But the infamous *cogito*, which makes Descartes the villain of a range of postmodern, posthumanist studies (including animal studies, ANT, and OOO), does not erupt suddenly into the Western intellectual imagination; it is a culmination of a process and a positioning that, as we have seen, has its roots in antiquity and finds form in the early modern period. Cartesian thought is deeply humanistic not (only) because it privileges the capacity for self-reflexive thought as the essence of the human, but because it encompasses the multiple facets of *humanus/humanitas* (human/humanity) and offers a powerful new synthesis of the ontological and epistemological dimensions of what it means to be human.\(^{19}\)
By choosing the genre of the intellectual autobiography in the *Discourse on Method*, Descartes glances back at Montaigne and takes seriously the challenge posed by his predecessor: how can a limited human observer come to have any certain knowledge of the world? It is worth noting here that despite a recent critical emphasis on the Cartesian subject, Descartes’s philosophy was driven by a scientific desire to explain the workings of the natural world: the *Discourse* emerged out of an intense period of study in which Descartes conducted experiments in optics and geometry and sought to explain meteorological phenomena. In a 1630 letter to Mersenne, he writes with hubristic flair: “I am resolved to explain all the phenomena of nature, that is to say, the entirety of Physics.” To think of Descartes first as a physicist and only then as a metaphysician is to reconsider the place of the human subject in Cartesian thought: as a would-be knower of the phenomenological world.

Like Montaigne, then, Descartes too starts with a deceptively humbling move, turning his gaze inward to the partial and particular self. But the process of coming to know one’s own selfhood and humanity as a knower—described so acutely in the *Meditations*—reveals a new way of knowing the world, one that pushes past the skeptical abyss opened by Montaigne’s insistence on human abjection. It is no accident that the (often neglected) Sixth Meditation builds a bridge from the *cogito* to the world through the intellectual imagination. The Cartesian subject too is one founded on the premise of human limitation and a self-conscious confrontation with it. Descartes, like Pico and Montaigne, invites us to look squarely at the human—and through the human at the world beyond.

### II. Spenser and the Human

To place Edmund Spenser within this intellectual genealogy is to see his work as actively participating within a broader intellectual-cultural transformation in his own time as well as continuing to affect our own understandings of what “the human” means today. Not only does he, like his contemporaries, investigate the implications of human exceptionalism in his texts, but his texts themselves take on an agentic quality of their own by engaging us—an effect already legible in Renaissance humanism’s encounter with its own pasts.
Not surprisingly, in Spenser’s corpus, the word “human” appears almost exclusively as an adjective that marks difference—though it is not always a celebratory or positive distinction. A recurrent phrase is “human thought,” but it is always used in the negative, to assert inadequacy in comparison with the divine: in A Hymne to Heavenly Beautie, for instance, Sapience’s “goodly grace . . . doth farre exceed all humane thought”; in the Faerie Queene, “the worke of heauens will surpasseth humaine thought” (V.iv.27), while Serena is saved by a chance that “exceed[s] all humaine thought.”

Here, the human seems defined by limitation, particularly epistemological limitation—though in other episodes, Spenser celebrates a distinctly human ability to create artfully and imaginatively (Colin Clout on Mount Acidale), to engage in aesthetic encounters (Britomart in Busyrane’s castle), and to enjoy and celebrate the pleasures of the body (Hellenore among the Satyrs; the bride in Epithalamion). Like Pico’s Adam then, Spenser’s oeuvre thus situates itself “in the middle,” between the extremes of humanist celebration and critique. It repeatedly invites self-consciousness and self-reflection, demanding that we look at the condition of humanity. But it also repeatedly thwarts narcissistic self-regard, reminding us of the ties of matter, embodiment, relationship.

Spenser’s experience as a poet and colonial administrator demanded an engagement with the question of the human at various levels and his writing abounds with various kinds of humans, half-humans, nonhumans, and inhuman creatures. The Faerie Queene is an exemplary instance as it draws on the ontological and epistemological currents of the period to explore the multiple meanings of being human: it mixes Aristotle, Plato, and Lucretius; injects an interrogatory, skeptical undertow into humanist commonplaces (most powerfully through the figure of Mutabilitie); and entertains an analogy between the Faery world of the poem and the New World of the Americas that grants the poetic world itself a new agency. As early as The Shepheardes Calender, Spenser plays with generic commonplaces to dislodge artificial boundaries between the human and natural worlds, exploiting and mocking in the same breath the anthropocentrism of the pathetic fallacy central to pastoral. Similarly, the Amoretti draws on but gently critiques the self-absorbed narcissism of Petrarchan lyric, acknowledging but also distancing itself from a vision of human subjectivity that is closed off from the world; it may be the only truly dialogic lyric sequence in the period. Other texts, such as those in the Complaints volume—or more notoriously in the unpublished Vewe—explore the relations between human and animal in pursuit of political critique and ideological angst;
animals are frequently doubles for humans and point relentlessly toward the dehumanization effected by state violence and political compromise.

Thus, human and nonhuman frequently intertwine: in Book IV of *The Faerie Queene*, for instance, with its culminating marriage of the Thames and Medway, we see the land itself behave in human-like ways while “human” characters (here, Florimell and Marinell, earth and sea) seem to become merely representations of elemental forces; bodies in the poem are places (the Castle of Alma), while places and persons are psychic landscapes and impulses (Despair in his cave). This is not just the effect of an allegorical fiction which deconstructs aspects of the human in nonhuman forms. The epic programmatically charts a sliding scale of humanity in its many senses, from the half-human satyrs and the humane lion of Book I to the strange case of the Salvage man and the cannibals in Book VI.

Spenserian allegory—in the sense of extended metaphors that invite what David Miller has called “metacognition”—is a key trope in this investigation of the human. For it is through allegory that Spenser engages with questions of epistemology (how do we come to know ourselves and others?) and history (how do we interpret the effect of the past on the present?). In exploring the power of allegory, Spenser anticipates a theory of distributed cognition in which the human is but one among many actors, one of which is literary figuration itself. A few examples will illustrate this point. In the famous Despair episode of *The Faerie Queene*, the Redcrosse Knight confronts, we might say, an allegory of himself. Despair is both within him and outside him, an emotion and a character. Despair is also, oddly, somehow defining of the human—only the human characters seem to succumb to his deadly lure—and to know him is to confront the most vulnerable part of the self. But Despair also has a literary and philosophical history—he is a deadly agent in his own right, plaguing writers from Augustine to Freud and beyond—and, as Spenser points out with a kind of black humor, he refuses to die.

Similarly, the chronicles that Arthur and Guyon read in Book II are located in the Turret of Alma’s castle—an archive, but also an allegory for the brain, the organ of knowledge and imagination, where history is written down and narratives are made up. Are we inside the brain or outside it? Is this the self-reflexive consciousness of the human simultaneously inside and outside history as Descartes would articulate it (albeit with different stakes) or is this a game of duck-rabbit? In the disjunctive merging of allegory and history in the chronicles of *The Faerie Queene*, we see fiction and fact slide into each other as history cedes to the narrative imagina-
tion. “Faerie lond” itself is rendered both real and virtual, a fictionalized past and an allegorical present, a history that culminates in contemporary Elizabethan England, but also a dark double for it. As a literary world, it has its own peculiar materiality and agency. Its effects make us wonder indeed about the place and position of the human, who both makes these worlds and succumbs to their power.

The collapse of chronology and the telescoping of time in Spenserian allegory, as in Montaigne’s disruptive juxtapositions, are already crucial markers of the ways in which rethinking the human brings with it a need to rethink seemingly self-evident ideas of history, periodization, and teleology. Is the idea of the human itself a historically contingent category, hedged about by contextual caveats? Or is there something about the human—and about humanism—that travels across time? Are we excavating an early modern vision of the human or do Spenserian figures have something urgent to tell us about ourselves? These questions are pertinent at a profound methodological level because they force us to consider the purpose of our critical practice. And they affect how we understand the encounter between contemporary theory and historically distant texts.

In this volume, Sanchez outlines how we may draw on posthumanist models to read Spenser and why this may be useful. My consideration of humanism’s continued potency as a critical rubric complements her emphases, for the “post” in posthumanism may ultimately signal a false chronology. Posthumanism is not something that necessarily comes after humanism; rather, it marks a question of emphasis. For humanism already contains a powerful recognition of its own fragility and hubris—and itself invites a dialectical, posthumanist critique. I am touched especially by Sanchez’s argument against potential accusations of anachronism when she writes eloquently of the literary text’s agency, which enables it to travel across time to encounter new readers and new concerns, unhindered by problems of historical estrangement. But this call for transhistorical sympathy and the power of literary texts to migrate across time is also deeply humanistic, and represents a curious return to the rhetoric of the Renaissance humanists who both understood and sought to erase historical difference. “When I read Cicero’s *De natura deorum,*” writes Petrarch, “I often have compassion for his fate and grieve that this man did not know the true God.” And Machiavelli describes his encounters with ancient texts thus: “There I am warmly welcomed, and I feed on the only food I find nourishing, and was born to savor. I am not ashamed to talk to them . . . and they, out of kindness, answer me . . . I forget every worry. I am no longer afraid.
of poverty, or frightened by death.” Spenser’s own appropriation of distant predecessors (Vergil, Lucretius) and more immediate ones (Chaucer, Ariosto) is inspired by similar sense of familiarity across time despite the apprehension of distance.

To read Petrarch and Machiavelli in these letters, or to read Spenser’s virtuoso self-presentation in *The Shepheardes Calender* (complete with a humanist textual apparatus and learned glosses!) is to read them in the act of reading across time—and theorizing how to read well—even as they imagine their own itinerant texts being read across another gulf of time. When Petrarch writes his letter “To Posterity” or when Spenser speaks to unborn souls in the Gardens of Adonis, they make a claim for the freedom of their texts against the tyrannical closure of a hyper-vigilant historicism with an ever-narrowing sense of right context. Humanist and posthumanist reading finally demand a passionate encounter between reader and text that mocks the illusion of detachment.

Early modern scholars have spoken of this experience in terms of wonder, magical correspondence, and enchantment but, thus far, have sought to relegate it to a premodern childhood of human subjectivity. But there are signs of change. When Rita Felski calls on us to “look . . . in front of the text, reflecting on what it unfurls, calls forth, makes possible,” she invites us to engage fully with what is most human about us as readers, even as we acknowledge the text’s own agency. To do so is simultaneously to question the privileged ontology of “the human” and to recapture wonder and enchantment as epistemologically useful modes of engaging with the world—and with our own task as generous readers. Few writers took up this call more fully, provocatively, and bravely than Spenser, whose writing is filled with investigations of the nature of our “being” and the complexities of enjoying it rightly.

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**Notes**

1. These statistics are based on a survey of Spenser’s poetry using Wordhoard: http://wordhoard.northwestern.edu/userman/index.html
2. The OED notes that while versions of “human” enter into Old French and then the various Romance languages in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, it is used consistently in English only beginning in the sixteenth century.


9. This is a synthesis of the discussion in the OED as well as ngram and words in context searches using the Early Modern Print project: http://earlyprint.wustl.edu/

10. It is worth noting in passing that the term “man” designates the universal, collective category in this period—a much-discussed phenomenon.

11. There is a notable increase in the use of the term “human” associated with Reformation tracts and editions of Augustine, alongside Cicero. See the Early Modern Print project: http://earlyprint.wustl.edu/

12. Aulus Gellius, Attic Nights, XIII:17


18. Cicero, De natura deorum, II. 37: “sic praeter mundum cetera omnia aliorum causa esse generata, ut eas fruges atque fructus, quos terra gignit, animantium causa, animantes autem hominum, ut ecum vehendi causa, arandi bovem, venandi et custodiendi canem; ipse autem homo ortus est ad mundum contemplandum et imitandum — nullo modo perfectus, sed est quaedam particula perfecti. sed mundus quoniam omnia complexus est neque est quicquam, quod non insit in eo, perfectus undique est.” (Marcus Tullius Cicero, De natura deorum; Academica, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956).
20. The Discourse was published with companion essays that demonstrated the new method with regard to particular scientific questions (on meteorology, optics and geometry). On the biographical context see Stephen Gaukroger, Descartes: An Intellectual Biography (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).
23. David Miller, “Temperance, Interpretation, and ‘the bodie of this death’: Pauline Allegory in The Faerie Queene, Book II,” forthcoming in ELR.
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