Preserving Nature in Hannah Woolley’s *The Queen-Like Closet; or Rich Cabinet*

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**Preserving and Ecofeminism**

In 2008, Carolyn Merchant published a response to Brian Vickers’s scathing essay “Francis Bacon, Feminist Historiography, and the Dominion of Nature.” Vickers’s essay excoriated Merchant’s groundbreaking ecofeminist text from the early 1980s, *The Death of Nature* and its critique of Francis Bacon and the history of science. Opposing the narrative of the great man, Merchant’s retort reminds us to consider the context of Bacon’s work: “[t]he colonization of the Americas, the rise of mercantile capitalism, the wars of religion, the revival of ancient learning, and skepticism over medieval philosophy.” Within this complex milieu that Merchant identifies, we should reevaluate the period and the traditional male-centered scholarship. I also think it necessary to continue investigating and critiquing ecofeminist writing, not to discredit but to complicate this important work, as this collection aims to do. In my view, some of Merchant’s and, more recently, Sylvia Bowerbank’s arguments limit our understanding of the range of seventeenth-century women’s experience. In *The Death of Nature*, Merchant argues for an inherent association between the degradation of the environment and the treatment of women: “The ancient identity of nature as a nurturing mother links women’s history with the history of the environment and ecological change.” Yet, certainly not all women in the period who concerned themselves with nature were necessarily early modern champions of the environment. Bowerbank’s title asserts that seventeenth-century women are *Speaking for Nature,*
through indeed her reading is nuanced, noting “the diversity of choices women made in negotiating their places within the shifting sands of early modern discourse of nature, whether is was to reproduce, resist, or reinvent ‘nature.’”\(^5\) Investigations about women and their interactions with nature provide a means to broaden the scholarly field and a way to see a wider spectrum of knowledge-making occurring in the early modern period. We should take seriously the persistent problem Merchant identifies in her article: “Despite three decades of efforts to inject issues raised by feminist scholars into texts and courses, most still focus largely on the great men of the revolutionary era between Copernicus and Newton.”\(^6\) To provide a fuller historical picture in our own time of environmental crises, we need continued explorations into what nature meant to women, whether they had a particular gendered view of their environment that differed radically from the male perspective, and how women interacted with, or acted upon, nature in the rapidly changing society of seventeenth-century England.

To that purpose, this chapter explores how the work of Hannah Woolley, whose recipe books (called books of receipts by early moderns) were published in the 1660s and 70s, demonstrates a studied and experimental use of nature that is in dialogue with the developing scientific techniques, methods, and inquiries of the period.\(^7\) Declaring that *The Queen-Like Closet or Rich Cabinet* (1670) was intended for “ingenious persons of the female sex,” Woolley certainly considers her readership to be women (*QLC, A3*). As a preponderance of recipes in this text and its 1674 compendium *A Supplement to The Queen-Like Closet* are concerned with preserving by means of distilling, conserving, candying, pickling, and/or cooking, these cookbooks provide evidence of how women were interacting with nature in particular ways. The preservation process is also clearly part of the larger culinary and medicinal production that constituted kitchen science, as Lynette Hunter and Sarah Hutton explicate, “From well before the early modern period women had participated substantially in what was then called ‘oeconomics’, which referred to the primary economic unit of the family…Their largest field of work was maintaining the household…, [which] involved the practice of what we would now think of as physical and organic chemistry.”\(^8\) Woolley herself identifies the art of cooking with chemistry and empirical natural philosophy when she proclaims that the reader “with Mrs. Woolley would put forth some New Experiments” (*QLC, Dedication*). Outcomes of the chemical experiments in the kitchen, evidenced by the receipts themselves, also show how Woolley’s approach to and manipulation