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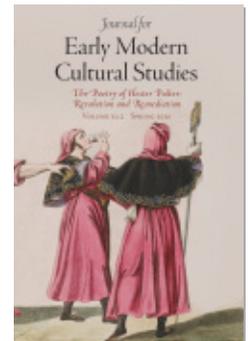
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FRANCES E. DOLAN

ABSTRACT

Hester Pulter frequently mentions dunghills, often using the word as an adjective to describe the earth. The dunghill might not appear to require much glossing, but its seventeenth-century meanings were more nuanced—literally, layered—than we might expect. While some of Pulter's contemporaries used "dunghill" to describe what we might call a dump—the final destination of garbage—they most often used the words "dunghill" and "muckheap" to describe repositories where organic matter of various kinds was gathered and transformed into compost to enrich soil. In the seventeenth century, this kind of dunghill—a matrix as well as a grave—was revalued and promoted as part of a larger reconsideration of waste as resource. The generative dunghill models Pulter's poetic process (recombining, ruminating, and revising) as well as the accretive and collaborative process that is the online edition called The Pulter Project. Seeing the dunghill as a creative process challenges divisions between elite poetry and agricultural labor, figural and literal, and even this life and the next. This essay's inquiry into the material history and figural resonances of the dunghill aspires not just to deepen our understanding of one of Pulter's keywords but also to interrogate the principles behind glossing and assembling "curations" for the online Pulter Project.



Hester Pulter lived in a house in the parish of Cottered just over forty miles north of London, a house her husband, Arthur, supposedly built "thro' the Importunity of his Wife" (Britland 3). Even if she did demand that he build that house in that location, she describes it as a kind of prison, where she is enclosed and isolated by illness, by childbirth (she had fifteen children), and by grief (she outlived all but two of them). In one poem, "Why Must I Thus Forever Be Confined" (Poem 57), the speaker laments being "shut up in a country grange" (EE l. 18). But this grange is also where her busy mind was

hard at work; Pulter wrote poetry and an unfinished prose romance, which have survived in a unique manuscript that forms the foundation of *The Pulter Project*. While Pulter describes this grange as immuring her “in wall or pale” (l. 32), its boundaries were also more permeable than this poem suggests, admitting visitors, books, and the lively exchange of manuscripts and ideas; we are learning just how embedded and connected Pulter was.

Pulter's choice of the word “grange” links the country house to the granary and working farm. In this essay I want to activate those agricultural resonances to think about the ways Pulter's imagery draws on the specifics of seventeenth-century agricultural practice, particularly the making of compost and amendment of soil as well as the bounded container or site for composting and the open-ended processes it fosters. My focus will be the dunghill. It seems likely that Pulter knew something about dunghills, since every house would have had one, and that she looked out upon and walked around her estate, and read about farming, as the mistress of a household and garden might be expected to do. On her estate and in her village, she would have observed the dunghill as a familiar feature of the landscape; in books on gardening and farming, she might have encountered pitches for composting and soil amendment as crucial to the ongoing fecundity of a “country grange.” In her poetry, she invites her reader to notice the dunghill and to reflect on its meanings.

Pulter frequently uses dunghill as an adjective to describe the earth: “this dunghill globe of earth,” or even more emphatically, “this dirty, dunghill earth” and “this base dunghill earth.”¹ At first gloss, this image does not seem to require much explanation or reflection. A dunghill is a pile of shit or, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* puts it, “a heap or hillock of dung or refuse.” In this meaning of a “heap or repository of filth or rubbish,” the *OED* explains, it was “often applied depreciatively to the earth, and to the human body. Also as the type of the lowest or most degraded situation.” The word might even extend to describe “opprobriously” a person “of evil life, or of base station.” Pulter's usage seems to correspond to these dismissive meanings. Just as the poems describe the body as an obstacle—the “earthly clog” of flesh and bones, “this loathsome ruined prison,” “this lump of earth”—so Pulter derogates attachment to “terrene hopes” and distraction by “terrene toys,” in part by describing the earth as a dunghill.² These associations are not unique to Pulter. George Herbert's “The Forerunners” describes attachment to the flesh as a love of dung: “Let foolish lovers if they will love dung” (sigs. H1v-H2r). In Anne

Bradstreet's "Four Ages of Man," the speaker of "middle age" describes how nothing gave her happiness but "the crop of my manured ground": "To greater things, I never did aspire, / My dunghill thoughts, or hopes, could reach no higher" (sig. E2r). Bradstreet's reference to "dunghill thoughts" suggests that the dunghill is a distraction from which one must turn away, an obstacle on the journey to transcendence.

But the seventeenth-century meanings of the dunghill were more nuanced—literally, layered—than the *OED* definition suggests. While some of Pulter's contemporaries used "dunghill" to describe what we might call a dump—the final destination of garbage—they most often used the words "dunghill" and "muckheap" to describe what we might call compost bins, that is, repositories where organic matter of various kinds was gathered and transformed into compost to enrich soil. If shit happens, as the saying goes, this kind of dunghill does not. It has to be carefully sited, constructed, and maintained. This kind of dunghill was, in the course of the seventeenth century, revalued and promoted as part of a larger reconsideration of waste as resource. The speaker of Pulter's "O, My Afflicted Solitary Soul" (Poem 28) wonders: "Why dost thou in this dunghill earth delight?" (EE, line 12). Why, indeed? Here I will turn to the specifics of seventeenth-century dunghills—how they were described and built, maintained and valued—in order to ground Pulter's figurations and question her apparent devaluation of the earth. Reading Pulter against Pulter, in effect, I scrutinize her lexicon (including "dunghill" itself as well as "moil" and "circle") and her topics (such as the pismire) to uncover the ways she acknowledges, perhaps unwittingly, the productive and created nature of dunghills. Ultimately, I will argue that Pulter composes her poems and her manuscript through a process that resembles dunghill construction more than it provides an alternative to, critique of, or escape from the dunghill. Her mucking about with material making thus provides a vehicle for and a contradiction of her seeming disavowal of this dunghill earth.

My sustained attention to Pulter's use of "dunghill" as an adjective to describe the earth engages recent discussions about literary form. Proposing that her poems are, in the most fecund sense, themselves dunghills resists Caroline Levine's argument that "bounded enclosures will always exclude" by focusing on the dunghill as a figure of the closed container as nonetheless permeable, capacious, and inclusive (7). The dunghill was a container as much as a pile, it was often covered, and so it is a model of the poem or the manuscript as bounded and bound. But just as the country grange both confined and did

not, so the dunghill gathered, held, and disseminated its contents. Unpredictably. It was a process as much as a thing, a collective described as a discrete entity. Similarly, fleshing out the material substrate and resonances of this figuration, as many other readers of early modern texts are now doing, unsettles even as it grounds its meaning, complicates rather than clarifies the poems.³ To recognize that the dunghill was a prominent feature of early modern agriculture and daily life is to think differently about the work of a privileged woman poet, not to land her in the muck but to insist on the ways she links classical allusion and the grubbiest part of her country grange (the waste that a populous household produced). Just as Pulter expresses interest in metaphysical transformations such as palingenesis (“View but this Tulip” [Poem 105]), her references to dunghills register attention to a transformation happening on her grounds, a transformation that models transcendence even as it is rooted in earthliness, embodiment, and decay.

Approaching developments in seventeenth-century agriculture as potentially generative contests the assumption that agriculture was, inevitably, a wrong turn.⁴ Taking a long view of human history, James C. Scott, for example, views grain agriculture as a negative development, linking it to state formation and oppression, beginning with harnessing fire and then moving to the domestication of plants, livestock, slaves, and women in the patriarchal family. As compelling as these arguments are, my own focus is not on whether we should ever have been farmers but rather on how our legacies from the past are layered, like the dunghill, and include some imaginative resources that can open up rather than foreclose alternative futures. While many histories of the early modern period rightly focus on the exploitation, exclusions, and devastations achieved by agricultural “improvements,” particularly land enclosures, the period also brought renewed attention to soil, compost, and the dunghill. Focusing on the dunghill opens up a fruitful connection between reflections on agricultural change in the early modern period and today. Industrial agriculture has contributed to environmental degradation and climate crisis, yet proponents of regenerative agriculture or agroecology suggest that perhaps farming can, if reimagined from the ground up, contribute to the solution. A crucial step in that process is acknowledging soil as a work rather than a given, a nonhuman community we can and should foster, and the foundation of our food system.⁵ “A heat-generating aerobic compost pile is a miraculous thing to behold,” writes Sander Katz; “The heat is a product of an alchemical mixing of the elements, and fills me with awe” (389). Wendell Berry extolls healthy

soil as “the great connector of lives, the source and destination of all. . . . It is alive itself. It is a grave, too, of course” (86). Such celebrations play a crucial role in advocating for microbial processes and the value of what is usually overlooked and downplayed. In other words, for regenerative agriculture, dunghill thoughts are themselves productive and inspiring.

This might at first seem a sharp contrast—Pulter and her contemporaries thought of the dunghill as a distraction from salvation, while proponents of soil renewal now see the dunghill as an engine of salvation. But that opposition is not so stark. Dunghills were fundamental in the early modern period too and they were not without their rapturous advocates, who argued for the value of seeing the ground as a work in progress that required and rewarded human intervention. Pulter’s poems implicitly reflect the views of dunghill advocates, since she, too, delights in making, builds layers, returns to topics and texts—and waits.

Pulter’s dunghill poems

Let us start from the bottom, turning to some of the dunghills in Pulter’s poetry. While Pulter’s speakers sometimes assume a human mastery over nature, at others they identify with soil, lying on and/or looking at the ground. Their gaze down and around unleashes inspiration rather than tethering it. “The Garden” (Poem 12) begins with the speaker lying alone in “my garden.” In “The Pismire” (Poem 35), the speaker leans his or her head against a sycamore, explaining:

My heavy eyes upon the ground did pore.
 Musing and looking on my Mother, Earth,
 To which I must, from whence I drew my breath:
 Then did I think how I to dust must turn,
 And lie forgotten in my silent urn [. . .] (Amplified Edition, lines 8–12)

Here we see the theological purpose of the conventional downward gaze, as the speaker contemplates the dust from which they are made and to which they must return. Joining the speaker’s downward gaze also affords a fresh perspective on the one biographical detail about Pulter that seems most to interest those who discover her: her maternity. One used to find details of accomplished women’s reproductive lives buried in footnotes. For example, in

his biography of Henrietta Maria, Quentin Bone explains: "Since the queen was frequently bearing children during these years, it would be monotonous to mention the birth of each child in the main body of this work" (86, n.58). In contrast, for many who first discover Pulter, the details of her pregnancies, births, and bereavements often seem to be the most interesting features of her biography. The poems themselves describe lying in and grieving, the alpha and omega of motherhood as the poems describe it. Taken together, Pulter's biography and poetry draw our attention to the mother's body as the fulcrum of birth and death. Her reproductive history, and the ways it impinges on the poetry, alert us to the complex histories subtending her reference to Mother Earth. Whereas Mother Earth sometimes appears in a sentimentalized and problematic form, as Stacy Alaimo and others point out,⁶ early modern writers, including Pulter, and the classical texts in which they found inspiration, use the image of Mother Earth to link womb and tomb, assigning the Earth Mother the power to consume and transform more than to nurture. In Anne Bradstreet's poem "Earth," the speaker (Earth) reminds readers that she is herself a cannibal mother: "in the abyссе of my darke wombe: / Your Cities and your selves I oft intombe." The poem closes with the reminder to the Earth's sons that "your mould is of my dust, / And after death, whether inter'd, or burn'd; / As earth at first, so into earth return'd" (12, 13). This image gives us a sense of the transformative power of the soil and the theological investment in dung and dust as the matter from which we come, the matter to which we return, the means by which we escape embodiment forever. The composting that takes place in the dunghill is how death becomes life, how matter decomposes and then re-matters.

In "The Pismire," the speaker's gaze moves from the Mother Earth to an anthill; the pismires or ants then provoke another level of dunghill thoughts. Even Pulter's decision to call the espied insect a "pismire" conjures images of piss and becoming mired in swampy grounds that can engulf and immobilize one. The pismire, Mother Earth, as we have seen above, and the dunghill go together. But thinking on their conjunction seems to animate rather than stall the speaker in this poem:

Then instantly, my busy mind was hurled,
 Thinking they were an emblem of the world.
 For all, which from this earth do draw their breath,
 Still moil and labor in this dunghill earth. (lines 26–29)

The verb “moil” corresponds to and reinforces “labor” here, inverting the order of the expression “toil and moil” to describe drudgery, the doubled words evoking the repetitive nature of the labor.⁷ “Moil” echoes another word with which it rhymes, soil, in its meaning “to soil” or defile. Coupled with “up,” moil can also mean dig up, uproot, or grub in the ground and even to “transform into a soft mass,” much as the processes of time and decay transform organic matter into compost or humankind into dust. This one word, then, to which Pulter returns in line 25, captures Pulter’s interest in the productive power of dissolution throughout her poems. It captures how laboring on the earth and in the dirt makes one dirty but also how this labor can be destructive, pointless, or generative (sometimes all at once). This particular poem links the speaker’s “busy mind,” the pismires’ labor, kings who *seem to have* “earth’s elixir” (or its most precious resource) without effort, and the sweaty, naked, sunburned female slave, who endlessly turns a mill. The hierarchies of king and slave, man and woman, poet and pismire morph into a circle in which all labor “but in vain.”

The description of the earth as a “dunghill” seems at first more negative than the description of it as a mother earlier in the poem. But the two are linked as images of origin more than they are opposed. In “The Garden,” the Rose claims a privileged top-down rather than bottom-up origin because she is “not sprung from dunghill earth / As aborigines; I, and the fruitful rice, / To enrich mankind, dropped down from paradise” (“The Garden” [Poem 12], Eardley, lines 182–85). As Eardley’s gloss reminds us, this refers to a story in the Qur’an of the rose and rice springing from Mohammed’s sweat. The Poppy, in response, overturns the Rose’s hierarchy to place soil above sweat, which she derides as a form of excrement (not unlike semen): “Let me and mine rise from the new-ploughed earth / While she proclaims her excrementious birth” (“The Garden” [Poem 12], Eardley, lines 255–56). As so often, Pulter here mingles theology with concrete knowledge of the practices that build and maintain soil. The Poppy insists that the earth that might be described as a dunghill is not “excrementious,” a now obsolete adjectival form of “excrement” (which was used in the seventeenth century to describe all outgrowths of the body, including hair, nails, and, as here, sweat), but rather “new-ploughed.” It rises up rather than drops down; it is an origin and not a remainder.

Whether dunghill or new plowed field, Pulter’s soil is created as much as found, a human production, like her poems, which suggests the implications

of disparaging it and the reasons for remaining attached to it. In “The Pismire,” the poem’s description of the pismires’ hard work suggests that they must be as busy as the speaker’s brain in order to create their hill. Another typical admonition against earthly attachments, “The Toad and the Spider” (Emblem 23), similarly emphasizes construction:

Then let these sad examples warn all those
 That do on worldly vanities repose:
 If in subsolary toys they trust,
 They build a fabric of dry sand or dust.
 Like little children in their pretty plays
 High pigeon-houses up of cards will raise.
 But like other earthly hopes, they build in vain:
 If they but laugh, they blow them down again.
 (Poem 88, “Amplified Edition (AE),” lines 38–44)

The imagery here of “building” a “fabric” and constructing “pigeon houses of cards” shows how Pulter imagines the dust of earthly life as a construction that must constantly be remade. This endless effort is key to her “sad examples” of how pointless human effort is in the face of mortality. Better to accept the futility of human effort and shift one’s focus to the next life. But the detailed descriptions of *building* a fabric of dust and *building* earthly hopes also convey the fact that human life consists of this building, however doomed and ephemeral. The anthill, the dunghill, the dust fabric and the house of cards are all processes of making parallel to the work of Pulter’s own “busy mind,” that is, her poems.

The seventeenth-century dunghill

One might assume that dunghills would not have much of a history except to the extent that they preserve or document history in the form of middens, a word already used for them in the early modern period. But, in the course of the seventeenth century, the dunghill accrued new value both because of the boom in a recycling economy and because of the role it played in what has been called an agricultural revolution, which particularly focused on increasing food production by means of soil amendment and crop rotation. Joan Thirsk argues that Columella’s first century *De re rustica* inspired a new vogue

in constructing dunghills and compost heaps in seventeenth-century England (“Making” 22). Columella argues that even where one cannot keep cattle or birds, and thus might miss out on the benefit of their excrement, the industrious husbandman

may amass and put together any kind of leaves, and collections of any other things, out of thickets and highways; . . . and mix them thoroughly with the dirt and sweepings of the court-yard; he may sink a pit . . . for laying up dung in, and gather into it, in one heap, ashes and dirt of the kennels, sinks, and common sewers, straw, and stubble, and the other things that are swept out of the house.⁸

As this passage makes clear, dung is not only excrement. It is any kind of organic matter that can enrich soil, particularly in its composted form. The waste of human lives and manufacture mingles with outgrowths or excrements of plants and animals. That is why so many of the verbs in Columella’s passage focus on the human agency of collection and composition: amass, put together, cut down, lay up, gather in.

As part of a larger seventeenth-century process of reconceptualizing waste as a form of wealth—which included recycling clothing and mining saltpeter from the urine-soaked soil under dovecotes, stables, and church pews—dung, in this broad sense of composted organic matter, became a kind of currency.⁹ Dung could be bought and sold and even appears in estate inventories as part of personal wealth.¹⁰ The poor man’s “Muck-hill,” writes Adam Moore, might become “(his *Philosophers stone*),” capable, that is, of transforming him from poor to rich (sig. F2v).¹¹ The seventeenth-century accounts of the wealth to be found in waste long predate the Victorian works that have come to define what Carolyn Steedman calls “Dust Studies” and Patricia Yeager the “detritus aesthetic” (Steedman 157; Yeager 327). Scavenging was already a crucial part of the seventeenth-century recycling economy. Every house and shop had its dunghill; every common ground was, in part, a kind of dunghill where people piled excess wastes. While an unkempt dunghill might lurk behind the house, and dung could be piled “almost any place,” dung heaped in front of urban houses was subject to scrutiny by “streetlookers.” Those charged with keeping a disorderly dunghill had to pay a fee that was then used to clean the city and repair streets. Objections to dunghills, Walter King argues, focused less on potential

health hazards and more on how they impeded traffic or created what would now be called “visual blight” (450).

Far from being a country pastime, dunghills flourished in London because city dwellers could gather the widest array of ingredients. The Reverend Richard Baxter marvels that in London

They have all the dung of the city . . . And there they make a great dung hill, of one row of the superficies of the green earth, and another row of weeds, and another of lime, and so again and again, till it be near two yards high; and this they leave many months to rot, and then carry it to their ground. And they come near 20 miles for waggon loads of old rotten rags, which some make great gain by selling, hiring abundance of poor people to rake them out of dunghills. And though they give a great price for them, it so much furthereth their grass and corn as fully recompenseth their cost and labour. (184)

Why would Londoners hire poor people to rake rags out of dunghills—in order to add them to “a great dung hill”? We can see the two meanings of dunghill at work here. A dunghill out of which one rakes rags for resale is a common pile of garbage, rather than a compost heap being carefully tended by a farmer or gardener. But even such a dunghill is not exactly a dead end for rags; it is instead an archive or reservoir of materials that can be reclaimed for other uses. In *Farewell to Husbandry*, Gervase Markham includes in his lists of possible soil amendments any rags, shreds, and “base peeces of woollen cloth whatsoever, which are only cast out, and fit for nothing but the dung-hill” as well as hooves and trimming from butchery “which indeed, if not for this use, are otherwise utterly cast away to the dung hill and despised” (sigs. E8v, E7v). Markham specifies wool here (and in the margin, “Raggess of wollen cloth”), perhaps because linen rags were used in paper making and so participated in a separate recycling economy, which Joshua Calhoun calls “the rags-to-paper economy” (328).¹² To enrich ground, Markham proposes diverting wastes from dunghills (or dumps) directly onto fields, where he describes shredded rags and chopped hooves scattered thickly on the surface and then later plowed under.

Although Markham recommends an active and ingenious process of collecting “manures” or soil amendments, which he recommends spreading over the ground, many of his contemporaries advocated carefully constructing a

dunghill or muck heap, that is, a place or even a structure where one might gather, mix, and ripen the organic materials that would become “dung” or compost. Especially in the context of *The Pulter Project*, a worksite in progress, we might call this a “site,” a place of making. While composting instructions today tend to focus on turning and temperature, early modern writers emphasize positioning and protecting the pile. Columella suggests a covered pit and early modern writers usually do too. Sir Hugh Plat anticipates that the “Farmers of our land” will complain that “it is too costly to build barnes, or other covertes for dunghills,” yet he advises his readers that they should “make a little square receptacle of bricke” at the bottom of a hill to serve as a “pit or cesterne.” He expresses contempt for those who don’t have the sense to cover their dunghills: “Al these simple sots which leave their muckheaps abroad, and subject to the weather, shew them selves to bee but meane husband men, and that they never tasted of any true naturall philosophie.” In case the reader is in any doubt, the margin insists: “muckheaps ought to be covered.”¹³ The muckheap, like a wife, must be under coverture; the husbandman worthy of the name will go to the expense and trouble of building a structure to contain and protect his muck.

Once a site is chosen and a receptacle constructed, the next step is placing the ingredients inside. In the passage from Columella, the translator uses the verb “laying up.” Versions of this verb appear in many English accounts of dunghill construction, suggesting depositing, packing down, and smoothing out. It indicates both saving (as in laying by or laying up, as the pismires “lay” grain in store) and structuring (in terms of creating layers). The dunghill does not rely on a human composter to mix and turn it. Instead, time and decay break the layers down. Plat also uses the noun “lay,” in the sense associated with masonry—a layer or stratum—when he advises readers on dunghill construction:

[Make] first a lay of dung of a foot in thicnesse, & then a lay of earth upon the same, and then another lay of dung upon that earth, and so proceeding in the maner of *Stratum super stratum*, til your muck heape bee as large and high as you woulde have it. (*Jewell sig. E2r*)

Plat draws attention to the ways the muck heap is a composition, built up layer by layer (like a pigeon-house of cards). Plat also uses “lay” as a verb to describe designing and planting a garden, as we might describe “laying out” a

garden; “lay” might even stand in for “plant.” One gardening manual, to choose but one example of many, offers this advice on planting hops: “when that ye plant them, ye shall lay in every Hill three or foure rootes” (Mascall 86; cf. Plat, *Floraes* sig. B4v). “Lay” is still commonly used as a verb to mean putting down or putting to rest (as in “laying dust” or “laying a ghost”).¹⁴ In Pulter’s poem “Must I Thus Ever Interdicted Be?” (Poem 55), the speaker says she will “lay my sins upon my Savior’s score” (Poem 55, EE, l. 8). This notion of putting to rest connects to the verb’s particular agricultural meanings. Gervase Markham, who frequently uses “lay” as a verb, advises the English husbandman to “lay fallow that field” and “fallow the field he will lay to rest the yeare following” (Markham, *English* sig. I3v; *Markhams Farewell* sig. M1r). Sylvester’s translation of Du Bartas’ *Devine Weekes & Works* explains God’s rest on the seventh day, and the importance of honoring the sabbath through bodily rest, by analogy to this agricultural practice: “A Field, left lay for some few Years, will yield / The richer Crop, when it againe is till’d” (Du Bartas sig. O5r).

The action of laying the field fallow, leaving it lay, or laying it to rest turned it into a “lay,” a noun often spelled “ley,” that is, a field or arable strip left to rest unplanted for a while. As John Evelyn describes this, “worn-out and exhausted lay-fields” can “by coverture, shade, rest, and forbearance for a season . . . enjoy their Sabbaths” (Evelyn sig. D8r). Indeed, the lay-field’s sabbatical (enjoined in *Exodus* 23.10) anticipates and provides a model for human sabbaticals.¹⁵ According to Thirsk, farmers learned this trick after the Black Death; the practice was well established by the seventeenth century, when these leys or temporary pastures might be left as long as twelve years between plantings.¹⁶

Hester Pulter was herself a “Ley” in that her maiden name was “Ley.” While this might at first seem to be pushing a chain of associations a bit too far, some seventeenth-century lexicographers linked the name or suffix “ley” to lay fields. In *A Restitution of Decayed Intelligence*, Richard Verstegan discusses place names ending in legh, ley, or lea, claiming that they were “anciently all one,” and referred to “grownd that lieth unmanured and wildly overgrown, as divers of our surnames therein ending do notefy, as for example, the honorable surname of Barkley, of birchtrees anciently called berk, Bromley, of the store of broom, and Bramley, of ley or legh grownd bearing brambles” (sig. Oo2v). Verstegan addresses such place names in a chapter on the surnames of English families and their relation to particular locations.

Regardless of whether his etymologies are reliable, he establishes a link between the termination “ley” as part of a place or family name and unplanted ground, although he views that ground as untended (unmanured and overgrown) rather than purposefully left fallow (plowed but not planted) as a strategy for increasing fertility. When the noun forms of “lay” describe a layer of organic matter or a strip or planting band of fallowed land, they capture human efforts to enrich soil rather than neglect. Still, Verstegan helps us to connect Pulter’s maiden name to the agricultural meanings of the words “lay” and “ley.” That bond of place and person might offer another perspective on Pulter’s depictions of being “confined,” “immured” and “enslaved” (“Why Must I Thus Forever Be Confined” [Poem 57]). Like the lay-fields Evelyn describes above, she might respond to the “coverture, shade, rest, and forbearance for a season” imposed upon her—that is, marriage, pregnancy, and rustication—by flowering anew.

Pulter often uses the word “lay” as a noun but with a meaning that, at first, appears to be entirely different from its agricultural meanings. She uses it in the *OED* sense of “A short lyric or narrative poem intended to be sung” (“lay,” n. 4, 1a). She recounts how her daughter Jane, when alive, “passed her happy days / In singing heavenly and the muses’ lays” (Poem 11). In this poem, even though some of Jane’s “lays” are “heavenly,” she sings them on earth, prior to her death. But Pulter also uses the word “lay” to describe the poetry to which she aspires in heaven. In “Desire” (Poem 18), Pulter asks God:

O then be pleased my dust to raise,
 To sing thy everlasting praise,
 In those celestial unknown lays,
 With life and love. (AE, lines 9–12)

As Sarah Ross argues in this issue, Pulter’s earthly poetry is a kind of practice for these “celestial lays,” which are, for humans, not-yet-conceivable. Although poems might also be viewed as “terrene toys” that keep her gaze earthbound, Pulter more often construes them as preparation for the divine. For example, in “Why Must I Thus Forever Be Confined” (Poem 57), the speaker associates the liberty to be found only when she is “dispersed” to “atoms,” with “being enfranchised, free as my verse” (EE, lines 101–03). In its widely varied meanings as a noun, “lay”—as compost pile striation, fallowed planting strip, or poem—glows with a verb-ish halo, drawing our attention to the processes of

making and mucking. The word links the aspirational and otherworldly—the celestial lay—to the grubbiest kind of mucking, the high to the low, rest to work. All of these lays are investments in the future.

It is not just the word “lay” that ties poetry and salvation to dunghill construction and agricultural practice. The cyclic process of composting had theological resonance. Pulter wrote four poems called “The Circle.” A circle seems to bear many meanings for her: the “sad circle” of unending “sighs and tears” (“The Circle [1],” [Poem 17], EE, lines 9, 1); the inevitable dispersion into dust (“The Circle [2]” [Poem 21]); the earth’s “eternal motion” (“The Circle [3]” [Poem 25]); the movement from chaos to creation to the fall to the passion and from virgin’s womb, to tomb, to resurrection (“The Circle [4]” [Poem 36]). The circle is, then, an individual’s emotions, the earth mother, human history, and divine time. It is entrapment and enfranchisement.¹⁷ It is the shape of human life as it is captured in God’s punishment to Adam and Eve—“for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return” (KJV 3.19)—and a plot that informs Pulter’s constant references to dust.

The circle also figures what later advocates of compost have called “the law of return,” by which what comes out of the earth is returned to it to enrich it (Howard xxv).¹⁸ The earth’s future fertility depends on its intermingling and absorption of the dead, which returns us to the classical and early modern understanding of earth as a mother who delivers, consumes, and transforms her offspring, as womb and tomb. It also points to the intimate connections of human and humus. Stacy Alaimo coins the term “trans-corporeality” to describe the intermeshment of life forms, the erosion of the human/non-human boundary, and “the recognition that ‘the environment’ is not located somewhere out there, but is always the very substance of ourselves” (*Bodily Natures* 4).¹⁹ We might take the dunghill as a model of that tangled, messy, mired “us,” a singular subject that is simultaneously collective, porous, and melting. It is also a model for how we come to know our own transcorporeality. Donna Haraway proposes “material-semiotic composting, as theory in the mud, as muddle”; she also suggests that we, “chipping and shredding and layering like a mad gardener, make a much hotter compost pile for still possible pasts, presents, and futures” (31, 32, 57). While Haraway emphasizes a zealous chaos here, her choice of the neater word “layering” resonates with those “lays” we have been considering, connecting Pulter’s dunghills and manuscript to the hot compost pile for which she advocates. Like Mother Earth, the dunghill—origin and destination—is one of the circle’s many manifestations.

The dunghill in the post-Reformation imagination

To the extent that the dunghill has theological resonances, those too might be historically specific. Steven Mullaney charts the shift from the charnel house as “a kind of way-station for the dead as they made their slow progress from this life to the next, from one dust to another” and “a concrete and material form of social memory, a sort of archive whose volumes, composed of bone rather than vellum, recorded the deep structure or genealogy of feelings in the city, the social and familial integuments of its long history” to the “disenchanted landfill” where bodies became “refuse or garbage.” For him, in an unintentionally Pulterian idiom, the shift from charnel house to landfill is “an emblem” of the “affective dimensions of reform” (2, 3, 4). But Pulter’s poetry shows us that even in the mid-seventeenth century, the landfill or dunghill is not disenchanted. It remains way-station and archive.²⁰

Donne vividly describes “this death of *Incineration*, and dispersion of dust,” the horrible “publishing” of one’s private, bounded self when one’s dust is “mingled with the dust of every Highway and of every Dunghill, and swallowed in every puddle and pond” (Donne sigs. C4v-D1r). The dunghill for him is the emblem of the horrifying dissolution that will precede reclaiming one’s self. The gift of resurrection, then, is the gift of reprivatizing one’s property in one’s self.²¹ As Ramie Targoff points out, Donne here ignores the Church of England’s “dismissal of the idea that we might retain our own body parts,” turning, instead, to an older tradition of “the material continuity of the resurrected self” already being questioned in the middle ages (169, 171). Pulter, too, seems to imagine the resurrection of the individual body. But her poems long for as well as fear the dispersion of dust.

We might contrast Donne’s horror of mingling to Brent Dawson’s reading of Grille in Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*. Grille, freed from Acrasia’s spell, is, according to the Palmer, “of the donghill kind” that “delights in filth and foule incontinence.” But isn’t everyone? Dawson argues that “what all living beings share is the fact that they emerge out of a heterogeneous muck to which they also return.” “Spenserian slime,” Dawson contends, “thus inhabits the paradoxical space where corruption and creation intertwine” (41, 26, 27). One might also find this heterogeneous muck, the productive conjunction of corruption and creation, in accounts of the chaos that precedes creation and provides its prime matter. Lucy Hutchinson describes “a yett confused undigested Masse” in her translation of Lucretius’s *De Rerum Natura*, and “A rude

congestion without form or grace" in her *Order and Disorder*; Milton describes "Matter unformed and void."²²

We see how the dunghill functions as end and as beginning in its appearances in Shakespeare. In *King Lear*, Cornwall orders that the body of the servant who came to Gloucester's defense be thrown "Upon the dunghill"; in 2 *Henry VI*, Alexander Iden drags the body of Jack Cade to a dunghill. The dunghill claims these rebels because it was also proverbially described as the matrix of the lowly and contemptible, who were therefore called "dunghill grooms" and "dunghill curs." In Q1, Hamlet castigates himself as a "dunghill idiot slave" rather than the more familiar "rogue and peasant slave."²³ This logic persists in the insult "Lady Muck" and in the expression that one "comes from muck" ("muck, n.1"). At one level, writers like Hugh Plat had to counter these associations in order to convince landowners that they needed to be dunghill lords. At another level, even these common usages suggest the dunghill is generative, breeding the mudblood lower orders. Jeffrey Masten has argued that "the fundament lies productively in a strangely active-passive position: it is the ground but also the groundwork; the seat but also the offspring; the founding and the foundation" ("Fundament" 135). The dunghill is just such a groundwork. In John Gay's poem "The Barley Mow and the Dunghill," the barley mow beseeches the farmer that the "vile dunghill," "those poor sweepings of a groom," should be kept out of sight: "A thing so mean must give offence" (l. 24, 25, 28). In response, the dunghill proclaims itself the "benefactor" of its own thankless offspring, the barley mow: "My warm assistance gave thee birth, / Or thou hadst perished low in earth" (33–34). Written in the early eighteenth century, Gay's poem does not celebrate a timeless pastoral wisdom. Instead, it responds to particulars of contemporary social life—ungrateful upstarts who repudiate their origins—by means of the specifics of agricultural practice that were more innovative than timeless at that moment and that insisted on the benefits of dunghills.

As I have worked on my editions for *The Pulter Project*, I have often thought on dunghills, especially as I have assembled my curations (that is, those materials I amass around a given poem) and then, via those curations, returned to the poems to add more "lays." If Pulter's manuscript is a found object—indeed, a recovered one—it is assembled out of found objects as well.²⁴ Alice Eardley describes Pulter's emblem writing as a kind of assembly: "In the composition of emblems, the author displayed her skill not through originality but through the witty or pertinent reappropriation and juxtaposition of

preexisting material, a significant proportion of which would have been familiar to her reader” (“Indivisibles” 131). Pulter seems to appropriate, juxtapose, and rework “preexisting” material in all of her poems, not just her emblems. We only notice it when we can identify the dunghills from which she draws. Does that make the work less original, less crafted—found but not made? In the passage just quoted from Eardley, for example, she seems to apologize for Pulter’s lack of originality, her use of the preexisting and familiar.

Each contributor to *The Pulter Project*, including our anonymous reviewers, recognizes (or conjures) different filaments connecting Pulter’s manuscript to other texts and ideas. Our collaboration with one another and with Pulter means that our creativity and resourcefulness—and our limitations—become part of the process of spotting what Pulter might have found and reused. Our curations, then, participate in what Jennifer Mae Hamilton and Astrida Neimanis call “composting feminisms.” Valuing composting as “a material metaphor,” Hamilton and Neimanis uphold it as a model of ethical acknowledgment of predecessors, particularly feminists: “Composting as practice demands that we pay attention to what goes into the compost bin. It implores that we attend to our critical metabolisms—to notice not only what is being transmogrified, but also under what conditions, why, and to what effect” (503). The glosses and curations we lay up on *The Pulter Project* site attempt to model not just what Pulter put into her dunghill but what we are collaborating to contribute to ours and our indebtedness to predecessors, even with regard to a manuscript whose editorial history is so relatively brief.

Does tracking down the “preexisting materials” Pulter may have gathered in composing a poem explain her poetry or downgrade her creative achievement? A poetry of re-appropriation and juxtaposition might absorb and break down its components—as a dunghill does—so that one does not necessarily recognize the components. Mary Douglas argues that the crucial achievement of composting is the erosion of recognition—“So long as identity is absent, rubbish is not dangerous” (196–97). Today, assessments of docupoetry and other literary forms that gather and repurpose found materials also emphasize transcending recognition. The assumption is often that art lies in the transformation; simply assembling isn’t art and isn’t original.²⁵ We might question this assumption in general, but it is particularly anachronistic with regard to early modern writers like Pulter.

Although the gathering and repurposing of material is often associated with women as a derivative, imitative form of authorship, the more we learn

about early modern writing, the more we know that all writers worked by means of what Columella calls, in the eighteenth-century translation quoted above, amassing, putting together, mixing, and laying up.²⁶ The form of the poem or emblem then operates as the container or bin holding these assemblages.²⁷ In *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, Robert Burton famously compares himself to a bee gathering, an apothecary mixing, and a good housewife weaving. All make one work out of many assembled pieces. Yet Burton describes the resulting text as “a rhapsody of rags gather[ed] together from several dunghills, excrements of authors, toys and fopperies confusedly tumbled out . . . ill-composed, indigested.” Writers might criticize one another for this, he concedes, but they all do it: “all thieves, they pilfer out of the old writers to stuff up their new comments, scrape Ennius’s dung-hills . . . as I have done” (26, 115). Burton here refers to Donatus’s story, probably apocryphal, in which Virgil defends himself for reading Quintus Ennius by saying he did so only so as to cull gold from the dung (*aurum in stercore quaero*).²⁸ In this story, as in Burton’s citation of it, the dunghill is an archive, a resource for the writer. Digging and gathering are not unusual; even Virgil did it. But you are supposed to transform what you find more than Burton feels he has done.

We again find the dunghill associated with what precedes poetry—what poetry finds and then transforms and transcends—in Joseph Addison’s argument that “anything that is disagreeable when looked upon, pleases us in an apt description” because the pleasure resides in “the action of the mind, which compares the ideas that arise from words, with the ideas that arise from the objects themselves.” He tests the limits of this proposal by turning to the dunghill. “For this reason, therefore, the description of a dunghill is pleasing to the imagination, if the image be represented to our minds by suitable expressions; . . . we are not so much delighted with the image that is contained in the description, as with the aptness of the description to excite the image” (*Spectator* 418).²⁹ But what would an apt description of a dunghill be, since it is more often mentioned than described? In works such as those by Markham or Plat, the apt description is of a process, not a thing; they offer instructions on how to make a dunghill. Looking at early modern sources opens up a deeper connection between dunghills and poetry: the dunghill not as object of description, nor as stockpile of raw materials, but as a model of the poetic process. A given poem might be a dunghill, not only drawing together a range of found materials but, as Elizabeth Zeman Kolkovich argues in this issue, holding lays of Pulter’s contributions over time as she continued to ruminate,

add, and revise. The manuscript as a whole might also be a kind of dunghill, with its lays of different hands and its evidence that Pulter returned to particular poems, as she returned repeatedly to certain topics.

If we think of a poem or the whole manuscript as a dunghill, built up by gathering and laying, then we *might* think of the editing process as a kind of reverse engineering. Like archeologists assessing coprolites (or fossilized dung) to figure out ancient diets,³⁰ then, by this logic, we might start with the manuscript as a kind of excrement or leftover, and then try to figure out what Pulter might have been working with or thinking about. But I do not assume Pulter necessarily knew the texts I place in the dunghill or curation for a given poem; nor does she always seem to have digested the materials I guess she might have eaten. As an editor and a curator, I am making my Pulter through conjecture and assemblage, rather than reconstructing or unveiling an original. For me, curating for *The Pulter Project: Poet in the Making* is an ongoing process of building up rather than breaking down. It embroiders or descants on the poems, I think, rather than dissecting them or boxing them in.³¹ Laying up Pulter's sources, analogues, and aftershocks, one sees just how widely and eclectically Pulter seems to have read, how creative, and sometimes how bracingly strange, she is. Mucking around with Pulter, I am seeing the seventeenth century itself as a dunghill ripe with surprises.³² I lay up in a kind of parallel operation to Pulter's, which does not aspire to reproduce her process but rather to model a virtual version of it, imagining and practicing a creative, open-ended collection and construction process, a labor that is grubby but purposeful. Like Pulter, I might go back later to tweak and add. But as we build our site, we must also guard against link rot, that is, generative decomposition's frustrating twin. Rather than what precedes poetry, the dunghill is poetry; dunghill poetics invites dunghill editing as a similarly creative act, a process of making and mucking that attaches one to this dunghill earth, to the future, and to one's co-muckers.

NOTES

1. All references to Pulter's poems refer to *The Pulter Project* Elemental Editions (EE) or Amplified Editions (AE), unless these are unavailable, in which case I refer to Alice Eardley's edition. References to dunghills include: "this dunghill earth" ("The Pismire" [Poem 35], EE, line 30, and "Why Must I Thus Forever Be Confined" [Poem 57], EE, line 47); "scorning this dunghill globe of earth" ("The Perfection of Patience and Knowledge" [Poem 39], EE, line 20); "this dirty, dunghill earth" ("Pardon Me, My Dearest Love" [Poem 42], EE, line 7); "this dunghill earth" ("Of a Young Lady at Oxford,

1646" [Poem 43], EE, line 78); and "this base dunghill Earth" ("The Manucodiats" [Poem 71, Emblem 5], EE, line 2).

2. Pulter's descriptions of the body include: "earthly clog" ("The Pismire" [Poem 35], AE, line 36); "My soul's so clogged with flesh and bones" ("To Aurora [3]" [Poem 34], AE, line 23); "this loathsome ruined prison" ("Made When I Was Not Well" [Poem 51], AE, line 2); and "this lump of earth" ("This Fell Catablepe" [Poem 98, Emblem 33], AE, line 14). References to earthly "toys," in addition to those discussed below in "The Pismire," include "terrene toys" ("Mark But Those Hogs" [Poem 99, Emblem 34], Eardley, line 15); and "sub-solar toys" ("The Toad and the Spider" [Poem 88, Emblem 23], AE, line 40). See also "terrene hopes" in "Of a Young Lady at Oxford, 1646" (Poem 43), EE, line 79.

3. See, among others, Cornes; Crow; Heffernan; and Rosenberg.

4. See Dolan, *Digging the Past*.

5. See Montgomery.

6. See Alaimo, *Undomesticated* 173, 180. My discussion here is informed by early modern eco-feminism. As just one example, see the foundational work of Munroe and Laroche.

7. Pulter also links "fruitless grief" and "moiling in the earth" in "To Aurora [3]" (Poem 34), AE, line 19. I am grateful to Wendy Wall for reminding me that, in the final couplet of "Why Must I Thus Forever Be Confined" (Poem 57), Pulter repeats the "hurled/world" rhyme.

8. The quotation is from an eighteenth-century translation, *Of Husbandry*, Book 2, chapter 15, "Of the several Kinds of Dung," 91. Compare this to the Loeb edition, 3.14: 5–6.

9. See Cressy on how saltpeter, a crucial ingredient in gunpowder, was "extracted at high cost from soil rich in dung and urine" (74–75), leading to proposals for a "command economy of excrement and urine, centrally mobilized for the kingdom's security. . . . At the heart of the matter lay the vitalizing power of urine and excrement, and the miracle of nitrous-rich soil" (105, 111). On saltpeter, see also Goldstein; and Martin.

10. See King 447; Morrison 76.

11. The poor man's muckhill might then stand parallel to the king's possession of "earth's elixir" in Pulter's poem "The Pismire" (Poem 35), AE, line 31.

12. See also Craig. Among the many additions to the dunghill that are specified, I do not find paper, although references to its use as waste paper are well-known, such as Dryden's reference to "neglected authors" becoming "Martyrs of pies, and reliques of the bum" ("Mac Flecnoc," line 101). I am grateful to Megan Heffernan for conversations about paper and waste.

13. Plat's most detailed instructions on composting and dunghills appear in a sixty-page text published as part of *The Jewell House of Art and Nature* but with separate pagination: *Diverse new sorts of Soyle not yet brought into any publique use, for manuring both of pasture and arable ground*. Quotations are from sigs. Eir, Eiv, and B4r (marginal comment). On Plat and "the economics" and "poetics of manure," see Mukherjee 93–144. On composting and on manuring as a complex process of care, see also Cornes; Dolan, "Compost/Composition;" Goldstein; Jones; Martin; and Oppermann.

14. As a verb, "lay" has an extraordinary range of meanings, moving from the simple "to cause to lie," to the more violent transitive meaning, "To bring or cast down from an erect position (in Old English often, to strike down, slay)"; "to lay to ground . . . to stretch upon or bring to the ground; to bring low, throw down, overthrow, destroy"; and, of the wind or rain, "To beat down (crops)." Another cluster of meanings includes "To 'bring to bed' of a child; to deliver (a mother)," which affiliates with the twentieth-century sexual

meaning “to have sexual intercourse with.” A third cluster of meanings includes “To cause to subside (the sea, a tempest, a cloud of dust, etc.); to put a stop to (an annoyance) (*obsolete*); to allay (anxiety), appease (anger, appetite, etc.)” and “To deposit *in* the grave; to bury” as in “to lay one’s bones” or to be buried (in a specified place). Even this inadequate survey suggests that the word “lay” moves from birth to death, from planting crops to beating them down. See “lay, v.1.”

15. On the Jewish practice of letting soil rest for one year after every six years of farming, see Blake.

16. See *Alternative*, 19, 24. This paragraph does not exhaust the meanings of “lay” as a noun, many now obsolete, which have included: lake or pool; hiring; religious law; bill or reckoning; a wager, bet or stake; a place of lodging or lair; a kind of alloyed metal or pewter; the batten of a loom (associated with lathe); and, as an adjective, nonclerical or non-professional persons. It could even be used as “an exclamatory substitute for Lord” (“lay,” *int.*, *OED*).

17. See, in this issue, Elizabeth Kolkovich’s discussion of Pulter’s responses to child loss and grief, and Elizabeth Scott-Baumann’s discussion of Pulter’s circles.

18. Recycling is routinely figured as a circle, from the bottom of plastic containers and the sides of bins to more abstract evocations such as: “Through the provision of night-soil, men, women, and children could join the ever-turning circle of production in agriculture which was so central to the life of pre-industrial society” (Woodward 189). The “ever-turning circle” remains a crucial agricultural figuration. For example, see Parks on the pioneering approach at Long Meadow Ranch in Napa that they call “full circle farming.”

19. See also Mentz.

20. As Berry and Katz’s language suggests, disenchantment about dung may never have occurred—or the dunghill may be achieving re-enchantment. See Bennett 165–66.

21. As Targoff points out, Donne “rewrites the entire life cycle as a continuous act of dying,” vividly “describing its daily horror” (163). In contrast, see Herbert, who describes somewhat wistfully how monuments sever “the good fellowship of dust / And spoil the meeting” among the dead (“Church Monuments,” *The Temple*, sig. C5r).

22. Hutchinson, *Translation of Lucretius* 5:453, 325; Hutchinson, *Order and Disorder* 17; Milton, *Paradise Lost* 7:233.

23. *King Lear* 3.7, F l. 96; Q l. 98; 2 *Henry VI*, 4.10.76; 1 *Henry 6*, 1.3.14; 2 *Henry IV* 5.3.95; *Hamlet* Q1, Scene 7, l. 384.

24. The 2016 Shakespeare Association of America workshop with which my engagement with Pulter began, led by Leah Knight and Wendy Wall, was called “Hester Pulter’s Manuscript and Other Found Objects.”

25. See Love 435.

26. On the specifics of early modern authorship, and the challenges it poses to anachronistic assumptions about originality and intellectual property, see Ezell and Masten (*Textual*). On texts as assemblages, see Smyth, *Material*; Fleming et al; and Rosenberg. Calhoun, Craig, and other scholars working on papermaking help us see the page itself as a textile, weaving together salvaged materials whose traces sometimes show and sometimes do not.

27. See Knight; Levine; Smyth, *Autobiography* 42; Wall 29, 198.

28. Latin words for dunghill often focus on location, as in the word “stercorarium” (the place for dung). In the Latin, this passage refers to dung and not dunghills. See Donatus

section 46; Cassiodorus 114; Goldschmidt 66. Donatus's story underpins this nineteenth-century description of ballads as dunghills: "The immense collections of Broadside ballads, the Roxburghe and Pepys, of which but a small part has been printed, doubtless contain some ballads we should at once declare to possess the popular character, and yet on the whole they are veritable dung-hills, in which, only after a great deal of sickening grubbing, one finds a very moderate jewel" (Francis James Child, writing to Svend Gruntvig Hustvedt [15 August 1872], cited by Brown 67). Pope claimed that eighteenth-century authors reversed this process: "As Virgil is said to have read Ennius, out of his dunghill to draw gold, so may our author read Shakespeare, Milton and Dryden for the contrary end, to bury their gold in his own dunghill" (61). Similarly linking bad poets to the dunghill, Thomas Nashe, in his preface to Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*, laments that after Sidney's death, all that is left are inferior poets, "*Ignis fatuus* and grosse fatty flames (such as commonly arise out of Dunghilles)" (sig. A3v). I am grateful to Rebecca Laroche for alerting me to this passage. In contrast, Burton suggests that all poets are dunghill poets.

29. This passage from Addison then informs Wimsatt and Brooks's *Literary Criticism*, in which they refer to the power of poetry to evoke even "an unpleasant object like a dung-hill" (257n9). While Addison does not refer to Virgil and Ennius's "dunghills," he does link Virgil to dung when he offers this backhanded compliment on the *Georgics*: "He delivers the meanest of his precepts with a kind of grandeur, he breaks the clods and tosses the dung about with an air of gracefulness" ("Essay" 159).

30. See Owen's use of such a method.

31. While I thus attempt to avoid the problem Felski diagnoses of the context as a box that shuts down or closes in meaning, I embrace her notion that context "stinks" by thinking in terms of generative and unpredictable breakdown and bloom. On the critic's agency in "contexting," see also Dolan, "Social" and *True*.

32. This is in line with the model of a digital edition as a "curated assemblage of materials" and a "guided pathway" through them that Pender and Smith propose (266, 267).

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