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Watery Discourses in Seventeenth-Century England: Fishing, Society, and Divinity in Izaak Walton's "The Compleat Angler"

ABSTRACT: The devotion and time spent in recreational activities are a defining trait of humans as a distinct species. Sports, games, and hobbies do not fulfill a biological urge to sustain life, yet for some they make life worth living. In seventeenth-century England, Izaak Walton, a devout Anglican Royalist, passionately explained how recreational fishing had the potential to make one feel content with one's life. First published in the wake of the devastating English Civil Wars, "The Compleat Angler" is one of the most reprinted books in the English language and much more than just an angling manual. Walton's discourse is rife with interpretative potential for understanding the social and religious contexts of a shattered country. This article argues that "The Compleat Angler" is a "symbol" of postwar society, notes its subtle socio-political messaging, and presents it as a moralistic, environmental, and religious text. Through the guise of an angling manual, Walton offered criticisms of English culture and advocated for a more tranquil and contemplative society.

KEYWORDS: early modern history; England; English Civil Wars; Izaak Walton; *The Compleat Angler*; angling; Christianity; Anglican Church; literary ecology; morality

Introduction

"I doubt not but if you and I did converse together but a few hours, to leave you possess with the same high and happy thoughts that now possess me of it; not only of the Antiquity of Angling, but that it deserves commendations, and that it is an Art, and an Art worthy the knowledg and practice of a wise man."¹ This quote from *The Compleat Angler* highlights the great artistry and respect that its author—Izaak Walton (1593–1683)—associated with the sport of angling. Recreational fishing, or angling, is the specific act of catching fish with a rod and hook (angle) for the express purpose of enjoyment rather than the mere procurement of food.² According to seventeenth-century cookbooks, England—a place where cured fish had been a staple protein for generations—was undergoing a culinary transformation as fresh fish became a more desired item on people's menus.³ Also around this time, the most famous angling manual, Izaak Walton's *The Compleat Angler* (1653), was released.⁴ To this day, *The Compleat Angler* remains one of the most reprinted books in the English language.⁵

¹ Izaak Walton, *The Compleat Angler* [1676], ed. Jonquil Bevan (Oxford University Press, 1983), 189.

² Angling refers to catching fish with a line and hook, while "fishing" can include using nets, spearfishing, etc. For the broad history of European fishing in the late Middle Ages prior to the publication of *The Compleat Angler*, see Richard C. Hoffman, *Fishers' Craft and Lettered Art: Tracts on Fishing from the End of the Middle Ages* (University of Toronto Press, 1997). For modern practices of angling and its sustainability, see Jacob W. Brownscombe et al., "Best Practices for Catch-and-Release Recreational Fisheries—Angling Tools and Tactics," *Fisheries Research* 186, no. 3 (2017): 693–705.

³ Alison Locker, "The Decline in the Consumption of Stored Cod and Herring in Post-Medieval and Early Industrialised England: A Change in Food Culture," in *Cod and Herring: The Archaeology and History of Medieval Sea Fishing*, ed. James H. Barrett and David C. Orton (Oxbow Books, 2016), 99–108.

⁴ Izaak Walton and Charles Cotton, *The Compleat Angler or, The Contemplative Man's Recreation* (Modern Library Classics, 2004).

⁵ Benjamin Guyer, "Izaak Walton's 'Holy War': 'The Compleat Angler' in Polemical Context," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 47, no. 2 (2016): 283.

Walton's style is soothingly meditative and presents angling as not just peaceful and gentle but also as an honorable and contemplative recreation that inspires virtuous traits in the angler. *The Compleat Angler* was published during a tumultuous time in English history—following the brutal English Civil Wars (1642–1651), four years after the execution of Charles I (1649), and during the so-called English Interregnum (1649–1660). Izaak Walton, a devoted Royalist and Anglican, subtly yet decisively asserts his ideology throughout the text. *The Compleat Angler* is filled with Walton's commentary on English society, and his definitive work inspired the creation of other angling texts.

The Compleat Angler instructs the reader on how to fish for various freshwater fish species found throughout England's rivers and ponds. Walton includes advice on the best baits, techniques, and cooking ideas for salmon, trout, pike, eels, and other game. These lessons, while informative, are not the true essence of the *Angler*.⁶ The *Angler* does not read like a pure manual of angling instruction. Its narrative structure features compelling dialogue between characters, songs, and plenty of life lessons. The work's main characters of Piscator, Venator (originally Viator), and Auceps begin the text by sharing about their favored recreations of fishing, hunting, and hawking.⁷ Piscator explains the art of angling, which intrigues Venator, and the rest of the book follows Venator's journey of learning the skills and virtues of an angler. The character of Venator represents the reader, who is new to the sport, while Piscator serves as Walton's voice. To better grasp the meaning behind Piscator's commentary, it is necessary to consider the long life of the *Angler's* author.

Izaak Walton was born in 1593 in Stafford (about 24 miles north of Birmingham) and died in 1683 in Winchester (about 60 miles south of London) at the age of ninety.⁸ Little is known of his parents except that his father, Gervase (or Jervis) Walton, was an innkeeper with strong connections throughout Staffordshire.⁹ At some point in his late teens or early twenties, Walton was living in London and became quite successful in the linen and drapery industry.¹⁰ In 1626, he married Rachel Floud, who provided him with her prominent family connections, thereby enhancing his reputation. Walton was close friends with the poet John Donne (1571/1572–1631) and the diplomat Henry Wotton (1568–1639), who would be honored in Walton's *Lives*, a collection of biographies published in the early 1670s, as well as in *The Compleat Angler*. During the English Civil Wars, Walton held on to his unwavering Anglican and Royalist beliefs, which many scholars have traced in his writings.¹¹ After the Royalist defeat in the Battle of Worcester (1651), Walton was entrusted with the "lesser George" jewel of Charles II, which he carried to London from the Midlands for safekeeping.¹² Throughout

⁶ Throughout this article, *Angler* (italicized) only refers to *The Compleat Angler*.

⁷ The names of the characters are the Latin words for fisherman (*piscator*), hunter (*venator*, originally traveler/*viator*), and fowler (*auceps*).

⁸ Stapleton Martin, *Izaak Walton and His Friends* (Chapman and Hall, 1904), 1.

⁹ Jonquil Bevan, "Introduction," in *The Compleat Angler* (Oxford University Press, 1983), 1.

¹⁰ Bevan, "Introduction," 1.

¹¹ Margaret Bottrall, "Walton, Izaak (1593–1683)," in *British Writers*, vol. 2, ed. Ian Scott-Kilvert (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1979), 134.

¹² Leslie Stephen, *Dictionary of National Biography*, 1885–1900, vol. 59, ed. Sidney Lee (Elder Smith and Company, 1899), 274.

his lifetime, Walton was impacted by the chaos of the mid-seventeenth century, which undoubtedly influenced his writing style. Around the age of sixty, Walton began writing the *Angler*, and he spent the remaining thirty years of his life refining its text through five editions.

Although Walton's *Angler* ranks as the most popular early modern angling manual, it is not the first. A treatise added to the *Boke of Seynt Albans* (1496) is considered the earliest known text on recreational fishing. This *Treatyse of Fysshynge wythe an Angle* was printed by the London publisher Wynkyn de Worde and contains information on various noble recreations for gentlemen (hawking, hunting, heraldry, and angling). Its prologue may have inspired the narrative format of Walton's *Angler* since it, too, begins by advocating for the supremacy of angling over other recreational activities. The authorship of this early fishing treatise is often ascribed to the late medieval Benedictine Juliana Berners (born c. 1388); however, there is little evidence to support this, and it is completely unknown who authored the treatise's section on angling.¹³ Nonetheless, the *Treatyse* created the trend of connecting morals to angling, a theme that almost every subsequent fishing text would follow. Yet, the 1496 manual had focused on the upper echelons of English society and their recreational activities. Between the publication of the 1496 *Treatyse* and the 1653 edition of the *Angler*, several other authors published angling manuals that clearly inspired Walton.¹⁴ For example, William Samuel's *Arte of Angling* (1577)¹⁵ features a similar narrative structure that includes lengthy dialogue between the characters Piscator and Viator, which Walton borrowed and expanded on in his *Angler*.¹⁶ Meanwhile, Leonard Mascall's *A Booke of Fishing with Hooke and Line* (1590) offers more concrete angling instructions (taken from the 1496 *Treatyse*) and lacks the meditative tone found in most early modern angling texts.¹⁷ Walton took many of the angling instructions found in Mascall's text and published them in the *Angler*. Last but not least, John Dennys's poetic text, *The Secrets of Angling* (1613),¹⁸ also influenced Walton. Dennys dedicates a considerable portion of his text to the angler's virtues, which happens to be a central theme of *The Compleat Angler*.

Considering all the angling texts that predate the *Angler*, as well as the ample amount of material that Walton borrowed from them, why is *The Compleat Angler* one of the most famous texts of seventeenth-century England? Some earlier scholarship, notably Marcus S. Goldman's chapter in a collection of *Studies in Honor of T. W. Baldwin* (1958), questions the originality of the *Angler* because of its apparent reliance on previous angling texts.¹⁹ While there is some merit to this claim, the true originality of Walton's *Angler* lies in its captivating dialogue and idyllic world, which supersedes the more practical angling advice of its

¹³ Max Lester Loges, "'The Treatise on Fishing with an Angle': A Study of a Fifteenth-Century Document" (Ph.D. diss., Oklahoma State University, 1992), 8–10.

¹⁴ In the introduction to his edition of the 1653 and 1676 versions of *The Compleat Angler*, Jonquil Bevan maps out the long list of angling texts that preceded Izaak Walton's publications. Bevan, "Introduction," 18.

¹⁵ William Samuel, *The Arte of Angling, 1577*, ed. Gerald Eades Bentley (Princeton University Press, 1956).

¹⁶ Bevan, "Introduction," 17.

¹⁷ Bevan, "Introduction," 16–17.

¹⁸ John Dennys, *The Secrets of Angling* (W. Satchell and Company, 1883 [1613]).

¹⁹ Marcus S. Goldman, "Izaak Walton and the Arte of Angling," in *Studies in Honor of T. W. Baldwin*, ed. Don Cameron Allen (University of Illinois Press, 1958), 185–204.

predecessors. Alison Locker has referred to the 1653 publication of the *Angler* as a “second ‘watershed’ moment” for angling texts after the influential *Treatyse*, because Walton’s text reinvigorated the genre.²⁰ It was John Cooper’s study *The Art of the Compleat Angler* (1968) that thoroughly changed the scholarly assessment of Walton’s text.²¹ Cooper’s monograph disputes the earlier claim that *The Compleat Angler* is unoriginal because Walton had borrowed ideas from earlier angling treatises; instead, Cooper contextualizes the literary traditions that Walton followed and expands on the author’s moral and religious beliefs found in the text. Cooper argues that the *Angler* is the meeting place between the “pastoral and georgic ideal” that is being communicated between the characters of Piscator and Venator.²² Cooper’s analysis has since spurred a series of scholarly research on Walton’s text.

Continuing the analysis of *The Compleat Angler* after Cooper, Jonquil Bevan’s 1988 study argues that Walton concealed the seriousness and artistry of his work, and that the text is both political and an example of escapism.²³ Walton’s treatise offers a rural escape for the defeated Royalist cause, while also softly criticizing the Puritan ideological shift in England. Additionally, Bevan has published a critical edition of both the 1653 and 1676 versions of *The Compleat Angler*, which contains a thorough introduction to the work.²⁴ A 1992 article by David Radcliffe suggests that *The Compleat Angler* is an early example of social formation and notes its political elements.²⁵ Steven Zwicker’s 1993 analysis expands on the political aspects of *The Compleat Angler* and argues that Walton’s work is more about presenting an idyllic pastime and resisting the Cromwellian leadership.²⁶ Gregory Michael Colón Semenza’s 2001 monograph presents Walton’s celebration of angling as a defense of sports during the English Interregnum, when many recreational activities were being scrutinized and banned.²⁷ A 2016 article by Benjamin Guyer elaborates on Zwicker’s analysis and proposes that *The Compleat Angler* is a work of Anglican royalism and a clear polemical text.²⁸ Yet Marjorie Swann’s 2023 work challenges the ideas proposed by Zwicker and Guyer, arguing that *The Compleat Angler* emphasizes the human relationship with the natural environment and is a depiction of seventeenth-century social, cultural, and environmental relationships rather than

²⁰ Alison Locker, *Freshwater Fish in England: A Social and Cultural History of Coarse Fish from Prehistory to the Present Day* (Oxbow Books, 2018), 78.

²¹ John Cooper, *The Art of the Compleat Angler* (Duke University Press, 1968).

²² Cooper, *Art of the Compleat Angler*, 102. The adjective “georgic” refers to Virgil’s poem “Georgica,” written in the first century BCE.

²³ Jonquil Bevan, *Izaak Walton’s The Compleat Angler: The Art of Recreation* (St. Martin’s Press, 1988).

²⁴ This particular edition of the *Angler*, also edited by Jonquil Bevan and cited earlier (Oxford University Press, 1983), serves as the main source for this study.

²⁵ David Hill Radcliffe, “‘Study to Be Quiet’: Genre and Politics in Izaak Walton’s ‘Compleat Angler,’” *English Literary Renaissance* 22, no. 1 (1992): 95–111. For a comprehensive analysis of the gendered language and the cultural context of male friendship surrounding angling, see Sean Herrera-Thomas, “Haunted by Authors: Pretexts and Pleasures in Early-Modern English and Late-Modern American Angling” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Santa Cruz, 2006).

²⁶ Steven N. Zwicker, *Lines of Authority: Politics and English Literary Culture, 1649–1689* (Cornell University Press, 1993), 60–61.

²⁷ Gregory Michael Colón Semenza, *Sport, Politics, and Literature in the English Renaissance* (University of Delaware Press, 2013), 139.

²⁸ Guyer, “Izaak Walton’s ‘Holy War,’” 283–303.

a purely political resistance hidden behind the guise of an angling manual.²⁹ These various scholarly approaches focus on opposing aspects of Walton's text; however, almost all scholarship on *The Compleat Angler* comes from English literature scholars, while historical scholarship on fishing does not pay much attention to Walton's work.

The angling texts that followed the *Angler* have received considerably less scholarly attention. This includes *The Experienced Angler* (1662), written by Colonel Robert Venables (c. 1613–1687), a notable parliamentarian veteran of the English Civil Wars.³⁰ After fighting for Parliament during the English Civil Wars, Venables was promoted to a leading position during the Western Design campaign in the Spanish West Indies, alongside William Penn.³¹ After the Stuart Restoration, his military and political career came to an end, and Venables likely spent more time angling. While Venables and Walton had been on opposite sides during the conflict, their shared love of angling seems to have bridged this gap. Walton wrote an introduction for Venables's book that showed his admiration and respect for the man. *The Experienced Angler* is much more concise in its angling instructions than the *Angler*. Charles Cotton (1630–1687), a close friend, fellow Royalist, and protégé of Walton, added a significant section to later editions of *The Compleat Angler* as well.³² Cotton is mostly remembered for *The Compleat Gamester* (1674), a manual on different recreational games. Walton's, Cotton's, and Venables's angling texts were eventually combined into *The Universal Angler* (1676).³³ Considering the proliferation of angling texts among writers who were either directly involved in or heavily affected by the English Civil Wars, a pattern emerges. The study of these angling manuals and their authors opens a unique lens to appreciate the connections between angling and English life after a period of violent wars and political instability. For the purposes of this study, Walton's *Angler* takes center stage because its content is the most varied and clear in its commentary on seventeenth-century English society.

The Compleat Angler is a multifaceted text that offers Walton's opinions on the natural world, morality, and religion. This study argues that *The Compleat Angler*—and the subsequent angling texts that followed it—aimed to influence others to adopt a peaceful, contemplative, and religious philosophy. Walton's *Angler* and, to a lesser extent, other angling texts offer distinctive insights into the broader cultural shifts of mid-seventeenth-century England after political and religious upheavals.

The present study examines how the subtle, yet frequent commentary found in angling texts can offer a unique perspective on English cultural history. Fishing manuals may not seem to

²⁹ Marjorie Swann, *Environment, Society, and The Compleat Angler* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2023).

³⁰ Robert Venables, *The Experienced Angler: or, Angling Improved* (first published 1662; Septimus Prowett and Thomas Gosden, 1825).

³¹ Jennifer Wells, "English Law, Irish Trials and Cromwellian State Building in the 1650s," *Past & Present* 227, no. 1 (2015): 115.

³² There were five editions of the *Angler* released during Walton's lifetime (1653, 1655, 1661, 1668, and 1676). Charles Cotton contributed to the *Angler* in later editions, including a section on fishing for trout and grayling in a clear stream. Cotton's addition to the *Angler* continues the narrative (pages 266–360 of the Modern Library Classics edition) and follows Walton's style.

³³ Izaak Walton, Charles Cotton, and Robert Venables, *The Universal Angler* (Richard Marriott, 1676).

be the “richest” documents in terms of increasing our understanding of seventeenth-century English history and culture. However, according to Peter Burke, a “common ground” shared by cultural historians is the “concern with the symbolic and its interpretation.”³⁴ As Burke explains, “symbols, conscious or unconscious, can be found everywhere, from art to everyday life.”³⁵ This study contends that the *Angler* is a “symbol” of postwar English society, rife with interpretative potential. It also considers the literary impact of Walton’s *Angler* and the historical events that influenced its content and meaning. While the *Angler* offers a variety of historically relevant themes, this analysis focuses on its environmental, moral, and religious undertones. Walton emphasized these central themes in the *Angler* because his idea of a “contemplative” fisherman encompassed an understanding of the natural world, a peaceful spirit, and an unwavering and true devotion to God.

1. Literary Ecology

“The Angler’s Wish” in the 1676 edition of *The Compleat Angler* begins as follows:

“I in these flowry Meads wou’d be: / These Chrystal streams should solace me; / To whose harmonious bubbling noise, / I with my Angle wo’d rejoice.”³⁶

Descriptions of the beauty and solace of the English countryside course through the pages of the *Angler*. Environmental thought permeates Walton’s style and—in the words of Marjorie Swann—“presents a rich and compelling vision of how humanity interacts with (and within) a complex natural world.”³⁷ This section explores the literary ecology of *The Compleat Angler*, as the natural world is the core of Walton’s idyllic world. James Meeker, in a 1997 analysis of the relationship between literature and the natural world, defines literary ecology as “the study of biological themes and relationships that appear in literary works. It is simultaneously an attempt to discover what roles literature has played in the ecology of the human species.”³⁸ As the *Angler* is a fishing manual, much of its text is dedicated to describing the freshwater inhabitants of England’s rivers. These fish, which Walton amusingly nicknames with noble titles—such as the salmon being the “king of the fresh waters” or the pike being the “tyrant”—receive detailed depictions of their natural behavior.³⁹ Walton’s way of talking about fish in *The Compleat Angler*, which includes accounts of their intelligence and beauty, displays his respect for them. He references the works of both Conrad Gessner (1516–1565), known as the “Swiss Pliny” for his contributions to early modern zoology,⁴⁰ and Sir Francis Bacon (1561–1626) to explain the varying species’ biology, thereby adding a scientific element to the text. As the *Angler* is one of the most reprinted books in the English language, it

³⁴ Peter Burke, *What is Cultural History?* (Polity, 2008), 13.

³⁵ Burke, *What is Cultural History*, 13.

³⁶ Walton, *Compleat Angler* [1676], 262. “Meads” refers to “meadows.”

³⁷ Swann, *Environment, Society, and The Compleat Angler*, 11.

³⁸ James Meeker, *The Comedy of Survival: Literary Ecology and a Play Ethic* (University of Arizona Press, 1997), 7.

³⁹ Izaak Walton, *The Compleat Angler* [1653], ed. Jonquil Bevan (Oxford University Press, 1983), 122.

⁴⁰ Sophia Hendriks, “Ichthyology and Emblematics in Conrad Gesner’s *Historia piscium* and Joachim Camerarius the Younger’s *Symbola et Emblemata*,” in *Emblems and the Natural World*, ed. Karl A. E. Enenkel and Paul J. Smith (Brill, 2017), 190.

warrants an analysis through the lens of literary ecology for its ongoing commentary on the environment. This facilitates an understanding of how the natural world was perceived in seventeenth-century angling texts.

Although Walton expresses occasional environmentalist thought, labeling him an early modern environmental activist would be erroneous. The *Angler* advocates for the preservation of fish, the scaled creatures that make its author's beloved sport possible, yet this appreciation does not extend to all creatures in England's animal kingdom. For example, Eurasian otters primarily feed on freshwater fish that are between ten and fifteen centimeters in length, the size of the freshly spawned fish that later grow into the species that Walton and his fellow anglers so hope to catch.⁴¹ Like overeager "greedy fishermen" (who Walton later chastises) that catch and kill young fish, otters are treated with extreme vitriol in the first few pages of the *Angler*. Expressing himself through the words of Piscator, Walton writes: "My purpose is to bestow a day or two in helping to destroy some of those villanous vermin: for I hate them perfectly, because they love fish so well, or rather, because they destroy so much: indeed, so much, that in my judgment, all men that keep Otter dogs ought to have a Pension from the Commonwealth to incourage them to destroy the very breed of those base Otters, they do so much mischief."⁴² Robert Venables also included his thoughts on otters in *The Experienced Angler*. Listing general advice for angling, Venables writes that an angler should "destroy all beasts or birds that devour the fish or their spawn."⁴³ He then quotes a poem about killing otters from George Gascoigne's *Noble Art of Venerie or Hunting* (1611) that, like angling manuals, instructs the reader on how to hunt England's fauna successfully.⁴⁴

The above excerpt from the 1653 edition of the *Angler* is rather ironic given how Walton portrays the peaceful spirit of anglers elsewhere in his text. After the long rant calling for a culling of Britain's otters, Piscator introduces himself as a "Brother of the Angle" who belongs to a fraternity of men that possess an aura of calm disposition, who pity the "poor-rich-men" that "spend all their time first in getting" and are too busy in the pursuit of money and status.⁴⁵ On this topic, Walton writes: "For (trust me, Sir) we enjoy a contentednesse above the reach of such dispositions."⁴⁶

How can one enjoy a superior level of contentment while also showing extremist views toward the natural existence of otters? While it is possible that Walton's tirade against the otters is exaggerated to complement the *Angler's* otherwise congenial tone, it reflects a pattern of anger against anything that threatens the sport of angling. In his comprehensive study of *The Compleat Angler* in the context of the Commonwealth (1649–1660) and the Puritan banishment of sports, Gregory Michael Colón Semenza notes the systematic use of

⁴¹ Lars-Henrik Olsen, *Tracks and Signs of the Animals and Birds of Britain and Europe* (Princeton University Press, 2013), 156.

⁴² Walton, *Compleat Angler* [1653], 64.

⁴³ Venables, *Experienced Angler*, 55.

⁴⁴ George Gascoigne, *The Noble Art of Venerie or Hunting* [1577] (Thomas Purfoot, 1611), 201.

⁴⁵ Walton, *Compleat Angler* [1653], 64.

⁴⁶ Walton, *Compleat Angler* [1653], 64.

angling to critique “contemporary laws proscribing communal recreations.”⁴⁷ Semenza argues that the “seeming apoliticality” of the *Angler* is what “makes it such a powerful political tool.”⁴⁸ The original version of Walton’s masterpiece is much more subdued when it comes to political themes. In fact, the 1653 and the 1676 editions are quite different. Walton’s original publication is more aligned with its title, *The Compleat Angler*, while the final edition is more connected to its subtitle, *The Contemplative Man’s Recreation*. This is because, by 1676, Walton’s philosophical commentary superseded his angling instructions. According to Jonquil Bevan, most of the changes in the subsequent editions of Walton’s text seem to “have been made on literary grounds” and do not add more in-depth instructions on fishing.⁴⁹

The 1653 edition—released on the eve of Oliver Cromwell’s rule as Lord Protector of the Commonwealth of England, Scotland and Ireland (1653–1658), when harsh measures were taken against communal sports—is closely linked to the “consolatory purpose” of late 1640s Royalist literature.⁵⁰ According to Blair Worden, Walton’s 1653 text “pays homage to rural retreat” for the defeated Royalist cause.⁵¹ Thus, the first edition focuses more on the simplicity and pleasure of rural life when compared to the rush of England’s urban centers. The *Angler*’s narrative, which has Piscator training Viator (later Venator) in the art of angling through the countryside, starts and ends near Tottenham (North London). In his definitive analysis of the *Angler*, John Cooper associates Walton’s text with the “pastoral and georgic ideal,” arguing that the reality of city life was the final test and the “full meaning” of the companions’ journey.⁵² Walton’s writing, it appears, paints the picture of an environmental sermon.

In the 1676 edition, however, the *Angler*’s veiled political messaging and pastoral ideals intertwine in one of Piscator’s lessons to Venator. During this particular lesson, Piscator explains to Venator an essential aspect of the angling brotherhood, namely, to respect the natural spawning of fish and to obey size limitations. To get his point across, Walton purposefully rationalizes the significance of the “Fence Months” in England:

“Sir, they be principally three, namely, March, April, and May, for these be the usual months that Salmon come out of the Sea to spawn in most fresh Rivers, and their Fry⁵³ would about a certain time return back to the salt water, if they were not hindered by weres and unlawful gins,⁵⁴ which the greedy Fisher-men set, and so destroy them by thousands, as they would, (being so taught by nature) change the fresh for salt water.

⁴⁷ Semenza, *Sport, Politics, and Literature*, 139.

⁴⁸ Semenza, *Sport, Politics, and Literature*, 144.

⁴⁹ Bevan, “Introduction,” 12.

⁵⁰ Blair Worden, *The English Civil Wars, 1640–1660* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2009), 113.

⁵¹ Worden, *English Civil Wars*, 113.

⁵² Cooper, *Art of the Compleat Angler*, 102.

⁵³ “Fry” are recently hatched fish.

⁵⁴ “Gins” is another term for animal traps. “Weirs” (here: “weres”) are used to control the flow of water on rivers for human needs such as to prevent flooding and change the water’s depth for boats. The changing flow of water can have damaging effects on fish spawning and natural movement, hindering their numbers. Although focused on Sockeye Salmon in Canada, the effects on fish and weirs are thoroughly covered in Douglas Harris, *Fish, Law, and Colonialism: The Legal Capture of Salmon in British Columbia* (University of Toronto Press, 2001), 79–81.

He that shall view the wise Statutes made in the 13⁵⁵ [regnal year] of Edw[ard]. the I. and the like in Rich[ard]. the III. may see several provisions made against the destruction of Fish: and though I possess no knowledge of the Law, yet I am sure the regulation of these defects might be easily mended. But I remember that a wise friend of mine did usually say, That which is every bodies business, is no bodies business. If it were otherwise, there could not be so many Nets and Fish that are under the Statute size, sold daily amongst us, and of which the conservators of the water should be ashamed. But above all, the taking [of] Fish in spawning time, may be said to be against nature; it is like the taking the dam on the nest when she hatches her young: a sin so against nature, that Almighty God hath in the Levitical Law made a Law against it."⁵⁶

This excerpt captures the multifaceted nature of the *Angler*. Walton offers a moral opinion on the "greedy" fishermen who angle not for the contemplative enjoyment but instead fish for money. In *The Experienced Angler*, Venables agrees with Walton's sentiment on illegal fishing methods: "And endeavour, whether in authority or not, to see all statutes put in execution, against such as use unlawful nets, or means to take fish; especially bar-netting and night-hooking."⁵⁷ Although Walton's and Venables's environmental preservation efforts are selective (and decidedly exclude otters), they show a strong distaste for the destruction of spawning fish and their fry. Walton explicitly refers to the Salmon Preservation Act of 1285, established during the reign of King Edward I (ruled 1272–1307), which includes the following section that closely parallels Walton's own complaints:

"Young Salmons shall not be taken nor destroyed by Nets, nor by the Engines at Millpools, from the midst of April unto the Nativity of St. John the Baptist [i.e., June 24]. And in Places whereas Waters be, there shall be assigned Overseers of this Statute, which being sworn, shall oftentimes see and inquire of the Offenders. And for the first Trespass, they shall be punished by burning of their Nets and Engines. And for the second Time, they shall have Imprisonment for a Quarter of a Year. And for the third Trespass, they shall be imprisoned a Year; and as their Trespass increaseth, so shall the Punishment."⁵⁸

Thus, Walton introduces an environmental and political aspect to his "Discourse of Rivers."⁵⁹ By referencing Edward I's 1285 law, Walton uses history to advocate for his environmental worldview and praises past rulers to critique the "defects" of the seventeenth century. According to Steven Zwicker, the *Angler* insists "that true liberty of the spirit follows from a particular moral, social, and political stance," and Walton's decision to bring up the immoral acts of his contemporary fishermen illustrates his moral and environmental philosophy.⁶⁰

When Walton proclaims that he has "no knowledge of the law," yet he is sure that the environmental rules may be "easily mended," he subtly critiques English policy.⁶¹ His personal political opinion, strongly shaped by his experiences as a devoted Royalist during the English

⁵⁵ Salmon Preservation Act 1285, 13 Edw. 1. St. 1, c. 47, in *The Statutes of the Realm: Printed by Command of His Majesty King George the Third in Pursuance of an Address of the House of Commons of Great Britain*, vol. 1 (Dawsons of Pall Mall, 1963 [reprint]), 94–95.

⁵⁶ Walton, *Compleat Angler* [1676], 213–214. The biblical reference here is Deuteronomy 22:6 (KJV): "If a bird's nest chance to be before thee in the way in any tree, or on the ground, whether they be young ones, or eggs, and the dam sitting upon the young, or upon the eggs, thou shalt not take the dam with the young."

⁵⁷ Venables, *Experienced Angler*, 56–57.

⁵⁸ Salmon Preservation Act 1285, in *Statutes of the Realm*, 94–95.

⁵⁹ Walton, *Compleat Angler* [1676], 195.

⁶⁰ Zwicker, *Lines of Authority*, 64.

⁶¹ Walton, *Compleat Angler* [1676], 213.

Civil Wars, casts great "wiseness" on past rulers. Jonquil Bevan describes Walton's political instinct as shunning public protest and intent on "set[ting] an example of dutiful and quiet obedience to the direction of those whom he looked on as his temporal and spiritual rulers."⁶² According to Bevan, this is apparent in Walton's writings, notably the "Life of Sanderson" in *Lives*, where he reflects on the tumultuous events of the 1640s, such as the March of the Covenanters (1643) and the execution of William Laud (1645).⁶³ Yet, in *The Compleat Angler*, Walton's direct expressions concerning this period are either heavily veiled or nonexistent.

The presence of the natural world is consistent throughout the *Angler*, serving as the tranquil backdrop for all of Walton's instructions and commentary. Walton's perspective on man's relationship with nature follows the idea of the Great Chain of Being, an ancient philosophy that links all elements of the universe in a hierarchical order.⁶⁴ According to this, the maintenance of natural order directly relates to "the divine plan of creation," which, when disobeyed by an individual's "pride and ambition," results in the "decay of nature itself."⁶⁵ Man is the "central link" in the Great Chain of Being and the world that surrounds him is made for his honor by God.⁶⁶ Walton implies this philosophy when he condemns sins against nature, like the killing of young fish by men influenced by greed.

Richard Hooker (1554–1600), an English theologian and a major influence on Walton, communicated the Great Chain in his writings. In *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, Hooker explains the consequences of breaking the natural order of nature: "If the moon should wander from her beaten way, the times and seasons of the year blend themselves, by disorder'd and confus'd mixture, the winds breathe out their last gasp, the clouds yield no rain, the earth be defeated by heavenly influence, the fruits of the earth pine away, as children at the wither'd breasts of their mothers, no longer able to yield them relief; what would become of man himself, whom these things do now all serve?"⁶⁷ Hooker plainly correlated the loss of the natural order with "universal dissolution" that would destroy mankind's existence.⁶⁸ The fear of the natural world collapsing was shared by many in the Tudor period, whose worldview was shaped by a strong "sense of hierarchy," and any disruptions to the natural order which fueled human life was met with great fear.⁶⁹ Even the "most innocuous acts of nature" were

⁶² Bevan, "Introduction," 4.

⁶³ Bevan, "Introduction," 3–4.

⁶⁴ Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (Harvard University Press, 1971), 62.

⁶⁵ W[illiam]. H[oward]. Greenleaf, *Order, Empiricism, and Politics: Two Traditions of English Political Thought, 1500–1700* (Oxford University Press, 1964), 26–27.

⁶⁶ Greenleaf, *Order, Empiricism, and Politics*, 27.

⁶⁷ Richard Hooker, "Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity, Book One," in *The Works of that Learned and Judicious Divine, Mr. Richard Hooker, in Eight Books of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity, Compleated Out of His Own Manuscripts* (Printed for John Walthoe et al., 1723 [1594]), 5. In this edition of Hooker's writings, an introductory prefix from Walton's biography of Hooker is included.

⁶⁸ Paul A. Lombardo, "The Great Chain of Being and the Limits to the Machiavellian Cosmos," *Journal of Thought* 17, no. 1 (1982): 43.

⁶⁹ Stephen Collins, "The Influence of the Great Chain of being on the Rhetoric Manuals of Sixteenth Century Tudor England" (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 2001), 15.

viewed with the clear presence of God's active role in daily life.⁷⁰ Based on Walton's admiration and deep familiarity with Hooker's works, it is evident that the Great Chain influenced Walton's conservationist tendencies. His pleas for fishermen to respect the natural cycles of fish fall under Hooker's idea of respecting God's natural order. From Walton's perspective, sins against the natural order could bring forth the "decline and death" of nature itself.⁷¹ A true angler—who followed the fisherman's code found in Walton's treatise—would practice the recreation in complete harmony with the Great Chain.

Although Walton expresses his dislike of unethical fishing practices and calls for the enforcement of centuries-old laws, this is not a constant message in his work. Marjorie Swann argues that, in order to understand *The Compleat Angler* in "all its fish-filled abundance," it must be read "first and foremost as an environmental text."⁷² Still, the multifaceted nature of the *Angler* allows it to be analyzed equally in the context of human morality, religious thought, and—of course—as an angling manual. In his study of literary ecology, James Meeker notes a theme concerning the natural world and literature that permeates Walton's angling masterpiece. Meeker writes: "A literary work is generally based upon a set of ideological assumptions—usually derived from the artist's contemporary culture, although often in conflict with it—that identifies certain principles of nature and defines human relationships to these principles."⁷³

Walton's principles of contentedness, peacefulness, and contemplation are all directly associated with nature, a place where these values are created and nurtured. In the first edition, when Piscator explains to Viator the antiquity of angling, Walton writes "That both Rivers, and the inhabitants of the watery Element, were created for wise men to contemplate, and fools to pass by without consideration."⁷⁴ Here, Walton directly correlates an angler's virtue with the peacefulness and tranquility of rivers. In *The Experienced Angler*, Robert Venables echoes Walton's nature-associated principles:

"The minds of anglers being usually more calm and composed than many others, especially hunters and falconers, who too frequently lose their delight in their passion, and too often bring home more of melancholy and discontent than satisfaction in their thoughts; but the angler, when he hath the worst success, loseth but a hook or line, or perhaps, what he never possessed, a fish; and suppose he should take nothing, yet he enjoyeth a delightful walk by pleasant rivers in sweet pastures, amongst odoriferous flowers, which gratify his senses and delight his mind; which contentments induce many, who affect not angling, to choose those places of pleasure for their Summer's recreation and health."⁷⁵

Continuing the trend of comparing angling with hawking and hunting, Venables describes the sweet aroma of flowers and pleasant views of nature that fill the angler with contentment. Venables posits that what delights the angler is nature itself; the physical act of angling is supplemental to spending peaceful time in the natural world. Indeed, Venables's description

⁷⁰ Collins, "Influence of the Great Chain," 15.

⁷¹ Greenleaf, *Order, Empiricism, and Politics*, 27.

⁷² Swann, *Environment, Society, and The Compleat Angler*, 15.

⁷³ Meeker, *Comedy of Survival*, 7.

⁷⁴ Walton, *Compleat Angler* [1653], 70.

⁷⁵ Venables, *Experienced Angler*, ii–iii.

of when an angler "hath the worst success" at catching anticipates the modern cliché fishing proverb that "the worst day of fishing is better than a good day at work."

The literary ecology of Walton's *Angler* and Venables's *Experienced Angler* reveals that the respective authors were quite opinionated when it came to how man should engage in recreational pursuits while in nature. Their views on conservation were hyper-focused on the preservation of fish over all else, because angling depends on a healthy fish population. While their hypocritical stance on otter populations shows a lack of understanding of how ecosystems actually function, both angling texts strongly suggest that there needs to be a legal system in place to protect the life cycle of fish. Angling in the seventeenth century was certainly not about catching as many fish as possible; instead, one of the angler's virtues was to be aware of how to sustainably enjoy this recreation. The natural world was there for contemplation and personal delight—but only for the "wise" men who took the time to consider and appreciate its beauty. To achieve this level of wisdom, anglers had to adopt a set of moral virtues that were just as essential to the sport as rods, hooks, and bait.

2. The Morality of Angling

The concept that there are certain virtues associated with angling is not original to Walton's text. In 1613, John Dennys had laid out twelve character traits that an angler was supposed to adopt, namely, faith, hope, love, patience, humility, courage, liberality, knowledge, placability, thankfulness, moderation, and memory.⁷⁶ Dennys writes: "Here then you see what kind of quallities / An Angler should indued be with all / Besides his skill and other properties / To serve his turn, as to his lot doth fall / But now what season for this exercise / The fittest is and which doth serve but small."⁷⁷ Dennys argues that being an angler involves much more than the physical skills of the sport, and—to be a true angler—one must aim to emulate the angler's code of virtues. This type of rhetoric was inspirational for Walton, who frequently refers to his fellow anglers as "brothers" who share a common moral code. Walton also connects the morality of angling to its antiquity and argues that the angler's virtues have been passed down over the centuries. In the first edition of the *Angler*, Walton comments on the moral traditions of angling as follows:

"But (my worthy friend) as I would rather prove my self to be a Gentleman, by being learned and humble, valiant and inoffensive, vertuous and communicable, then by a fond ostentation of riches; or (wanting these Vertues my self) boast that these were in my Ancestors; (And yet I confesse, that where a noble and ancient Descent and such Merits meet in any man, it is a double dignification of that person): so, if this Antiquitie of Angling (which, for my part, I have not forc'd) shall, like an ancient Familie, be either an honour, or an ornament to this vertuous Art which I both love and practice, I shall be the gladder that I made an accidental mention of it; and shall proceed to the justification, or rather commendation of it."⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Dennys, *Secrets of Angling*, 52–55. Not surprisingly, these character traits echo biblical models, for example, 1 Corinthians 13:13 (the three virtues of faith, hope, and love) and Galatians 5:22–23 (the nine fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and temperance).

⁷⁷ Dennys, *Secrets of Angling*, 55.

⁷⁸ Walton, *Compleat Angler* [1653], 68–69.

In his statement regarding the ancient traditions of angling, Piscator attempts to show modesty in professing his personal virtues by bringing to light the ancestral virtues of his angling forefathers. This is, in a sense, a point of "sophisticated bragging" used by Walton to show that his beloved sport is endowed with superior values (certainly superior when compared to hunting, as this excerpt appears at the beginning of the *Angler*). Piscator's "accidental mention" of the "honour" of angling's history is an intentional point that both advocates for the sport and defends its practice.

Walton spends considerable time in the introduction of the *Angler* explaining to Viator the wonders of the sport and the benefits it provides to those who practice it. Walton writes: "For he that learns it, must not onely bring an enquiring, searching, and discerning wit; but he must bring also that patience you talk of, and a love and prosperity to the art it self: but having once got and practised it, then doubt not but the Art will (both for the pleasure and profit of it) prove like to Vertue, a reward to it self."⁷⁹ Therefore, according to Walton, the skills required to learn angling build the character of the novice fisherman on his journey toward mastery. Thus, angling was not just a recreation: it was a way of life.

A close friend of Walton, Henry Wotton, is described as the epitome of one who has achieved angling perfection. Walton quotes one of Wotton's sayings regarding angling in the original 1653 edition: "For Angling was after tedious study A rest to his mind, a cheerer of his spirits, a diversion of sadness, a calmer of unquiet thoughts, a Moderator of passions, a procurer of contentedness, and that it begot habits of peace and patience in those that profest and practic'd it."⁸⁰ This quote demonstrates how Walton propagates angling as an avenue to achieve happiness, discipline, and harmony. In the 1676 version, Walton adds a comment after quoting Wotton: "You will find angling to be like the virtue of Humility, which has a calmness of spirit, and a world of other blessings attending upon it."⁸¹

When comparing *The Experienced Angler* to Walton's text, it appears that Venables is much less explicit in the moral teachings associated with the angling lifestyle. Venables's text is much shorter in length and primarily contains angling instructions without the narrative structure of the *Angler*. Still, in the much simpler *Experienced Angler*, Venables alludes to the calmness of angling: "I am confident it doth not, as many other delights; cast blocks and rubs before him to make his way more difficult and less pleasant. The cheapness of the recreation abates not its pleasure, but with rational persons heightens it; and if it be delightful the charge of melancholy falls upon that score, and if example, which is the best proof, may sway any thing, I know no sort of men less subject to melancholy than anglers."⁸² Venables is clear that anglers enjoy more happiness than others due to the very peaceful nature of their sport.

Why, in 1653, would Izaak Walton be so adamant about the moral virtues of angling? Other angling texts raise similar points; however, the *Angler* is the most direct and descriptive one

⁷⁹ Walton, *Compleat Angler* [1653], 67–68.

⁸⁰ Walton, *Compleat Angler* [1653], 76.

⁸¹ Walton, *Compleat Angler* [1676], 205–206.

⁸² Venables, *Experienced Angler*, iv.

with regard to these ideas. Walton also makes no statement that angling should be reserved for the higher classes, other than stating that the sport does require “the expense of a little money.”⁸³ The intense drama of the English Civil Wars and the period’s ideological conflicts offer an explanation for why Walton was so explicit in his writing.

In 1643, the House of Commons ordered that the burning of the *Book of Sports* take place in several areas across London.⁸⁴ The *Book of Sports* had been authorized by King James I in 1618 and clarified the lawfulness of English sports and pastimes.⁸⁵ It had been reissued under Charles I in the 1630s and had been met with intense opposition by “advanced Protestants” who held “strict sabbatarian views.”⁸⁶ Charles I’s *Book of Sports* allowed “dancing, May games, and archery” after the conclusion of divine service on the Lord’s Day, and banned activities like blood sports.⁸⁷ Puritans viewed “festive pastimes” on days of religious service as a “celebration of sinfulness.”⁸⁸ Michael Braddick calls the book burning a symbol of the “administrative radicalism of the parliamentary cause” to support “social and cultural reformation.”⁸⁹ For Semenza, the rejection and burning of the *Book of Sports* “symbolized the end of the old order,” and the attack on recreations under the Puritan regime encompassed almost all activities (other than divine service) that brought large crowds together.⁹⁰

While angling was not specifically named as an outlawed activity by Parliament after the banishment of sports, Walton may have felt a strong desire to defend his passion when writing the first edition of the *Angler*. Steven Zwicker calls the *Angler* a “lament for social harmony destroyed by jealousies and fears; it is an act of self-definition and consolation for the exiled and sequestered community of Stuart loyalists.”⁹¹ While the *Angler*—according to the author’s ideology and that of the individuals named in the text—is a piece of consolatory literature for the Anglican Royalist cause, it is equally a reflection of Walton’s perspective on English society. This becomes most apparent during the later editions of the *Angler* in which Walton shows himself as explicitly concerned with the problematic lifestyles of the non-angling community. By 1676, the monarchy was restored, and the heated temperature of the English Civil Wars’ politics had waned, yet the *Angler* reached its fiercest tone regarding how society should behave. In the final chapter of the *Angler*, Walton discusses how people make themselves miserable:

“And truly, it is so, or might be so, with very many who vex, and toyl themselves, to get what they have no need of. Can any man charge God, that he hath not given him enough to make his life happy? no doubtless: for, nature is content with a little: and yet, you shall hardly meet with a man, that complains not of some want, though he indeed wants nothing but his will, it may be, nothing but his will of his poor Neighbour, for not worshipping, or not flattering him, and thus, when we might be happy and quiet, we create trouble to

⁸³ Walton, *Compleat Angler* [1676], 362.

⁸⁴ Michael Braddick, *God’s Fury, England’s Fire: A New History of the English Civil Wars* (Penguin, 2009), 277.

⁸⁵ Semenza, *Sport, Politics, and Literature*, 112–113.

⁸⁶ Braddick, *God’s Fury, England’s Fire*, 279.

⁸⁷ Braddick, *God’s Fury, England’s Fire*, 279–280.

⁸⁸ Braddick, *God’s Fury, England’s Fire*, 280.

⁸⁹ Braddick, *God’s Fury, England’s Fire*, 280.

⁹⁰ Semenza, *Sport, Politics, and Literature*, 143.

⁹¹ Zwicker, *Lines of Authority*, 64.

our selves. I have heard of a man, that was angry with himself because he was no taller, and of a Woman, that broke her Looking-glass because it would not shew her face to be as young and handsom as her next Neighbours was."⁹²

Walton continues this tirade with a story about rich people fighting for the "highest Pew in the church" and concludes by telling Venator that "you must remember that both [people] were rich, and must therefore have their wills."⁹³ Walton discusses how one will rarely meet someone who does not wish for more than what is already their lot, and he points to the misery people find themselves in when comparing themselves to others. Through angling, Piscator trains these common traits out of Venator's spirit. As a recreation, angling forces its practitioner to slow down, reflect, and enjoy the simplicity of nature.

Some of the core moral themes found in the *Angler* deal with the self-realization and appreciation of being free from pain and suffering. A repeated line in a speech given by Piscator in the 1676 edition of the *Angler* is "every misery that I miss is a new mercy."⁹⁴ Conceptions of pain found in early modern English literature show a pattern of acceptance and meaning behind suffering. In *Pain and Compassion in Early Modern English Literature and Culture*, Jan Frans van Dijkhuizen analyzes the "cultural laboratory in which the repercussions of emerging theological views on physical suffering were addressed, [how] rival conceptions of pain were confronted, and [how] new ways of attaching meaning to pain were constructed."⁹⁵ He reveals the "personal and cultural factors" associated with the timeless human experience of pain and suffering, and the meanings that early modern writers attached to such misery.⁹⁶ Walton's *Angler* touches on this topic at the end of the fishing trip:

"And, that our present happiness may appear to be the greater, and we the more thankful for it; I will beg you to consider with me, how many do, even at this very time, lie under the torment of the Stone,⁹⁷ the Gout, and Tooth-ache; and, this we are free from. And, every misery that I miss is a new mercy, and therefore let us be thankful. There have been since we met, others, that have met disasters of broken Limbs, some have been blasted, others Thunder-strucken; and we have been freed from these, and all those many other miseries that threaten humane nature: let us therefore rejoice and be thankful. Nay, which is a far greater mercy, we are free from the unsupportable burthen of an accusing, tormenting Conscience: a misery that

⁹² Walton, *Compleat Angler* [1676], 364.

⁹³ Walton, *Compleat Angler* [1676], 364.

⁹⁴ Walton, *Compleat Angler* [1676], 362.

⁹⁵ Jan Frans van Dijkhuizen, *Pain and Compassion in Early Modern English Literature and Culture* (Boydell & Brewer, 2012), 7. Such patterns of acceptance are, of course, very much in keeping with New Testament precepts; see, for example, 2 Corinthians 1:6 (KJV): "And whether we be afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation, which is effectual in the enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer: or whether we be comforted, it is for your consolation and salvation."

⁹⁶ Van Dijkhuizen, *Pain and Compassion*, 3.

⁹⁷ Van Dijkhuizen's study introduces pain by referring to the famous diary of Samuel Pepys (1633–1703), which includes sections dedicated to his agonizing bladder stones. In 1658, Pepys underwent an operation to remove them. The procedure—done with no anesthetic or alcohol—included a sharp instrument that was inserted in his urethra to locate the stone, followed by an incision between the scrotum and the anus that would be used to remove the stone. Pepys was so thankful for the operation and the end of his constant pain that he planned an annual day to commemorate the bladder stone removal. Perhaps, due to the reality of seventeenth-century ailments and the torturous medical procedures, Walton included gout, stones, and toothaches in the same category as broken limbs, explosions, and lightning strikes. See Van Dijkhuizen, *Pain and Compassion*, 1–3.

none can bear, and therefore let us praise him for his presenting grace; and say, every misery that I miss, is a new mercy."⁹⁸

Piscator celebrates their personal freedom from the agonies that others are experiencing at that same moment. Above all, being free from a "tormenting Conscience" is most crucial for Walton, as he believes this type of suffering to be deeply ingrained in the minds of many of his fellow countrymen. To Walton, the virtues of angling are directly connected to how Piscator and Venator attain their freedom from a tormenting conscience. Walton shows a sense of compassion for others who are suffering by drawing attention to the reality of those "miseries that threaten humane nature." According to van Dijkhuizen, compassion for the suffering of others was a key concern for many early modern writers because of the "correlations between pain and pity."⁹⁹ Walton ties this to a particular angling virtue: thankfulness. Piscator teaches Venator to not only accept that misery is an unavoidable aspect of life, but to also rejoice in those periods of time when they are free from the inescapable torments of pain. Thus, in some way, the *Angler* serves as a therapeutic text for those who are experiencing torment. After all, its original release in 1653 had offered a respite to the adherents of the defeated Royalist cause to escape into the world of angling.

Walton's perspective on suffering extends to the misery that rich people inflict on themselves. A central lesson in the *Angler*—often superseding lessons on how to catch fish—is that happiness and wealth are almost always at odds. Walton himself was a rather affluent individual, and it is clear that the angling lifestyle required "the expense of a little money" to eat and drink (and enough free time to enjoy leisurely activities). Considering the social circles frequented by Walton, the moral commentary of the *Angler* is seemingly a reflection of the mental misery prevalent among the rich. Walton writes:

"Let us not repine, or so much as think the gifts of God unequally dealt, if we see another abound with riches, when as God knows, the cares that are the keys that keep those riches, hang often so heavily at the rich mans girdle, that they clog him with weary days and restless nights, even when others sleep quietly. We see but the outside of the rich mans happiness: few consider him to be like the Silk-worm, that when she seems to play, is at the very same time spinning her own bowels, and consuming her self. And this many rich men do; loading themselves with corroding cares, to keep what they have (probably) unconsciously got. Let us therefore be thankful for health and a competence; and above all, for a quiet Conscience."¹⁰⁰

The inclusion of these specific messages on happiness (as separate from wealth) in the 1676 edition may reflect Walton's personal experiences. As someone who, during his youth and early adult life, had competitively risen through the ranks of English society in the drapery business, Walton incorporated glimpses of his personal growth and wisdom in the *Angler*. The final edition of the *Angler* was published when Walton was in his eighties, and the differences between the first and last editions show a deliberate change in what the author wanted the reader to understand about the recreation. The long sermons that describe the misery that rich people experience on the inside are lacking in the 1653 edition, but they abound in the 1676 version. In the late 1640s and early 1650s, Walton had been more

⁹⁸ Walton, *Compleat Angler* [1676], 362–363.

⁹⁹ Van Dijkhuizen, *Pain and Compassion*, 7.

¹⁰⁰ Walton, *Compleat Angler* [1676], 363.

concerned with crafting an alternate version of life for the defeated Royalists and Anglican clergy during the Cromwellian regime.¹⁰¹ The 1653 edition came after years of violence and destruction during the wars, and the peaceful tone of the *Angler* created a calm and immersive world for its reader.¹⁰² By the 1670s, Walton's style in the *Angler* becomes more specific, offering wise lessons on how to live one's life with as much happiness as possible.¹⁰³

The *Angler* features many lessons on what virtues a true angler must possess, reflecting Walton's broader outlook on how his contemporaries should live their lives. The public burning of the *Book of Sports* and the banishment of many English pastimes may have inspired Walton to reveal the moral benefits he associated with angling, arguing forcefully that the sport was completely inoffensive to society. The *Angler* shows, from Walton's perspective, a lack of happiness in seventeenth-century high society, showing that the removal of ungodly sports and the proliferation of pious movements did not purify or fix English life. The adoption of the angler's code could mend miserable minds and spread happiness not connected to wealth, property, or status. The morality of angling was supported by its connection to Christianity, a fundamental aspect of Walton's text.

3. The Anglican Angler

The "obvious pun" between "angler and Anglican" has been used by scholars to note the religious and political implications of Walton's text.¹⁰⁴ Although Benjamin Guyer shows that this was not intentional, since "Anglican" was not a common identifier of religious practice in seventeenth-century England, there is still a profound connection between Walton's angling and the Christian faith.¹⁰⁵ Walton typically weaves religious points into his moral teachings on gratitude; however, spiritual themes appear throughout the *Angler* to bolster angling's credibility as being the most pious of all recreations. Some scholars have argued that the inclusion of religion in the *Angler* is related to Walton's dislike of Puritan ideals, which attack his "harmless mirth."¹⁰⁶ The division between traditional Protestants and those Reformers who concerned themselves with religious customs, Predestination, and "harmless" practices not specified in Scripture ran deep in antebellum England.¹⁰⁷ In *The World Turned Upside Down*, Christopher Hill outlines the contentious and emerging religious thought that defined the English Revolution.¹⁰⁸ Conflicting ideologies battled over the future of England's Christianity. Radical reforms, like the banning of communal sports by Parliament and the burning of the

¹⁰¹ Bevan, *Izaak Walton's The Compleat Angler*, 36.

¹⁰² Stephen Porter, *Destruction in the English Civil Wars* (Alan Sutton Publishing, 1994), 65–66. Porter estimates that 11,200 homes were destroyed during the wars, leaving approximately 55,000 people homeless.

¹⁰³ Tony Claydon and Thomas Corns, "Introduction: Living with Masquerade: The Recent Scholarship of the 1670s in the Stuart Realms, in *Religion, Culture and National Community in the 1670s*, ed. Tony Claydon and Thomas Corns (University of Wales Press, 2011), 1–2.

¹⁰⁴ Semenza, *Sport, Politics, and Literature*, 146.

¹⁰⁵ Guyer, "Izaak Walton's 'Holy War,'" 287–288.

¹⁰⁶ Guyer, "Izaak Walton's 'Holy War,'" 294; Bevan, *Izaak Walton's The Compleat Angler*, 38.

¹⁰⁷ Braddick, *God's Fury, England's Fire*, 8.

¹⁰⁸ Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution* (Penguin, 1991 [1972]), 160–162.

Book of Sports in 1643, served as a likely catalyst for Walton's decision to write the *Angler*. The consistent use of Christianity in the *Angler* endows the sport with an aura of piety and makes angling appear as the holiest recreation.

In the *Angler's* first edition, Walton connects angling with the traits of the Apostles (*vita apostolica*) and argues that angling is more than a simple recreation; it is, in fact, a faithful activity that channels the Apostles' lives. In his work's final edition, Walton appears increasingly philosophical and adamant about his moral ideology. However, religious themes are already firmly situated in the 1653 version, making it one of the clearest subtexts of the *Angler*. In the introduction, Piscator teaches Viator about the Christian origins of angling:

"As the Patriarks or Prophets of old, and of the Apostles of our Saviour in these later times, of which twelve he chose four that were Fishermen: concerning which choice some have made these Observations. First, that he never reprov'd these for their Employment or Calling, as he did the Scribes and the Money-Changeers. And secondly, That he found the hearts of such men, men that by nature were fitted for contemplation and quietness; men of mild, and sweet, and peaceable spirits, (as indeed most Anglers are) these men our blessed Saviour (who is observed to love to plant grace in good natures) though nothing be too hard for him, yet these men he chose to call from their irreprovable employment, and gave them grace to be his Disciples and to follow him."¹⁰⁹

Walton then focuses on the four Apostles who were fishermen (Peter, Andrew, James, and John) and writes: "when our blessed Saviour went up into the Mount, at his Transfiguration, when he left the rest of his Disciples and chose onely three to bear him company, that these three were all Fishermen."¹¹⁰ Walton is quite explicit in his Christian interpretation, emphasizing the profession of the angling Apostles to propagate the religious validity of the sport.¹¹¹ In addition, fishing is elevated above other activities—such as the work of scribes and moneychangers—because Jesus "never reprov'd" it as a profession. In fact, Walton argues that Christ approved of fishing as a profession, thus rendering angling a divine sport.

The Contemplative Man's Recreation is the *Angler's* subtitle, and through the concept of contemplation, Walton ties angling to God. This idea of inward reflection echoes themes found in Thomas à Kempis's (c. 1380–1471) *The Imitation of Christ* (c. 1418–1427). Specifically, book two in Kempis's work focuses on the "inward life." Kempis writes: "He who knoweth how to walk from within, and to set little value upon outward things, requireth not places nor waiteth for seasons, for holding his intercourse with God. The inward man quickly recollecteth himself, because he is never entirely given up to outward things."¹¹² The *Angler* mirrors this concept in how Walton preaches for quietness and peaceful escapes in nature, where one can develop a clear and more contemplative mind.

¹⁰⁹ Walton, *Compleat Angler* [1653], 74.

¹¹⁰ Walton, *Compleat Angler* [1653], 74.

¹¹¹ Lucy Wooding, *Tudor England: A History* (Yale University Press, 2022), 21.

¹¹² Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ: Four Books*, trans. W. Benham (John Nimmo, 1886 [c. 1418–1427]), 87–88.

Walton brings up the “ancient debate” on whether “contemplation or action” brings man the most happiness in life.¹¹³ Walton emphasizes contemplation and links it to how man can imitate God: “That the nearer we Mortals come to God by way of imitation, the more happy we are. And they say, That God enjoys himself only by a contemplation of his own infinitenesse, Eternity, Power and Goodness and the like.”¹¹⁴ However, Walton considers action as instructive as well, since “Cloysteral men of great learning” say that action “teaches both art and vertue.”¹¹⁵ Thus, sitting in nature provides the contemplative aspect of happiness, while angling itself constitutes a virtuous action. Walton insists that angling is the only sport that satisfies both schools of thought regarding the Christian debate of contemplation versus action. His discussion of proper Christian practices hints at the theology of Richard Hooker. Hooker’s *Polity* is commonly considered the *via media* (middle way) between Catholicism and Protestantism in the Church of England, and his views on ancient Christian customs were often the “antithesis of Puritanism.”¹¹⁶ According to Michael Brydon, Walton created an “Anglican Church father” of Hooker in the *Life of Hooker*, which “vindicated everything that the Restoration religious settlement stood for.”¹¹⁷ Brydon argues that Walton created an exaggerated biography of Hooker to emphasize Anglican virtues, which aligns with how the post-Restoration *Angler* openly suggests “proper” Christian practices.¹¹⁸

The angling virtues that Walton emphasizes, such as quietness and contentment, are connected to how to please God and oneself. Walton writes: “By being humble and cheerful, and content with what his good God has allotted him: he has no turbulent, repining, vexatious thoughts that he deserves better: nor is vexed when he sees others possess of more honour or more riches than his wise God has allotted for his share; but he possesses what he has with a meek and contented quietness.”¹¹⁹ Essentially, Walton argues that those who constantly wish for more in their life are destroying their own happiness.

England’s riverbanks were Walton’s ideal locations for contemplation (affording the opportunity to imitate God), and angling invited man to these divine places. Walton references a treatise written by Peter du Moulin¹²⁰ (1601–1684), a French-English clergyman, who observed that God revealed divine information to his prophets by taking them to deserts or seashores to get them away from people and distractions, thereby settling their minds in “a quiet repose” and making them “fit for revelation.”¹²¹ *The Compleat Angler* strongly

¹¹³ Walton, *Compleat Angler* [1676], 192.

¹¹⁴ Walton, *Compleat Angler* [1676], 192.

¹¹⁵ Walton, *Compleat Angler* [1676], 192–193.

¹¹⁶ Michael Brydon, “The Evolving Reputation of Richard Hooker: An Examination of Responses to the Ecclesiastical Polity, 1640–1714” (Ph.D. Diss., University of Durham, 1999), 8.

¹¹⁷ Brydon, “Evolving Reputation of Richard Hooker,” 90.

¹¹⁸ Brydon, “Evolving Reputation of Richard Hooker,” 90–91.

¹¹⁹ Walton, *Compleat Angler* [1676], 365.

¹²⁰ Moulin, who sided with the Royalists, was the anonymous author of *Regii Sanguinis Clamor* (1652) which attacked the works of John Milton (1608–1674), a supporter of the Parliamentary cause during the English Civil War. David Currell, “Milton Among the Satirists,” in *Changing Satire: Transformations and Continuities in Europe, 1600–1830*, ed. Cecilia Rosengren, Per Sivefors and Rikard Wingård (Manchester University Press, 2022), 148.

¹²¹ Walton, *Compleat Angler* [1676], 193.

supports the idea that angling and devotion to God are closely attached to each other. Angling not only allows for contemplation, a trait of the divine, but is also a gateway to an idyllic past when, in Walton's mind, people had been more faithful. Walton repeatedly recalls communal values that had existed before the English Civil Wars,¹²² especially virtues related to the Christian faith that he longed to see again.¹²³ This includes the "images and memory" that persist throughout the dialogue, which, according to Anne McIlhane, is a series of exchanges that reflect Walton's personal memories before the devastation of the wars.¹²⁴ Many of Walton's angling companions were "dispossessed" Anglicans and Royalists who had been forced into early retirement after the wars; conceivably, the loss of true faith in England was a common topic of conversation among them.¹²⁵

Angling manuals prior to the *Angler's* 1653 publication had presented the sport as a solitary recreation,¹²⁶ yet the *Angler* emphasized it as a communal activity.¹²⁷ Indeed, the *Angler* made angling more inclusive to a broader audience due to its massive popularity and because, prior to its release, angling had been viewed as a recreation most fit for the nobility.¹²⁸ Although the *Angler* opened the sport to a wider range of people beyond the nobility, it remained a pastime of relatively wealthy and literate men. In mid-seventeenth-century England, the literacy rate was roughly thirty percent among men and even less for women.¹²⁹ Marjorie Swann argues that Walton excluded women from the angling brotherhood and considered the sport a recreation strictly for men.¹³⁰ Indeed, Walton advertised the sport to "male" readers so that they would want to join the "brotherhood."

Throughout Walton's text, Piscator and Venator share the peaceful journey of angling together. Most of the religious teachings expressed in the *Angler* are offered by Walton's stand-in character, Piscator, but by the conclusion of their fishing trip, Venator becomes strikingly similar in his addresses to Piscator. In the last few pages of the *Angler*, Venator says: "For indeed, your company and discourse have been so useful and pleasant, that I may truly

¹²² The later editions of *The Compleat Angler* were released after the 1660 Act of Oblivion which forced limits on how the English Civil Wars could be remembered in writing. Walton never directly brings up the conflict but often hints that the antebellum years were a much better time for virtues and faith. For a detailed study on how the English Civil Wars were remembered in writing, see Matthew Neufeld, *The Civil Wars after 1660: Public Remembering in Late Stuart England* (Boydell and Brewer, 2013).

¹²³ Anne Elizabeth McIlhane, "Renaissance Acts and Images of Angling: An Anatomy of the British Piscatory, 1496–1653" (Ph.D. diss., University of Virginia, 1998), 173.

¹²⁴ McIlhane, "Renaissance Acts and Images of Angling," 173–174.

¹²⁵ McIlhane, "Renaissance Acts and Images of Angling," 173; Bevan, *Izaak Walton's The Compleat Angler*, 28. Bevan argues that *The Compleat Angler* can be read as a book of consolation for the Anglican clergy.

¹²⁶ Two angling manuals that predate Walton's work, *The Booke of Seynt Albans* (1496) and *The Arte of Angling* (1577), celebrate the idea of an isolated angler. For a thorough comparison of the communal aspects of *The Compleat Angler* and these earlier texts, see Gregory Michael Colón Semenza, "'Unlawful Recreations': Sport, Politics, and Literature in Early Modern England" (Ph.D. diss., The Pennsylvania State University, 2001), 199–213.

¹²⁷ Semenza, "Unlawful Recreations," 209.

¹²⁸ John Cliffe, *The World of the Country House in Seventeenth-Century England* (Yale University Press, 1999), 158.

¹²⁹ Braddick, *God's Fury, England's Fire*, 50.

¹³⁰ Swann, *Environment, Society, and The Compleat Angler*, 60.

say, I have only lived since I enjoyed them, and turned *Angler*, and not before."¹³¹ The personal growth and happiness that Venator has experienced throughout their journey have led him to feel a sense of "rebirth" with regard to his perspective on life. The final words of the *Angler* reflect how angling in the natural world has brought Venator closer to God and closer to happiness:

"*Venator*: You advised me to the like concerning Angling, and I will endeavour to do so, and to live like those many worthy men, of which you made mention in the former part of your discourse. This is my firm resolution; and as a pious man advised his friend, That to beget Mortification he should frequent Churches; and view Monuments, and Charnel-houses, and then and there consider, how many dead bones time had pil'd up at the gates of death. So when I would beget content, and increase confidence in the Power, and Wisdom, and Providence of Almighty God, I will walk the Meadows by some gliding stream, and there contemplate the Lillies that take no care, and those very many other various little living creatures, that are not only created but fed (man knows not how) by the goodness of the God of Nature, and therefore trust in him. This is my purpose: and so, Let every thing that hath breath praise the Lord. And let the blessing of St. Peters Master be with mine. / *Piscator*: And upon all that are lovers of Vertue; and dare trust in his providence, and be quiet, and go a Angling. Study to be quiet, I Thes. 4. 11."¹³²

Here, Walton directly correlates faith in the "goodness of God" with outdoor recreation. All of the benefits that the natural world offers to those who spend time in it are actually gifts from God's power and wisdom. Walton defends his mirth of angling by appealing to decades-old "anti-Puritan apologetics" that position his adversaries as opponents to Christian "righteousness."¹³³ The idea of religious "righteousness" was a rhetorical strategy employed by both sides during the English Civil Wars. Oliver Cromwell's speeches during the conflict often used the ideology of the "rightness of war" as being determined by God's will.¹³⁴ Rachel Foxley writes on the religious justifications used by Cromwell: "the first Civil War, and perhaps even more those which followed, were religious struggles for Cromwell, and he, like the Puritan divines, expected a glorious divine issue from these events."¹³⁵ Opposing religious perspectives during and after the wars all relied on appeals to God. Walton's more "contemplative" approach toward angling finds itself entirely in accordance with Christian values based on imitating God and the lives of the Apostles. According to Derek Hirst, the wanderings of *Piscator* and *Venator* serve to "challenge Puritan sourness with values that are obviously inclusive: friendship, fellowship and a concord both social and natural."¹³⁶ Thus, the way in which Walton celebrates the communal nature of angling and directly connects it to God stands in contrast to the Puritan teachings of the mid-seventeenth century.

¹³¹ Walton, *Compleat Angler* [1676], 370.

¹³² Walton, *Compleat Angler* [1676], 371. 1 Thessalonians 4:11 (KJV): "And that ye study to be quiet, and to do your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you."

¹³³ Guyer, "Izaak Walton's 'Holy War,'" 293–294.

¹³⁴ Rachel Foxley, "Oliver Cromwell on Religion and Resistance," in *England's Wars of Religion, Revisited*, ed. Glenn Burgess (Taylor & Francis Group, 2011), 260.

¹³⁵ Foxley, "Oliver Cromwell," 260.

¹³⁶ Derek Hirst, "Literature and National Identity," in *The Cambridge History of Early Modern English Literature*, ed. David Loewenstein and Janel Mueller (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 649.

Piscator explains how his fellow anglers possess superior Christian values at the beginning of the *Angler*, when he compares the recreations of hawking, hunting, and angling to Auceps and Venator, stating:

"Gentlemen; let not prejudice prepossess you. I confess my discourse is like to prove suitable to my Recreation, calm and quiet; we seldome make the Welkin to roar, we seldom take the name of God into our mouths, but it is either to praise him or pray to him; if others use it vainly in the midst of their recreations, so vainly as if they meant to conjure, I must tell you, it is neither our fault nor our custom; we, we protest against it. But, pray remember I accuse no body; for as I would not make a watry discourse, so I would not put too much vinegar into it; nor would I raise the reputation of my own Art by the diminution or ruine of anothers."¹³⁷

Walton pretends that he does not want to elevate the reputation of angling over other recreations, yet he spends much of the *Angler* doing just that. Like the ironic discussion about protecting fish at the expense of otters, Walton deliberately praises angling at the expense of other recreations. He discusses how water, the element that Piscator trades in, is the "eldest daughter" of creation that "God commanded to bring forth living creatures abundantly," and mentioned that Moses "appointed fish" to be the "chief diet for the best Common-wealth."¹³⁸ When comparing the mental states of anglers and other hobbyists, Robert Venables, too, is quite direct: "The minds of anglers being usually more calm and composed than many others, especially hunters and falconers, who too frequently lose their delight in their passion, and too often bring home more of melancholy and discontent than satisfaction in their thoughts."¹³⁹ Perhaps Venables's tone appears more straightforward because his text lacks a conversation between a hunter and a falconer, but the *Angler* expresses the same idea. Venator's growth from hunter to angler during the course of the story also shows the superiority of angling, since Venator expresses his increased spiritual devotion and general happiness only after switching from hunting to fishing.

The contemplation seen in both Walton's and Venables's angling manuals mirrors the "beauty of holiness," a phrase that accounts for the "so-called Laudian 'innovations' of the 1630s."¹⁴⁰ The Laudian view of the "beauty of holiness," named after the Archbishop of Canterbury William Laud (1573–1645), reflected "decent, appropriate worship, not just in the appearance of the place of worship but also in the individual worshipper."¹⁴¹ This "beauty" in the individual is commonly referred to in the *Angler* and in Venables's manual. In the *Angler*, Venator describes how he "would beget content, and increase confidence in the Power, and Wisdom, and Providence of Almighty God" while walking along flowers and a burbling stream.¹⁴² An angler who possesses Walton's Christian values can emulate the inward "beauty of holiness" through the recreation.

¹³⁷ Walton, *Compleat Angler* [1676], 185. "Welkin" is a reference to the firmament or the clouds (sharing its etymology and meaning with the German word "Wolken").

¹³⁸ Walton, *Compleat Angler* [1676], 185–187.

¹³⁹ Venables, *Experienced Angler*, ii–iii.

¹⁴⁰ Travis Knapp, "The Beauty of Holiness between Hooker and Laud: 'Not more holy, than comely, nor more sacred, than sumptuous,'" *Anglican and Episcopal History* 94, no. 1 (2025): 65.

¹⁴¹ Knapp, "Beauty of Holiness," 69.

¹⁴² Walton, *Compleat Angler* [1676], 371.

Izaak Walton's perspective on the environment and morality was completely bound to his Christian faith. Walton was quite forward in how closely he connected angling with the divine during a time of heightened religious tensions. However, Walton was careful not to state that he and other anglers were "better" than other Christians and instead spoke about how the sport brought them closer to God. The natural world had been given to man by God and was therefore a place for appreciation. The ancient art of angling could be traced back to the Apostles, and it was the angler's duty to replicate their virtues. Walton used Christianity in the *Angler* to defend the sport at a time when communal sports were under threat of banishment. Not only could angling be communal and still faithful to the Lord, but its contemplative nature actually emulated the glory and wisdom of God.

Conclusion

In his "watry discourse," Izaak Walton celebrated angling and sought to attract his reader to the sport. Angling was more than a recreation to both Walton and Venables; it was a way of living that brought happiness and peace—but most of all, contentedness. The *Angler* was not the first angling text, nor was it the first to involve a narrative, characters, and philosophical thought. However, the *Angler* has remained the most famous fishing text because of its beautifully written dialogue, its harmonious descriptions of nature, and its influence on the sport of angling. Walton's legacy continues in the modern era, especially with the Izaak Walton League of America (founded in 1922), one of the oldest and largest conservation societies in the United States.¹⁴³ Moreover, various places in North America are named for him, such as Mount Izaak Walton (in California's Sierra Nevada), the historic Izaak Walton Inn (in Essex, Montana), and the Izaak Walton Recreation Site (in Sterling, Alaska). In the United Kingdom, numerous locations in Staffordshire pay homage to his legacy with a statue, a street, and a pub named after him.

Walton expressed his fervent beliefs under the guise of angling instructions and offered subtle criticisms of mid-seventeenth-century English society. This is apparent when Piscator shames the greed of those who overfish for the procurement of wealth, and when Walton's text urges for legal reform to enforce the wise statutes of England's past. Walton's respect for the natural world bled into his moral philosophy. Walton's moral teachings are often tied to the inverse relationship between wealth and happiness, as well as the significance of maintaining gratitude for one's mere existence. Part of his definition of happiness involves one's decision to show thankfulness for being free from pain and mental misery. Perhaps Walton projected some of his personal struggles to find happiness as a wealthy Englishman who associated with high-class people and wanted to share with others how angling could serve as a steppingstone to achieve contentment. By the final edition of the *Angler*, Walton included anecdotes of rich people crafting their own misery by constantly pushing for more and more financial gain. From the perspective of Walton and Venables, anglers adopt a persona that surpasses other recreations because the nature of the sport reshapes their identity. Walking along a riverbank and relaxing in the serenity of the natural environment connects to Walton's discussion of contemplation versus action, and Venables mentioned

¹⁴³ Guyer, "Izaak Walton's 'Holy War,'" 285.

that even when an angler “hath the worst success,” he still found growth and happiness when surrounded by tranquil landscapes.¹⁴⁴

In some ways, the moral virtues associated with angling after the English Civil Wars reflect a newfound recreation for the defeated Royalist supporters who despised Puritan-based religious and societal reforms. However, angling was not only for Royalists attempting to escape the reality of the Cromwellian regime. Robert Venables, who had fought for Parliament during the wars and served Cromwell’s ambitions in the Caribbean—a direct opponent to Walton’s values—became an angling brother to Walton when he published his own fishing manual. Walton’s introduction to *The Experienced Angler* includes his thoughts on Venables’s text: “I received much advantage in the practice, yet, without prejudice to their worthy Authors, I could never find in them that height of judgment and reason, which you have manifested in this, as I may call it, epitome of Angling.”¹⁴⁵ Walton’s address to Venables hints at the reconciliatory effect of angling. These two men had been on opposite sides during the English Civil Wars, yet angling united them in a shared passion. In the *Angler*, Piscator almost always refers to anglers as members of a collective who behave in a similar fashion and share common values.

Among the values shared by anglers are religious traditions dating back to the days of the Apostles. The mid-seventeenth-century’s complicated religious environment is reflected in how Walton intertwined angling with the divine. The contemplative aspect of the sport imitates God, and spending time in the quietness of nature opens one up to divine revelation. Walton used Scripture to show that angling was never “reproved” by Christ and should therefore be considered a non-threatening recreation as far as Christianity is concerned.¹⁴⁶ Because of his experience with Puritan-influenced attacks on communal pastimes, Walton emphasized the healthy relationship with faith that angling provided. Walton’s focus on the religious aspects of angling likely served as his resistance to the Puritans’ banishment of communal sports on Sundays. The *Angler* showed that angling could be a communal activity that was perfectly in line with respecting the Lord’s Day.

A pattern emerges in the central themes covered in this study and how they relate to angling. The fish conservation arguments protect angling by celebrating the natural world’s beauty and by showing how unchecked overfishing can threaten the sport’s existence. The moral lessons advocate for angling because they promise a social community of anglers who share a common code of humility, gratitude, and happiness over wealth. Religion defends angling as a biblical activity that is meant to be shared with others and that imitates the divine.

As a literary genre, angling texts offer a unique perspective on the cultural history of mid-seventeenth-century England. *The Compleat Angler* is a nuanced and multifaceted piece of historical evidence that offers a glimpse into how Izaak Walton viewed society during a complicated and tumultuous time in England. The *Angler* introduced a new model for living

¹⁴⁴ Venables, *Experienced Angler*, ii–iii.

¹⁴⁵ Venables, *Experienced Angler*, 14 [unnumbered in the original text].

¹⁴⁶ Walton, *Compleat Angler* [1653], 74.

life in a shattered country after years of political and religious instability. Walton used angling as the “hook” to draw his readers in, but the text was almost equally about propagating a certain philosophical and religious way of life that, in his view, afforded tremendous meaning and happiness. Walton’s 1653 *Angler* presented his fellow isolated Anglican Royalists with a guide to a calming recreation that could stimulate them to become more content and peaceful through angling. Its social commentary was brief, however, and angling remained the absolute focus of the text. By 1676, the *Angler* had evolved into a literary masterwork that reflected Walton’s assessment of his contemporary English society. Walton’s final edition was no longer a “pastoral escape” for the defeated faction of the wars; instead, it offered a way out of mental misery for anyone willing to change their attitude. Angling simply served to effect a personal transformation in its practitioner.

Even today, much of the *Angler* remains applicable to our daily lives. The violence, corruption, and despair that persist in the twenty-first century is comparable to the chaos that Walton and his contemporaries experienced. Today, the fear of misery due to physical pain has perhaps dwindled because of modern medicine and technology that have helped alleviate many of the agonizing ailments and diseases that have affected mankind for thousands of years. However, mental suffering is as prevalent as it was when Walton first wrote the *Angler*. Entire diseases may have been eradicated, and procedures exist to soothe the pain of bladder stones, gout, and toothaches, but there is no cure for the torture of mental anguish. Izaak Walton prescribed to his mentally miserable contemporaries a dosage of contemplation, thankfulness, and the enjoyment of the little things in life: it is through simple pleasures like the beauty of a setting sun, quality time spent with loved ones, and, of course, the catching of a fish, that we can be “free from those high, those restless thoughts, which corrode the sweets of life.”¹⁴⁷

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¹⁴⁷ Walton, *Compleat Angler* [1676], 334.