

STEPHEN KNIGHT. *Nature and Medieval Literature*. New Century Chaucer. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2024. Pp. xiii, 313. £80 cloth; £80 e-book.

Scholarship attending to the material impact of nonhuman forces and beings on medieval literary culture has expanded rapidly over recent decades to include, for example, animals (wild, feral, and domestic), weather, geology, trees, elements, waters, soils, disease, parasites, and much of this inflected by insights from queer theory, feminist theory and critical race studies. As a work in conversation with medieval ecocriticism, in many ways Knight's nature-centric monograph is unusual in eschewing the majority of this work. The author outlines the impetus for the study, which is to give "detailed attention to the ways in which writers and their texts actually responded to the natural world" as an alternative to a "conceptually analytic" approach that interrogates the cultural category of nature (xi). This work expands not only on Knight's decades of medievalist study but also on the author's recent approach to themes of environment in the transhistorical final chapter of *Medieval Literature and Social Politics*, which centred on the figure of Merlin.¹ Nature is simply defined in a single sentence: "[b]y 'natural world' is meant the entire domain of animals, birds, trees and flora, as well as natural landscapes and their features, even including weather" (1). Yet, in the volume itself, the natural world is more sensitively imagined: not just as a background context or a parallel alterity, but sometimes as powerful intersecting systems with medieval literary concerns, and Knight does allow the caveat that 'nature' in the sense in which it is used here is not the medieval understanding of the term (4). The great strength of this work is its tremendous range, most chapters addressing a genre-defined selection of between 20 and 40 texts, painstakingly yet engagingly directed towards finding thematic patterns in the presentation of nature across the corpus of medieval literature.

The introduction to this volume gives a conventional narrative for nature as a serious critical object in literary criticism, placing Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* as a watershed text for ecological consciousness. The backdrop of growing social counter-movement to post-war capitalist exploitation coincides with parallel scholarly movements in Britain and America in the mid-twentieth century that seek to highlight environmental damage as ideologically-driven. This critical movement comes late to

¹ Knight, S. (2021). *Medieval literature and social politics: studies of cultures and their contexts* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003052548>.

medieval historiography because “[a]n important recurring theme among the historians was the argument that [climate destructive economic and ideological systems developed] from the sixteenth century on” (2). Highlighted important works in 1966 and 1973 that take nature as a central critical object for medieval literary reading might have challenged the suggestion that environment was not a mid-century medievalist concern. Largely well-received is ecocriticism on Chaucer, including that of Sarah Stanbury, Felicity Riddy, Lisa Kiser, and Lesley Kordecki. Medieval ecocriticism from Gillian Rudd, Rebecca Douglass, Derek Pearsall and Elizabeth Salter also enters into later chapters, as both support and counterpoint to analysis, especially in Chapters 5 and 7.

This volume has a range of 500 years in medieval Welsh, Scottish, English and French material, working across seven chapters each defined by the selected corpus. These chapters are described as essays that have resonances with each other, but are not thematically linked. Chapter 1 examines early Welsh literature, especially the *Mabinogi*, in which supernatural forces abound, sometimes revealing traces of Celtic myth and a ‘dark’ or ‘unnatural’ nature, especially in the case of the synthetic Bloddeuwedd, made from blossom (36-38). Chapter 2 examines *Perceval*, *Peredur* and *Sir Perceval of Galles*, beginning with the hero in rural and unrefined seclusion and ending with him courteously stationed at Camelot. In these texts, “[n]ature is an indicative and often symbolic context for the action of romance” (72). Chapter 3 examines the major works of Geoffrey Chaucer, acknowledging the significant attention this author has already received from ecocriticism. The unnaturalness of Fame and Fortune, and the use of Nature as thematic scene, a “fine overture to a major sequence” (96) dominates the earlier and middle works, but *The Canterbury Tales* emerges as the most complex, notably the arch manipulations of overlapping yet opposite worlds in ‘The Franklin’s Tale’, also wittily evoked in ‘The Nun’s Priest’s Tale’. Animality receives a very close treatment in this chapter, which will be continued into Chapter 4 for William Dunbar and Robert Henryson. The nature presented in Dunbar’s dream visions is used as a “fine revelatory weapon” (174), to critique the structure of social power, but there are other elements to this survey of his work. Many texts suggest fascination with the estrangement of night and the contorted city emerges in Dunbar’s urban descriptions, as ‘cramped honeycombs’ or a ‘beggars’ nest’ (141). Henryson’s *Testament* and *Orpheus* are read as again revealing a ‘dark’ grim force in nature, but it is in the

Morall Fabillis that Henryson is found to present “the interrelation of the natural and the human worlds as both complementary and mutually, even allegorically, revealing”. (175) Henryson’s fables are the centrepiece of this analysis, highlighting especially ‘The Wolf and the Lamb’ and ‘The Paddock and the Mouse’ as sustaining complex meditations on animal lives and human morals simultaneously. Chapters 5 and 6, with their mission of introducing nature-centric analysis to popular Middle English romances (the 20 “most interesting” cases (177)) and Robin Hood from Broadview ballads up to Hollywood film, are especially complex and ambitious. Chapter 5 also breaks the pattern set by the earlier chapters of ending with a short conclusion by introducing further texts instead: those romances that the author sees as having already received ecocritical attention at the expense of more popular romances, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Malory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur*, for which brief new readings based on the chapter findings are offered. Chapter 5’s section ‘Romances with Nature Involved in the Plot’ (200-212) valuably complicates the typical Romance arc from wildness to sophistication (219), by introducing natural systems as functioning parts of romance narratologies in *Sir Cleges*, *Chevalere Assigne* and especially *Sir Orfeo* and *Launfal*. Chapter 6 is likewise different in its structure, and most like the earlier published convincing analysis of different realisations of the Merlin figure from the earliest Welsh versions to those of the last 20 years in Western Europe and America. Like Merlin as a figure of knowledge, Robin Hood’s relationship to the environment is underpinned by his function as a figure of the Greenwood – a manageable arboreal space adjacent to medieval urban lives – and his outlaw status. Though varyingly evoked, Robin Hood always operates as a feral and liberated agent for Knight: “the outlaw is always in some way linked to and a part of the positive myth of nature” (260). Chapter 7 moves away from the narrative poetry and prose that has occupied the previous chapters, and acknowledges this in the careful explanation of medieval lyric context (261-262). Ecocritical analysis here is notably underpinned by Gillian Rudd’s work in the area.² The chapter takes in 40 lyrics, including the Holly and Ivy carols, springtime love lyrics, and Marian devotion, often bringing mystical and secular readings alongside each other. William Dunbar’s work also returns here in the form of love lyric. The conclusion of this final chapter links to

² Rudd, J. (2007; 2010). *Greenery: ecocritical readings of late medieval English literature*. Manchester University Press.

previous ones: the patterns that have emerged gradually are brought to the fore in these last pages. These are often matters of literary convention, but some of these details can be ecocritically telling: the romances, for example, present a broader range of animals than the lyrics, which are decidedly avian, yet is a genre in which it is far less conventional for nature to be a central focus.

From an ecocritical standpoint, the refusal of definitional analysis of what is meant by 'nature', is disconcerting and some medieval ecocriticism is perhaps too hastily dismissed by the author. Interrogating the implicit anthropocentrism of dividing human and natural worlds is placed beyond the intended scope of this volume. The intention is rather that the sheer scale of this work yields insight unavailable to ecocritical approaches that frame particular texts through intellectual histories of medieval environmental thought. Though not articulated by Knight, the relationship of such scale and pattern to ecology itself might well be convincingly explored: ecocritics might therefore find this volume to be an invitation rather than an admonishment.