



Reading the Natural World in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: Perceptions of the Environment and Ecology. Thomas Willard.

Arizona Studies in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance 46. Turnhout: Brepols, 2020. xxii + 232 pp. €80.

This volume, which began life as a series of papers presented at the twenty-fourth annual conference of the Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies (ACMRS) in 2018, brings together an introduction, a first section on “Perspectives” (two chapters), a second section on “The Medieval World” (six chapters), and a third on “The Early Modern World” (five chapters). As the introduction notes, there is a “certain continuity” due to the “European perspective” (xiv), but the contributions are probably best appreciated if their variegation is embraced, for this is indeed a rich and mottled medley.

Section 1 offers “two perspectives on approaches to the environment in pre-modern writing” (xv): the first, by Michael Bintley, brings to his study of Anglo-Saxon land charters the concept of the “exogram” (borrowed from Karl Spencer Lashley); the second, by Albrecht Classen, studies rivers in the works of Wolfram von Eschenbach, concluding that they “not only delineate a geophysical map but also trace the map of human existence” (34).

The rest of the volume is organized chronologically, going from Anglo-Saxon poetry to Shakespeare. Chapters focused on the Middle Ages are by Todd Preston (on birds of the genus *Corvus* in Old English literature), by Emma Knowles (on the biblical book of Daniel), by Michael W. Twomey (on Bartholomeus Anglicus), Lori J. Ultsch (on snakes in Dante’s *Inferno*), Tiffany Nicole White (on the Icelandic saga of Áli Flekkur), and Rebekah Lynn Pratt-Sturges (on Gaston Fébus’s hunting manual, the *Livre de chasse*). Twomey’s study of the thirteenth-century encyclopedic *De proprietatibus rerum* stands out: it shows how the author’s bookishness—Pliny, Isidore de Seville, and newly available Arabic material—leads him to represent a natural world as an “exemplary environment” that is rather alienated from the real one, foreshadowing the “Western alienation from nature” (87). Pratt-Sturges’s chapter discusses the *Livre de chasse*’s miniatures, reproduced in color, showing how they “transform the artificiality of the medieval park into a perceived natural state where humans reign supreme” (120), connecting physical spaces and social practices, thus making a similar compelling point to Twomey—namely, how representations of nature all too often keep the physical world at a distance, something “constructed out of nature but not natural” (136).

Chapters focused on the early modern period are by Sarah H. Beckjord (on Oviedo’s chronicle), Catherine Schultz McFarland (on the mountainous landscapes of Pieter Bruegel the Elder), Jennifer Bess (on horses and horsemanship in Philip Sidney), and two essays on Shakespeare, the first by Grace Tiffany (on forests and trees in *Titus Andronicus*, *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, and *As You Like It*), and the

second by Seth Swanner (on nonhuman voices in *Macbeth*). Beckjord's chapter on Oviedo's description of Nicaragua is welcome and, building beyond Antonello Gerbi's foundational *Nature in the New World* (1975, trans. 1985), shows the complexity of Oviedo's self-aware practices. McFarland's study of *The Suicide of Saul* and *The Conversion of Paul*, paintings in which "the landscape itself becomes almost a protagonist" (160), such that the "immensity of the settings . . . dwarfs the subjects" (161), is carefully argued and teeming with eco-lessons: "The mountains loom over the human beings until they seem crushed by the power of a God who seems not to care about the puny dramas of these pitiful protagonists" (169). Tiffany's chapter on Shakespeare's savage trees pushes past a certain notion that Shakespeare's woodlands might be "benevolent places" to realign them more with the "threatening woods of European folk tales and medieval romance" (197), a thought to be set aside Vin Nardizzi's *Wooden Os*.

For the most part, *Reading the Natural World* is not—and does not claim to be—a volume in urgent dialogue with contemporary ecocriticism, and the editor's passing comment that one chapter takes up the "*relatively recent* field of animal studies" (xvi, emphasis mine) indeed suggests just such a distance from present theoretical debates. This distance in no way minimizes the interest and importance of the contributions, however, all of which shed new bright light on the literary and artistic works they study.

Phillip John Usher, *New York University*
doi:10.1017/rqx.2023.432

Religion and Prison Art in Ming China (1368–1644): Creative Environment, Creative Subjects. Ying Zhang.
Brill Research Perspectives in Religion and the Arts. Leiden: Brill, 2020. 102 pp. €96.

"Clouds swooping across the sky, wind blowing, dirt spiraling. . . . The minister walked over and turned himself in." But just three days later, "A piece of paper arrives, restoring the minister the next day. Just like that, Heaven reverses the gust" (2). Ying Zhang's *Religion and Prison Art in Ming China* begins with this poem, written by an imprisoned official in 1638 when his senior colleague, the Minister of Punishments, was also thrown in prison for displeasing the emperor. In many ways, this poem is highly typical of literati art—its oblique commentary on contemporary events, its use of "moral meteorology" to draw correspondences between celestial phenomena, like weather, and human events, like imperial censure. But in other ways, it was the product of an exceptional context—the seemingly arbitrary imprisonment and then release of an otherwise powerful figure.

A political historian by training, Zhang reminds us that "imprisonment was a much more common phenomenon among Ming officials than we think" (7), but does not