WRITING WITH THE GRAIN: FORM, FLOW, AND THE ENVIRONMENT IN LATE MEDIEVAL POETRY

A Dissertation
Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of Cornell University
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree
of Doctor of Philosophy

by
Ryan Wesley Lawrence
December 2022

©2022 Ryan Wesley Lawrence

WRITING WITH THE GRAIN: FORM, FLOW, AND THE ENVIRONMENT IN LATE MEDIEVAL POETRY

Ryan Wesley Lawrence, Ph.D.
Cornell University 2022

Writing with the Grain explores moments of dynamic conceptual and formal exchange between poetic and environmental worlds in late-medieval vernacular literature. It traces the ways that late medieval poets envisioned the environment as a participant in the production of poetry—a view which challenges the notion that, in creative expression, humans "give form" to things, as if matter were brute, subordinate, passively awaiting the agent who shapes it (often called "hylomorphic" theories of creative expression). Examining poets like Chaucer and Gower, I argue for a view of late-medieval poetic production that seeks to "follow the grain" of the material world, so to speak, embracing the material fluctuations of the environment and allowing these fluctuations to participate in the shaping of poetry. *Writing with the Grain* argues that late-medieval vernacular writers understood that our environmental contexts–in all their materiality–have striking consequences for how we understand poetic form.

Drawing on phenomenological understandings of creativity, Chapter One reads Robert Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid* alongside Chaucer's *Canterbury*

Tales to argue for a view of poetic production characterized by human-environmental *correspondences*, where poets follow forms that are latent in the environment itself. In Chapter Two, I explore the conceptual and physical connections between poetic and environmental matter. I argue that Chaucer's *House of Fame*, with its attention to concepts of movement and proliferation, puts forth a view that sees creativity born within the whirl of the Aristotelian world of fluctuation. In Chapters Three and Four, I demonstrate the ways medieval poets like John Gower and John Lydgate used literary form to enact environmental form, from the role of poetic form in structuring environmental concepts such as climate and pollution, to the use of fiction and dialogue in capturing our skillful engagements with material objects such as tools.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Ryan Lawrence was born in Gravette, Arkansas. He graduated with a B.A. from University of Arkansas in 2016, where he majored in English Literature and Medieval and Renaissance Studies. After graduation, he joined the Medieval Studies Program at Cornell University, where he received his M.A. in 2019 and his PhD in 2022, with a concentration in Old and Middle English literature. His work has recently been published in *Philological Quarterly.*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am so thankful for the mentors, colleagues, and friends who have helped make this dissertation possible. I am grateful for the support and constant encouragement of my dissertation committee: Andrew Galloway, Kim Haines-Eitzen, and Samantha Zacher. Andrew Galloway has introduced me to so many wonderful texts, and I cherish the many insightful conversations we have had throughout my graduate career. I am deeply grateful for his intellectual curiosity, generosity, and enthusiasm at every stage of this project. I am likewise thankful for Kim Haines-Eitzen, who nurtured my interest in phenomenology early on and whose course on "Desert Monasticism" sparked my interest in literature and the environment. I left every meeting with Kim having a renewed sense of excitement for my own work. Samantha Zacher has been supportive of my project since the beginning, through its many shapes and iterations. Samantha's feedback on this project has been incredibly rich and insightful. Her scholarship has been an exemplar for me since I was an undergraduate, and I am so thankful to have worked with her.

The Medieval Studies Program has provided me with years of support: Sage and Avalon Fellowships, travel grants, conference funding, and many other means of support. I am grateful to the many teachers I have had throughout my graduate career, especially Andrew Hicks and Joshua Byron

Smith. I would like to acknowledge the encouragement and feedback from my fellow graduate students in Medieval Studies and The Department of Literatures in English. I am thankful to have learned and laughed so much with you all. I am incredibly thankful for my dissertation writing group, Austin Lillywhite, Olivia Milroy-Evans, Seth Strickland, and Sophia D'gnazio, who encouraged me to keep writing and always gave such generous feedback. Thank you to the Society for the Humanities for supporting this wonderful group.

I cannot possibly express the gratitude I feel towards my friends who have supported me throughout these years. I am particularly thankful for Brynn, Clint, Kenny, and Caleb, whose conversations and humor are precious to me. I am grateful for Austin and Seth, who I love, and who have been the most wonderful companions. And Bethany, whose curiosity and encouragement inspired me through the hardest parts of this project.

My deepest thanks goes to my Mother, Sisters, and Grandmothers.

Table of Contents

Introduction **11**

Medieval Poetry and the Environment 11

Writing with the Grain 16

Poetry and the Environment: Forms of Relation 19

Forms 24

Chapter One
Correspondences **35**

Testament of Cresseid 41

Temperature Fluctuations and Poetic Form 44

Correspondence and Hylomorphism 51

Following the Grain 54

Chapter Two
The Whirl of Materials: Form and Movement in Chaucer's House of Fame **59**

Movement and Aesthetics 60

Poetry and Natural Philosophy 68

Movement in The House of Fame 79

Multiplication and the Problem of Representation 92

Chapter Three
Composing the Air: Atmosphere and Climate in Gower and Lydgate **104**

The First Perifierie 110

The Second Perifierie 119

The Third Periferie 130

Chapter Four
"Is Skill Wordless?": Poetic Making in Two Anonymous Late Medieval Poems 135

"Is Skill Wordless?" 135

A Complaint Against Blacksmiths *138*

Fictionality and Entanglement 146

The Debate of the Carpenter's Tools *148*

Attending to Materials 155

Conclusion **158**

Bibliography **162**

Introduction

Medieval Poetry and the Environment

> Erthe toc of erthe erthe wyth woh.
> Erthe other erthe to the erthe droh.
> Erthe leyde erthe in erthene throh.
> Tho heuede erthe of erthe erthe ynoh.
>
> [Earth took earth from earth, with woe.
> Earth drew other earth to the earth.
> Earth laid earth in an earthen place.
> Then earth had earth enough of earth.][1]

I begin with this poem to raise a set of questions that will be explored throughout the dissertation. What forms does the environment afford human life? How does poetry (and human creativity more generally) physically and conceptually "form" the environment? And how does language mediate and reveal the formal entanglements between the human and nonhuman worlds?

---

[1] Gillian Rudd begins her seminal book, *Greenery: Ecocritical Readings of Late Medieval English Literature*, with *Erthe*, a "deceptively simple" four-line lyric found in Harley 2253. Rudd explains that this lyric is "an obvious starting point for any ecocritically minded investigation of late medieval English literature." While I follow Rudd in beginning with *Erthe*, my dissertation works to highlight features of the material world that often get left behind by ecocritical scholars—such as movement, atmosphere, weather, and sound. For more on the "over-emphasis" on earth and ground in studies of the environment, see Tim Ingold, "Earth, Sky, Wind, and Weather." *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 13 (2007): S19–38. Gillian Rudd, *Greenery: Ecocritical Readings of Late Medieval English Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007). Susanna Fein, David Raybin, and Jan Ziolkowski, eds. and trans., *The Complete Harley 2253 Manuscript*, 3 vols. (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2015). Translation is my own.

Various interpreters have puzzled over the exact meaning of *Erthe*, a Middle English lyric found in Harley 2253, often suggesting that the dense poem offers a bleak and painful vision of the human relationship to the "erthe" — a relationship premised on connotations of death, exhaustion, and mourning, and perhaps even apocalyptic and planetary destruction.[2] The twelve occurrences of "erthe" in the poem display the robust "semantic range of 'earth' in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries," allowing for "connotations of soil, world, earth as opposed to heaven, and grave to resonate through the poem."[3] Indeed, "erthe" can refer to a range of material forms—to name a few: the spherical world itself, the "clay" that formed humanity, the "erthene throh" of the grave, "earthly goods," and the "dust" to which humanity inevitably returns.[4] The multitude of available meanings for "erthe" invites the reader to hold several interpretations in their mind at once.[5] Which moments in the poem are meant to refer to *erthe* as "humanity" and which moments are meant to refer to *erthe* as

---

[2] For example, see D. Vance Smith, *Arts of Dying: Literature and Finitude in Medieval England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).
[3] Gillian Rudd, *Greenery: Ecocritical Readings of Late Medieval English Literature* (2007), p. 22. Concerning this multitude of meanings for "erthe," Rudd remarks: "The entries for this short word run to several pages in dictionaries of both modern and medieval English, indicating that not only are our relations to this word and all it signifies complicated now, but that they have been for some time and often for the same reasons," p. 21.
[4] ĕ̄rthe n.(1), *Middle English Dictionary* (2022).
[5] D. Vance Smith explains that the "most arresting effect, and meaning, of these lines is just this production of multiple possibilities, without resolution." Smith, "Medieval *Forma*: The Logic of the Work," in *Reading for Form*, ed. Susan J. Wolfson and Marshall Brown (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006), p. 74.

“material world”? Material forms such as graves, for example, can be seen in the poem as being formed by the material world, the personified *erthe*, encasing and decomposing the human body in an “erthene throh.” But the grave is also a type of “erthe” that exists as a cultural form, as a human-formed place (“erthene throh”) that contains the human body (also “erthe”). These moments of linguistic play within the poem demonstrate the complex formal relationships between humans and the material world. In fact, the attention to the complex nature of form is part of the poem’s “force, verging on the unintelligible purity of form itself. The quatrain seems almost to shape a formal exercise, arrayed on a single rhyme and laden with the word *erthe*.”[6] Thomas A. Prendergast and Jessica Rosenfield explain that, for Middle English writers, “form is a site of challenge, never a vehicle of uncomplicated translation from structure to content, or text to context.”[7] *Erthe* is certainly a convincing example of this assertion in the way that the formal properties of the poem (the personification of *erthe,* the compact nature of the poem, as well as the proliferation of different meanings of “erthe”) obscure the exact meaning of the poem.

Regardless of how you interpret each instance of *erthe*, it seems clear that the poem is interested in the diverse and complex material and cultural forms (from creation to the grave) that proliferate between the human and

[6] D. Vance Smith, “Medieval *Forma*,” p. 74.
[7] “Introduction,” in Prendergast, Thomas A., and Jessica Rosenfeld, eds. *Chaucer and the Subversion of Form* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018) p. 3.

nonhuman worlds. In the poem, the contours of human experience—from our formation out of clay to the production of material goods to the final "erthene throh" of the body—are all constituted, in one way or another, by the "earth." Concerning the form of the poem, D. Vance Smith explains:

> Reminding us that we are formed of *erthe*, the quatrain couches the question of our being, and its termination, in terms of form: is our form the form of the earth, the form that the earth takes? If so, then what form does earth take to accommodate—literally form itself to—our earth? The haunting brilliance and morbid wit of this poem abides in its presentation of *erthe* as a formal problem [. . .][8]

The poem potently captures the "formal problem" presented by the *erthe,* and allows the reader to glimpse the ways in which the forms of the environment and the forms of human life are "entangled," each one acting upon and shaping the other, in a knot of reciprocal interactions.[9] *Erthe* demonstrates this

---

[8] D. Vance Smith, "Medieval *Forma*," p. 75.

[9] The notion of "entanglement" follows from the work of Karen Barad and Tim Ingold, primarily. Throughout the dissertation, I highlight the "entanglements" between human and the environmental worlds, emphasizing a reciprocity that is foundational in the work of Barad and Ingold. My use of "entanglement" refers to the thick formal, cultural, and physical connections between the human and nonhuman worlds. The notion of entanglement works against the Cartesian division of subject/object by emphasizing the ways in which subjects do not "preexist their interactions." As Barad explains: "To be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence. Existence is not an individual affair. Individuals do not preexist their interactions; rather, individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating . Which is not to say that emergence happens once and for all, as an event or as a process that takes place according to some external measure of space and of time, but rather that time and space, like matter and meaning, come into existence, are iteratively reconfigured through each intra-action, thereby making it impossible to differentiate in any absolute sense between creation and renewal, beginning and returning, continuity and discontinuity, here and there, past and future." Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (2007), p. ix.

reciprocal relationship as the line “erthe toc of erthe" makes it difficult to distinguish between *erthe* as “environment” and *erthe* as “human” (“clay”). Using personification and semantic ambiguity to blur the line between environment and human, highlights a mutual entanglement that resists a straightforward ascription of action to either the environment or the human. As the poem calls attention to the entanglement between the human and nonhuman worlds, it also serves to situate “our apprehension of textual form in relation to our living in a world of forms.”[10] In other words, the poem functions to interrogate the formal limits of poetry, with its compact and dizzying strings of “erthe,” while also serving to question the ways in which earth and human beings mutually *inform* one another. What, exactly, does *erthe* take of *erthe*?

Writing with the Grain

Writing with the Grain explores moments of dynamic conceptual and formal exchange between poetic and environmental worlds in late-medieval vernacular literature, such as those evinced in the *Erthe* lyric. It traces the ways that late medieval poets envision the environment as a participant in the production of poetry—a view which challenges the notion that, in creative expression, humans “give form” to things, as though matter were brute, subordinate, passively awaiting the agent who shapes it (often called “hylomorphic” theories

[10] D. Vance Smith, “Medieval *Forma*,” p. 71.

of creative expression). I explore the conceptual and physical connections between poetic and environmental *matter* to show how poets, such as Chaucer, understand the movement and proliferation of poetic form in material terms. I demonstrate the ways that medieval poets like John Gower and John Lydgate used literary form to enact environmental form, from the role of poetic form in structuring environmental concepts such as *climate*, to the use of fiction in capturing our skillful engagements with material objects such as tools. In sum, *Writing with the Grain* argues that late-medieval vernacular writers understood that our environmental contexts–in all their materiality–have striking consequences for how we understand poetic form.

To begin with, to what extent does the process of poetic production involve the material world?[11] At base level, the use of vellum, oak gall, and minerals as the material substrate of medieval book production connects the

[11] Carolyn Walker Bynum's work has been extremely influential to studies of poetic-material relationships in late medieval literature. See especially, "Why All the Fuss About the Body? A Medievalist's Perspective," *Critical Inquiry* 22 (Autumn, 1995), pp. 1-33; *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity*, 200-1336 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995). Following Bynum, see Cristina Maria Cervone's work: *Poetics of the Incarnation: Middle English Writing and the Leap of Love* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013); More recently, see Stephanie Batkie and Matthew Irvin, "Incarnational Making in Vox Clamantis II." In *Studies in the Age of Gower: A Festschrift in Honour of Robert F. Yeager*, ed. Susannah Mary Chewning (Boydell & Brewer, 2020), pp. 35–56. For landmark studies with a more ecocritical bent, see: Barbara A. Hanawalt and Lisa J. Kiser, eds., *Engaging with Nature: Essays on the Natural World in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Notre Dame, IN, 2008); Carolyn Dinshaw, "Ecology," in *A Handbook of Middle English Studies*, ed. Marion Turner (Oxford, 2013), 347–62; Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman* (Minneapolis, 2015); Sarah Stanbury, "EcoChaucer: Green Ethics and Medieval Nature," *The Chaucer Review* 39/1 (2004): 1–16.

production of poetry to the material world.[12] The fact that these three materials span the animal-vegetable-mineral divide speaks to the dense threads between the medieval literary and environmental spheres. At a linguistic level, the Middle English usage of the word *matere* to mean both "physical matter" and the "subject matter" of a literary work, invited medieval poets to explore connections between the two, often imagining themselves as creators of "quasi material-poetic worlds."[13] Influenced by the allegorical works of Martianus Capella (c. 410-420), Bernardus Silvestris (c.1100–c.1160 [before 1178]), and Alan de Lille (c. 1128), late medieval poets like Chaucer and Gower took up the subject of natural science and employed poetry to raise questions concerning the nature of the material world.[14] Extended discussions of subjects ranging from Aristotelian causation to the properties of sound waves feature prominently in late-medieval vernacular poetry.[15] Nature is personified

[12] For example, see D. Vance Smith. "The Inhumane Wonder of the Book." *The Chaucer Review* 47, no. 4 (2013): 361–71; Arthur Bahr and Alexandra Gillespie, "Medieval English Manuscripts: Form, Aesthetics, and the Literary Text," *Chaucer Review 47*; Elaine Treharne, P*erceptions of Medieval Manuscripts: The Phenomenal Book.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

[13] Kellie Robertson, "Medieval Materialism: A Manifesto," *Exemplaria* 22.2 (2010): 99-118 (114); Alastair Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages*, 2nd edn (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012);

[14] See James Simpson, *Sciences and the Self in Medieval Poetry: Alan of Lille's "Anticlaudianus" and John Gower's "Confessio Amantis"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).Walter Clyde, *Chaucer and the Mediaeval Sciences*, 2nd ed. (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1960); George Fox, *The Mediaeval Sciences in the Works of John Gower* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1931); John D. North, *Chaucer's Universe* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).

[15] See Alistair Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages*. Minnis's work draws connections between late-medieval vernacular

throughout late medieval literature, as poets work to form the material world by giving Nature a voice and inviting her to speak.[16] In texts like Gower's *Confessio Amantis* and poetic iterations of the popular pseudo-Aristotelian *Secreta Secretorum*, poetry functions in an encyclopedic register, working to explain concepts like the scale of being and the various regions of the atmosphere. Building on recent work in medieval studies by scholars such as Kellie Robertson, Rebecca Davis, and Mary Carruthers, my dissertation speaks to the overlap between late medieval discourses on poetics and contemporary medieval discourses concerning nature and the forms of the material world.[17]

Poetry and the Environment: Forms of Relation

How are we to understand poetry's formal relationship to the environment? Jonathan Bate's *The Song of The Earth* has become a seminal text for a number of recent critics negotiating the relationship between poetic form and the

---

prologues and Aristotelian causation. For discussions of sound, see Adin Lears, W*orld of Echo: Noise and Knowing in Late-Medieval England* (Cornell, 2020).

[16] See Robertson, *Nature Speaks: Medieval Literature and Aristotelian Philosophy* (UPenn Press, 2017).

[17] See Kellie Robertson, "Abusing Aristotle," in *Speculative Medievalisms: Discography, ed. The Petropunk Collective* [Eileen Joy, Anna Kłosowska, Nicola Masciandaro, Michael O'Rourke] (New York: Punctum Books, 2013); Robertson, "Medieval Materialism: A Manifesto." *Exemplaria* 22.2 (2010): 99-118; Robertson, "Medieval Things: Materiality, Historicity, and the Premodern Object." *Literature Compass* 5 (2008); Rebecca Davis, "Fugitive Poetics in Chaucer's House of Fame," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 37 (2015): 101-32; Mary Carruthers, *The Experience of Beauty in the Middle Ages* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

environment. Drawing on Martin Heidegger's notion of "dwelling," Bate argues that

> [. . .] poiesis in the sense of verse-making is language's most direct path of return to the *oikos*, the place of dwelling, because metre itself – a quiet but persistent music, a recurring cycle, a heartbeat – is an answering to nature's own rhythms, an echoing of the song of the earth itself[18]

For Bate, poetry's formal relationship to the environment is primarily "eco-mimetic," meaning that the form of the poem seeks to mimic the form of the environment.[19] For Bate, poetry, through forms such as "metre itself," works to tune human attention to the "rhythms" and "the song of the earth." The function of poetry is to enact a sense of "dwelling" and foster a sense of environmental connection by working to mimic the rhythms of the environment in an effort to return to "the *oikos*" (from the Greek meaning "dwelling" and the origin of "ecology"). This Heideggerian strain of ecological dwelling has come under scrutiny by a number of recent critics, such as Taylor Eggan. Eggan

---

[18] Jonathan Bate, *The Song of The Earth* (Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 75-76. Author's italics.

[19] For an interesting recent example of eco-mimetic reading, see Sonya Postmentier, *Cultivation and Catastrophe: The Lyric Ecology of Modern Black Literature* (2020). Postmentier explains: "I am also interested in lyrics as ecological: that is, in how poems sometimes mimic or approximate organic forms and processes often associated with enclosure, preservation, self-sustainability, and internal relation, forms that can exceed their own boundaries, and that may in turn yield new models for social and ecological relation." p. 4. Postmentier cautions that "*Cultivation and Catastrophe* follows in the wake of the model of environmental relation Glissant elaborates in *Poetics of Relation*, a model acknowledging the limits of ecomimesis or the idea that the relationship between nature and culture is a transparent one." p. 9.

demonstrates the overlap between these Heideggerian ecological "homecoming" narratives of settler colonial homemaking.[20] On the whole, Bate's view of poetry is characterized by a desire to capture an ostensibly harmonious and rhythmic material world. This type of formal project has sometimes been called "ecological poetry," which "seeks to be nature, to foster a sense of artistic creation as a natural act" and strives for formal structures that are "indistinguishable from natural processes."[21]

Bate's attention to the ability of poetry to *respond* to environmental forms accords with many late-medieval conceptions of poetic-environmental relationships examined throughout this dissertation. For instance, in Chapter One, I put forward the notion of *correspondence*, based on the poetry of Robert Henryson and the work of anthropologist Tim Ingold, as a model for understanding the relationship between poetic form and the environment, arguing that poetic forms emerge out of our attentive and responsive engagement with the material world. My dissertation traces moments where poetic production and formation are ascribed to material forces beyond the human. For Bate, poetic form "echoes" the forms of the environment and therefore originates in the structure of the natural world itself. This seems to

---

[20] Taylor Eggan, *Unsettling Nature: Ecology, Phenomenology and the Settler Colonial Imagination* (2022), p. 13.
[21] Bernard, Quetchenbach, "Illuminating the Anthropocene: Ecopoetic Explorers at the Edge of the Naturecultures Abyss," *American Literary History* 31 (2) (2019), p. 327.

suggest that the poet, therefore, is not the originator of form but mimics forms which originate in the environment.

However, my dissertation challenges this unidirectional relationship between poetry and the environment. I argue that these two areas of discourse—the poetic and the environmental—*mutually inform one another*. In other words, the relationship between poetic form and environmental form is not simply imagined as a practice of representation wherein the forms of poetry mimic the forms of the environment—though these types of poetic representations of the environment do occur in late medieval literature and occasionally present themselves throughout the dissertation. Rather, I argue that late medieval poets looked to the forms of the environment as models for understanding the form and function of vernacular poetry while, at the same time, employing poetry as a way of understanding and forming the very environment in which they were enmeshed. In this way, my dissertation speaks to recent trends in literary geography which seek to eschew the simple and "effortless mapping of represented landscapes in literary texts" and to "raise more complex questions about [. . .] how space and geography affect literary forms and styles."[22] Devin Griffiths has recently advocated for an "ecology of

---

[22] For a useful overview of trends in literary geography, see Daniel Weston, "Contemporary Poetic Ecologies and a Return to Form" and Weston, *Contemporary Literary Landscapes: The Poetics of Experience* (2019). Andrew Thacker explains that "critical literary geography" is characterized by "the process of reading and interpreting literary texts by reference to geographical concepts." Thacker, "Critical Literary Geography," p. 60.

forms" which emphasizes movement and relationality, explaining that "instead of container form, we need a relational formalism, a theory of reform. To put this differently, form is ecological; it works through wider networks of relation and of the material, energetic, and social interactions that give it life."[23] In a similar vein, Sarah Whatmore has advocated for "an upheaval in the binary terms in which the question of nature has been posed and a re-cognition of the intimate, sensible and hectic bonds through which people and plants; devices and creatures; documents and elements take and hold their shape in relation to each other in the fabric-ations of everyday life"[24]

Along with these recent calls in literary geography for more relational models for understanding the "bonds" between "documents and elements" and the ways in which they "take and hold their shape," my dissertation argues that the formal relationship between poetry and the environment looks less like a mirror of representation and more like a knot of entangled relations. Conceived of in a "relational way, the idea of ecology provides powerful purchase for the recognition of humans' entanglement in environment rather than for asserting mastery over it."[25] I explore the ways that late medieval poets looked to enter into, and enact, this entanglement rather than simply represent it.[26] As such, this

[23] Devin Griffiths, "The Ecology of Forms," pp. 70-71.
[24] Sarah Whatmore, *Hybrid geographies: natures, cultures, spaces.* (London Thousand Oaks, 2002), p. 3.
[25] Daniel Weston, "Contemporary Poetic Ecologies and a Return to Form," p. 9.
[26] For another strain of phenomenological entanglement in medieval studies, see Seeta Chaganti, who explains: "Aware of the interacting forces among bodies, texts, and other

dissertation is ecocritical in the sense that it "considers human and nonhuman life as co-related in an ecological and dynamic relationship." As Cheryll Glotfelty explains, "all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it."[27]

Forms

Before proceeding to explore the formal "interconnections" between poetry and the environment, it will be helpful to clarify what I mean by "form." Among the multitude of ways we can think about form, Caroline Levine explains that "'form' always indicates an *arrangement of elements—an ordering, patterning, or shaping."*[28] For the purposes of this dissertation, I take Levine's general definition of form as my baseline definition. The primary definition of "form" in the *Middle English Dictionary* defines it as the "physical shape of something, contour, outline; the figure or shape (of a person), body [. . .]."[29] "Form" is the

media, medieval audiences could perceive virtual spaces that contained social meaning and the fullness of poetic form." Seeta Chaganti, "Danse Macabre in the Virtual Churchyard," *postmedieval* 3 (2012): 7–26.

[27] Cheryll Glotfelty, *Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (UGeorgia Press, 1996), p.xix.

[28] Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (UPrinceton Press, 2015), p. 3.

[29] "fŏrme n." in the *Middle English Dictionary* (2022). In particular, see uses 1a and 6. There have been a number of recent volumes speaking to the nature of "form" in late medieval literature. For example, see *Reading for Form*, ed. Susan J. Wolfson and Marshall Brown (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006); *Chaucer and the Subversion of Form,* Prendergast, Thomas A., and Jessica Rosenfeld, eds. Cambridge Studies in Medieval

way things are ordered, patterned, and shaped. In reference to the literary, Middle English writers referred to form as a "[s]tyle of writing; (b) literary device or idea; (c) literary type or genre; (d) the exact wording of a text, formulation."

Late-medieval literary form has been described as "frustratingly vague, baggy, and imprecise," with scholars noting the fact that "governing theories are more usually embedded than stated."[30] However "baggy" late-medieval form may be, it is commonly conceived of "as the informing of raw materials according to the script of some idea, as the forming of an object guided by some thought."[31] Contributing to this lack of "stated" conceptions of form, scholars

---

Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Eleanor Johnson, *Practicing Literary Form in the Middle Ages: Ethics and the Mixed Form in Chaucer, Gower, Usk, and Hoccleve* (University of Chicago Press, 2013); Shannon Gayk and Kathleen Tonry, eds., *Form and Reform: Reading across the Fifteenth Century* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2011); *Readings in Medieval Textuality: Essays in Honour of A. C. Spearing*, ed. Cristina Maria Cervone and D. Vance Smith (Cambridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 2016).

[30] D. Vance Smith, "Medieval Forma," p. 69; Christopher Cannon, "Form" in *Middle English*, ed. Paul Strohm (Oxford, 2007), p.79. Christopher Cannon's work has been influential for thinking about late medieval literary forms. In *The Grounds of English Literature* (2005), Cannon emphasizes the overlap between the human and material worlds, explaining that "form is that which thought and things have in common" (p.5). His work makes use of Vinsauf's understanding of form, adding a Hegelian dialectic, and explaining that "thinking directs labour according to a 'subjective aim and design', it embeds itself in the hard materials it shapes (the 'Iron, Wood, Stones'), thereby using that hardness to solidify and preserve an idea" (p. 48). Based on Chaucer's opaque reference to Vinsauf in the mouth of Pandarus, Cannon builds an understanding of form that positions the human mind as "master" and singular shaper of literary form. While we agree that the material world deserves more attention in our understanding of late medieval form, my project works to diffuse the generation of form across the human and material divide, striving to collapse the relationship between thought and thing.

[31] Cannon, "Form," p. 178. This conception of form traditionally follows from Aristotle: "It is obvious then from what has been said that the thing, in the sense of form or substance, is not

have noted that late-medieval vernacular writers, particularly poets, "often had few (or no) vernacular models to rely on" for conceptualizing form, resulting in productions that are "*formally unique.*"[32] Scholars often point to Geoffrey of Vinsauf's (c. 1210) *Poetria Nova* as a model for understanding late-medieval vernacular conceptions of poetic form.[33] While he does not use the term "form," Vinsauf explains that the formation of a literary text happens in the mind of the author:

> Si quis habet fundare domum, non currit ad actum
> Impetuosa manus: intrinseca linea cordis
> Praemetitur opus, seriemque sub ordine certo
> Interior praescribit homo, totamque figurat
> Ante manus cordis quam corporis; et status eius
> Est prius archetypus quam sensilis.
>
> [If a man has a house to build, his impetuous hand does not rush into action. The measuring line of his mind first lays out the work, and he mentally outlines the successive steps in a definite order. The mind's

produced, but the concrete thing which gets its name from this is produced, and that in everything which comes to be matter is present, and one part of the thing is matter and the other form." Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 7. 1033b 15-20.

[32] I want to emphasize the word "stated" in this sentence. While late-medieval vernacular poets did not have something like a vernacular *ars poetica* on which to rely, Middle English writers (in particular) did look to other vernacular forms (French, for example) for understanding the shapes and subject matter of their own work. Cannon, "Form," p. 178, italics are the author's. For a helpful critique of Cannon's work, see Elizabeth M. Tyler, "Where is the Ground of English Literature?" *The Cambridge Quarterly* 34, no. 4 (2005): 408–11.

[33] See Cannon, "Form," p. 177. Also, Cannon,

> hand shapes the entire house before the body's hand builds it. Its mode of being is archetypal before it is actual.][34]

While Bate emphasizes the role of the environment in supplying poetic forms, Vinsauf completely eschews external or material influence on poetic form (even as he uses a deeply material metaphor) and explains that form originates in the "mind first" before the poet ever proceeds to the page. For Bate, form is shaped externally; for Vinsauf, form is shaped internally. The popularity of drawing on Vinsauf's conception of form in scholarship on late medieval literature is due, in part, to Chaucer's use of the passage in *Troilus and Criseyde* to explain the schemes of Pandarus: "Al this Pandare in his herte thoughte, | And caste his werk ful wisely or he wroughte," (I. 1070–1).[35] I offer a critique of this view of form in Chapter One, but my dissertation serves to challenge the purely external and purely internal views of form put forth by Bate and Vinsauf. Instead, I propose a relational view of late-medieval form that attends to the ways in which poetic forms arise at the intersection between human and more-than-human worlds. In a similar way, Caroline Levine argues that,

> [. . .] in practice, we encounter so many forms that even in the most ordinary daily experience they add up to a complex environment composed of multiple and conflicting modes of organization—forms

[34] Geoffrey of Vinsauf, *Poetria nova*, rev. ed., trans. Margaret Nims (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010). For the Latin, see Edmond Faral, *Les arts poétique du xiie et du xiiie siècle: Recherches et documents sur la technique littéraire du moyen âge* (Paris: Champion, 1962).
[35] All quotations of Chaucer are from *The Riverside Chaucer,* 3rd edition, Larry Benson (Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

> arranging and containing us, yes, but also competing and colliding and rerouting one another.[36]

I explore this proliferation of "multiple and conflicting" forms in Chaucer's *House of Fame* (Chapter Two), highlighting a late-medieval attention to *movement* as a formal concept that connects the aesthetic and environmental. In late medieval poetry, I argue, these two formal spheres (the aesthetic and environmental) often reshape and reroute one another. For example, in Chapter Three I argue that both Gower and Lydgate use poetic form in an attempt to control and stabilize conceptions of the physical form of the atmosphere; a type of formal "rerouting" that seeks to develop narratives of environmental stability—a conceptual move akin to recent, modern notions of *climate.* As such, Chapter Three, while still emphasizing reciprocal notions of form, follows recent scholarship which works to interrogate the ways in which "multiple forms of order [. . .] unsettle one another."[37] This notion shares some similarities to Édouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation*, which recognizes the Other as an "aesthetic constituent" in a relationship that "senses, assumes, opens, gathers, scatters, continues, and transforms" forms of identity and aesthetics.[38]

---

[36] Levine, p. 16.
[37] Levine, p. 17.
[38] Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (UMichigan Press, 1990), p.29; 94-5.

Levine's work connects "aesthetic and political forms" that "emerge as comparable patterns that operate on a common plane." Her focus is on the "many overlapping forms" between the aesthetic and political spheres that structure and govern social experience, which she refers to as "a kind of event" called "collision." Setting aside the traditional "models of causality," such as Vinsauf's, Levine's work allows for new configurations of, and insights into, the "work of forms."[39]

My dissertation takes a similar approach. I am interested in the ways that forms are conceived in late-medieval literature in a non-traditional mode of causation. While Levine's use of "collision" works well in the political and social contexts that she explores, the relational view of form that I propose employs terms such as *correspondence, entanglement,* and *negotiation* in order to emphasize the reciprocal and ongoing formal relationship between poetry and the environment.[40] At the same time, this project departs from Levine by emphasizing notions of flow and movement. Throughout the dissertation, I argue that late-medieval poets are just as concerned with the flow and process

---

[39] Levine, *Forms,* p. 19.

[40] In another way, Donna Haraway's new materialist concept of "naturecultures," which she defines as "the implosions of the discursive realms of nature and culture," employs the language of "implosion" to negotiate spaces and forms that arise at the intersection between the human and non-human realms. Donna J. Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness.* Vol. 1. (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003).

of poetic formation as they are with notions of form as fixed or stabilized—as a container for matter.

Outline of the Argument

I begin by arguing for an approach to late-medieval poetics that challenges the hylomorphic model of creativity in favor of a model of correspondence, which views poetic formation as happening in moments of human-environmental reciprocity (Chapter One). The hylomorphic model sees the human as standing over and above "raw" materials, shaping them into whatever form is in the human mind. However, I argue that aesthetic forms are often latent in these materials themselves. Akin to a carpenter cutting along the grain of a tree, I contend that late-medieval poets, such as Chaucer and Henryson, followed forms afforded by the environment itself. I argue that these poets envisioned creativity as a process of "corresponding" with the material world, tracing and joining with its fluctuations and flows.

I then chart the overlapping concerns between contemporary poetics and physics in order to show that late-medieval poets thought about poetry in material terms. With this in mind, I examine Chaucer's *House of Fame* to argue that the poem puts forth a view of creativity focused on entering into the movements, proliferations, and flows of the material world (Chapter Two).

But what happens when the fluctuations of the material world impede and overthrow the processes of creativity and poetic production? I consider this question by examining Gower's *Confessio Amantis* and Lydgate's *Pageant of Knowledge* (Chapter Three). I argue that both Gower and Lydgate negotiate and work to stabilize the changing forms of the environment by attempting to poetically "form" the material world. I focus on Gower and Lydgate's attention to atmospheric fluctuations, arguing that the process of putting the atmosphere into poetic form shares similarities with modern notions of "climate." Drawing on recent work in historical climatology, I conclude by demonstrating that "climate" arises in moments of human-environmental negotiation, which is itself a form of correspondence.

I conclude by considering skill. The process of "following the grain" is predicated on the notion of skilled engagement with materials. Reading two anonymous Middle English poems, *The Debate of the Carpenter's Tools* and A *Complaint Against Blacksmiths,* I demonstrate the ways in which human and nonhuman actors co-conspire in these poems to produce both poetic and physical forms (Chapter Four).

The literature and forms explored throughout this dissertation take shape in the period between the arrival of the Black Death in 1348 and the later half the 1500s, during the climatological period sometimes referred to as "The Little Ice Age," a period marked by environmental change and destabilization.

Chapter One surveys some of the devastating environmental changes that took place during the period between 1348-1500. This period of environmental change marks the historical boundaries for the literature that I survey throughout the dissertation. While the texts that I survey are historically bounded, in that they were all likely composed within the period between 1348-1500, this project does not seek an historical framing that attempts chronological progressions of thought between sets of texts. Instead, I group texts in conversation along the line of argumentation throughout.[41]

With the general contours of my argument in mind, it is worth considering the social and educational backgrounds of the authors I have chosen in this project. For example, Chapter Two argues that authors such as Chaucer and Gower engage with Aristotelian concepts of matter, an engagement predicated on knowledge of Aristotelian natural science usually gained by way of a university education. While it's clear that many authors throughout the dissertation did indeed have such an education, including Chaucer and Gower, it is less certain that the anonymous poets of *Erthe*, *The Debate of the Carpenter's Tools, and A Complaint Against Blacksmiths* shared the same

[41] Additionally, while Middle English literature constitutes the bulk of texts that I survey, Middle Scots poetry is also part of my inquiry. Middle Scots writers such as Gavin Douglass, Robert Henryson, and William Dunbar were deeply influenced by Middle English literature, from Chaucer to Gower, and saw themselves as continuators of the Chaucerian mode of poetic *makyng*.

educational background and were attuned to such philosophical concepts and discussions. This potential variety of education does not detract from the project but demonstrates shared material and aesthetic considerations between poets with varied social and educational backgrounds.

Chapter Outline

The poetic and environmental forms explored throughout this dissertation display a range of shapes, patterns, and relations. Chapter One surveys the formal relationship between palpable changes in weather patterns and the influence of these changes on Robert Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid.* In this chapter, I argue that the literary form of Henryson's poem is partially dictated by the environmental changes of the mid-fifteenth century. I argue that Henryson's concept of poetic-environmental *correspondence* marks a departure from traditional "hylomorphic" theories of poetic formation that privilege human thought and unidirectional concepts of causality. Against this view, I argue that Henryson's *Testament* (following Chaucer's model in his *General Prologue*) diffuses poetic agency to the environment itself and establishes a relational mode of poetic formation that casts the nonhuman world as a co-creator in the production of poetry.

Drawing on the work of Kellie Robertson and Mary Carruthers, Chapter Two investigates the formal exchange between concepts of movement in poetry

and in contemporary natural science. Focusing on Chaucer's *House of Fame,* I demonstrate the ways in which Aristotelian concepts of matter and movement were aestheticized by late medieval poets and how these material models helped shape a formal understanding of poetry based on notions of movement, multiplication, and proliferation.

Chapter Three explores the formal relationship between atmospheric phenomena and poetry. I show how atmospheric phenomena, even those as seemingly mundane as dew, can unsettle human narratives of environmental stability and highlight the ways in which environmental forms impose themselves on human experience. I examine Gower's *Confessio Amantis* and Lydgate's *Pageant of Knowledge* in order to demonstrate the ways that poetic form can work to negotiate and restabilize the roiling and ever-changing forms (or "impressions") of the atmosphere. I argue that this poetic reformulation of atmospheric matter bears similarities to modern notions of *climate.*

Chapter Four demonstrates the formal ability of poetry to enact human and environmental entanglements. I focus on two anonymous Middle English poems, *The Debate of the Carpenter's Tools* and *The Complaint Against Blacksmiths,* exploring the ability of poetry to put human and nonhuman entanglements into poetic form. As poems concerned with practices of labor and the nature of craft, these works capture and comment on contemporary skillful engagements with the more-than-human world, demonstrating the ways

in which human and nonhuman actors co-conspire to produce both poetic and physical forms. In this way, like *Erthe,* these poems demonstrate the formal entanglement between humans and the environment in which they are enmeshed.

Chapter One

Correspondences

On October 6, 1348, at the urgent request of Philip VI, the medical faculty at the University of Paris issued a compendium of opinion on the causes of the Black Death.[42] One of the causes cited was "the corruption of the air." Air, "which is pure and clear by nature," had mixed with "evil vapors," spreading pestilence throughout France and England.[43] The faculty held that this corruption arose from atmospheric changes, both natural and human induced. Unusual gusts of "thick, wild, and southerly winds," brought corrupt vapor from swamps, lakes, and deep valleys. The refusal to properly bury the dead resulted in the "putrefying" of the air and water.

The early half of the fourteenth-century — a period marked by a number of climatic changes — was the start of what is now broadly called the "Little

---

[42] John Aberth, *The Black Death: The Great Mortality of 1348-1350: A Brief History with Documents* (2005), pp. 48-49.

[43] A version of medieval pollution: "miasma (μίασμα, Ancient Greek for "pollution"), a noxious form of "bad air", also known as night air. The theory held that epidemics were caused by miasma, emanating from rotting organic matter. Though miasma theory is typically associated with the spread of contagious diseases, some academics in the early nineteenth century suggested that the theory extended to other conditions as well, e.g. one could become obese by inhaling the odor of food." *Suspicions about the Hidden Realities of the Air,* a 17th century text by Robert Boyle, discusses miasma theory and the "effluviams" of air. Simon Kemp, "A Medieval Controversy About Odor," *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 33 (1997).

Ice Age." The cold, along with excessive rainfall, influenced the growth of crops; fields turned either flooded or barren, resulting in famine every fourteen years, on average.[44] By the middle of the fourteenth century, on the heels of the long frosts of the earlier part of the century, England and France saw a rise in temperature and further changes in the environment. Gilles li Muisis, (c. 1272 – 1352), in his *Chronicle* of 1349, noted the shifting of the climate:

> The winter was certainly very odd, for in the four months from the beginning of October until the beginning of February, although a hard frost was often expected, there was not so much ice as would support the weight of a goose. But there was instead such a lot of rain that the Scheldt and all the rivers round about burst their banks, so that meadows became seas, and this was so in our country and in France.[45]

The faculty at the University of Paris also expressed their experience of these environmental changes, saying:

> For some time the seasons have not succeeded each other in the proper way. Last winter [1347/8] was not as cold as it should have been, with a

[44] The most well known famine is the "great famine" of 1315-17, which brought many deaths to northwestern Europe. The heavy summer rains of 1314 in England and Germany reduced the yields of grain, followed by a severe winter. The winter of 1316 was so cold that ships were, reportedly, frozen into the Baltic ice. Richard Hoffmann, *An Environmental History of Medieval Europe* (2014), pp. 323-41. See also: Jean M. Grove, *Little Ice Ages: Ancient and Modern*, 2 vols., 2nd edn (New York City: Routledge, 2004); Kathleen Pribyl, Richard C. Cornes, and Christian Pfister, "Reconstructing Medieval April–July Mean Temperatures in East Anglia, 1256–1431," *Climatic Change* 113.2 (2012): pp. 393–412; David Stone, "The Impact of Drought in Early Fourteenth-century England," *The Economic History Review* 67.2 (2014): pp. 435–62; J.M. Grove, "The Onset of the Little Ice Age," in *History and Climate: Memories of the Future?*, ed. P.D. Jones, A.E.J. Ogilvie, T.D. Davies, and K. R. Briffa (New York: Kluwer, 2001), 153– 86.

[45] Horrox, *The Black Death* (Manchester University Press, 1994) p. 54. Trans. from Gilles li Muisis from J-J. de Smet (ed), *Recueil des Chroniques de Flandre* II, Brussels, 1841, pp. 279-82.

> great deal of rain; the spring windy and latterly wet. Summer was late, not as hot as it should have been, and extremely wet – the weather very changeable from day to day, and hour to hour; the air often troubled, and then still again, looking as if it was going to rain but then not doing so. Autumn too was very rainy and misty.[46]

Taken on their own, these contemporary accounts of the environmental conditions of the late medieval period serve as general impressions, dependent on the memory and local context of the chronicler. However, data from ice cores, tree rings, volcanic eruptions, records of wine harvests, and records of solar activity and sunspot counts have contextualized these historical impressions, allowing for a fuller picture of late medieval climate.[47] Environmental historian Richard Hoffman has characterized the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries as a period of "brutal climate oscillation."[48] Hoffman explains that "some scholars see the entire fourteenth century and through to the mid sixteenth as characterized by irregular cycles of climatic extremes, with concomitant regional bouts of catastrophic weather."[49] As more data become available, historians have increasingly incorporated discussions of climate change into economic and social history, acknowledging the important role that climate plays in economic, social, and political changes.[50] Using insights from

---

[46] Horrox, *The Black Death,* p. 161.

[47] Brian Fagan, *The Little Ice Age: How Climate Made History 1300-1850* (New York City: Basic Books, 2000), pp. 50-55.

[48] Hoffmann, *An Environmental History of Medieval Europe* (Cambridge, 2014), pp. 323–4.

[49] Ibid. p. 324.

[50] Brian Fagan argues against the charge of environmental determinism that plagued environmental historians in the 1980s and 90s. He explains, "Environmental determinism, the

paleoclimatology and paleogenetics, historians such as Bruce Campbell have charted the relationship between the climatic changes of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and disease, social changes, landscape degradation, and economic recession.[51]

As in the passages above, contemporary accounts confirm these very palpable environmental changes. The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries saw an increase in frequency and intensity of storms in most of the British archipelago, a fact reflected in contemporary chronicles.[52] The chronicle of Anonymous of Canterbury explains that

> on the Saturday before these jousts, namely, on the feast of St Maurus the abbot (15 January) around the hour of vespers on that day, dreadful storms and whirlwinds such as had never been seen or heard before occurred in England, causing houses and buildings for the most part to

---

notion that climate change was a primary cause of major developments like, say, agriculture, has been a dirty word in academia for generations. You certainly cannot argue that climate drove history in a direct and causative way to the point of toppling governments. Nor, however, can you contend that climate change is something that you can totally ignore." Fagan goes on to explain that ignoring the historical effects of climate change "is to neglect one of the dynamic backdrops of the human experience. Consider, for instance, the food crises that engulfed Europe during the Little Ice Age [. . .]. These crises in themselves did not threaten the continued existence of Western civilization, but they surely played an important role in the formation of modern Europe." Brian Fagan, *The Little Ice Age: How Climate Made History 1300-1850* (New York City: Basic Books, 2000), pp. xiv-xv.

[51] Bruce Campbell, *The Great Transition: Climate, Disease and Society in the Late-Medieval World* (2016). Other recent examples include: Mark Bailey, *After the Black Death: Economy, Society, and the Law in Fourteenth-Century England* (Oxford, 2021); Philippa Maddern, "Imagining the Unchanging Land: East Anglians Represent their Landscape, 1350–1500," in *Medieval East Anglia*, ed. Christopher Harper-Bill (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2005).

[52] See Fagan, *The Little Ice Age,* pp. 61-78. See also: Andrew Richmond*, Landscapes in Middle English Romance: The Medieval Imagination and The Natural World* (Cambridge, 2021), p. 196.

> come crashing to the ground, while some others, having had their roofs blown off by the force of the winds, were left in that ruined state; and fruit trees in gardens and other places, along with other trees standing in woods and elsewhere, were wrenched from the earth by their roots with a great crash, as if the Day of Judgement were at hand, and fear and trembling gripped the people living in England to such an extent that no one knew where he could safely hide, for church towers, windmills, and many dwelling-houses collapsed to the ground, although without much bodily injury.[53]

This account references the windstorm of January 15th, 1362, which leveled church towers and ripped the trees from gardens across the south and east of England. Along with contemporary chroniclers, poets also seemed to note the windstorm of 1362. The storm has been linked to the "south-west wynd on Saterday at even" referenced in *Piers Plowman.*[54] The poem explains that "pyries [pear trees] and plum-trees were puffed to the erthe" and "brode okes were blowen to the grounde."[55] The ecological changes of the fourteenth century work their way into the lines of the poem. This happens on both a historical and formal level, as the series of alliterative plosives ("pyries,"

---

[53] *Chronicon Anonymi Cantuariensis: The Chronicle of Anonymous of Canterbury*, 1346–1365, ed. and tr. Charity Scott-Stokes and Chris Given-Wilson (Oxford: Clarendon P., 2008), pp. 268-69.

[54] William Langland, *Piers Plowman*, ed. A. V. C. Schmidt, *The Vision of Piers Plowman: A Critical Edition of the B-text Based on Trinity College Cambridge MS B.15.17* (London, 1978; 2nd ed. 1995), passus V, line 14, p. 62. All *Piers* quotes are from this edition.

[55] William Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman: A Critical Edition of the B-Text Based on Trinity College Cambridge MS B.15.17*, p. 424, passus V, 13-20. See Skeat's note, p. 65. Also, Ralph Hannah, *Penn Commentary on Piers Plowman vol. 2* (2017), p. 53.

"plum-trees," "puffed," "brode," "blowen") in these lines enact the beating wind of the storm of 1362.

As I mentioned in the Introduction, Rebecca Davis and Kellie Robertson have both noted the ways that late medieval poetry was influenced by contemporary conceptions of the material world. In particular, the ways in which Aristotelian natural philosophy influenced late medieval poetics. In a similar vein, Richard C. Hoffmann has encouraged medieval studies, as a field, to recognize the reciprocal shaping power between the environment and human society in our scholarship. He asks medievalists "to admit a nonhuman dynamic to its story," "to think about the interactions between medieval society and its natural environment and to explore the ecological connections which shaped those changes."[56] Hoffmann concludes:

> Nature changes human society. Human society changes Nature. Evidence from traditional human sources, both verbal and material, and from the growing mass of palaeoscientific data demonstrates this reciprocity in medieval Europe. Those who study medieval life need to possess and contribute to this understanding.[57]

Andrew Richmond's recent book, *Landscape in Middle English Romance,* takes up Hoffmann's challenge, arguing that the changing ecological contexts of late

---

[56] Richard C. Hoffman, "Homo et Natura, Homo in Natura: Ecological Perspectives in the European Middle Ages" in *Engaging with Nature: Essays on the Natural World in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, eds. Barbara A. Hanawalt and Lisa J. Kiser. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), p. 13.
[57] Ibid. p. 13.

medieval England influenced environmental descriptions in Middle English romances—from *Sir Colling* to *Sir Gawain and The Green Knight.*[58] Along with Hoffman and Richmond, this chapter focuses on the "reciprocity" between Nature and human society. Namely, the reciprocal shaping power between late medieval poetry and contemporary environmental changes. In this chapter, I ask: what is the relationship between late-medieval climate change and the production and form of poetry? And how does the material world in which we are enmeshed influence human creative processes? In order to consider these questions, I want to turn to Robert Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid.*

Testament of Cresseid

Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*, written in Middle Scots sometime between 1450 and 1470, is a narrative poem of 616 lines based on Chaucer's own *Troilus and Criseyde.* Henryson's poem begins:

> Ane doolie sessoun to ane cairfull dyte
> Suld correspond and be equivalent
> Richt sa it wes quihen I began to wryte
> The tragedie --- the wedder richt fervent,
> Quhen Aries, in middis of the lent,
> Schouris of haill gart fra the north descent,
> That scant me fra the cauld I micht defend.
>
> Yit nevertheles within myne oratur

[58] Andrew Richmond, *Landscapes in Middle English Romance: The Medieval Imagination and The Natural World* (Cambridge, 2021).

I stude, quhen Titan had his bemis bricht
Withdrawin doun and sylit under cure,
And fair Venus, the bewtie of the nicht,
Uprais and set unto the west full richt
Hir goldin face, in oppositioun
Of God Phebus, direct discending doun.

Throwout the glas hir bemis brast sa fair
That I micht se on everie syde me by;
The northin wind had purifyit the air
And sched the mistie cloudis fra the sky;
The froist freisit, the blastis bitterly
Fra Pole Artick come quhisling loud and schill,
And causit me remufe aganis my will.[59]

(lines 1-21)

[A dismal season, a poem full of pain
Should correspond and be equivalent
Just as it was when I began to write
The tragedy --- the weather being very harsh,
When Aries, in the midst of Lent,
Made showers of hail descend from the north
In a great cold I barely could withstand.

Still, there I stood, inside my oratory
When Titan had withdrawn his beams of light
And draped and sealed the brightness of the day,
And lovely Venus, beauty of the night,
Had risen up and toward the true west set
Her golden face, direct in opposition
To the god Phoebus, straight descending down.

---

[59] *Robert Henryson: The Poems,* ed. By Denton Fox (OUP, 1987). Translation adapted from Seamus Heaney's *The Testament of Cresseid and Seven Fables* (Faber, 2009).

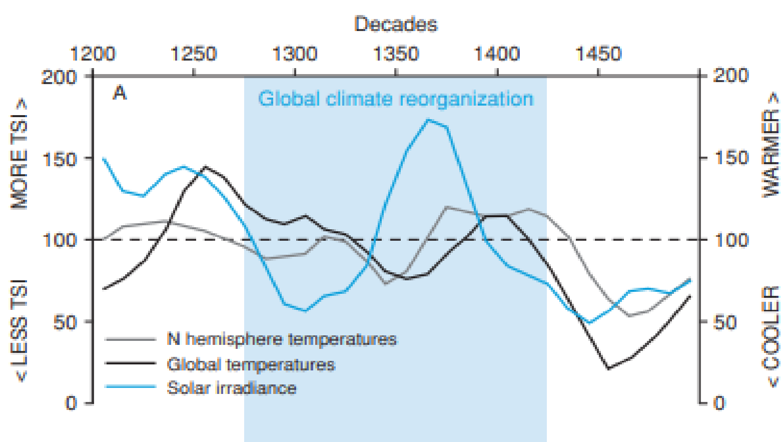
> Beyond the glass her beams broke out so fair
> I could see away on every side of me.
> The northern wind had purified the air
> And hunted the cloud-cover off the sky.
> The frost froze hard, the blast came bitterly
> From the Arctic Pole, whistling loud and shrill,
> And forced me to remove against my will.]

Henryson opens his poem with the issue of the relationship between poetic production, mood, and the environment. He explains that the "doolie" season, characterized by harsh weather, should "correspond" with the painful poem of the tragic fate of Cresseid — a fate that was left untold in Chaucer's version of the story. Based on the Latin *correspondere,* the earliest reference to the "correspond" in English, according to the *OED*, occurs in 1413.[60] The *Middle English Dictionary* lists one further use of the word in 1454 and *The Middle Scots Dictionary* lists two uses of the word before 1500, one of those being Henryson's. The word means to "correspond, harmonize, reciprocate," from *com-*, meaning "together, with (each other)" and *-respondere* "to answer." I want to focus on Henryson's use of "correspond" in this passage in order to consider the relationship between contemporary environmental changes and the production of poetry. What is the *correspondence* between the climatic conditions of the later half of the fifteenth century and Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*?

[60] "correspondence, n.". *OED* Online. June 2022.

Temperature Fluctuations and Poetic Form

As I noted above, the Paris Faculty expressed their experiences of the climactic changes occurring in the mid-fourteenth century. According to paleoclimatologists, this moment marks the end of the first major drop in temperature in England during the late medieval period [figure 1, below].[61] The



second major drop in temperature occurs during the period in which Henryson would have composed the *Testament,* between the 1450s and 70s, a period that saw temperatures in England and Scotland drop further than they had in centuries. Bruce Campbell explains that "the 1450s were [. . .] the coldest

[61] Figure 1: Indexed solar irradiance, global temperatures and northern hemisphere temperatures, 1200–1500. From Bruce Campbell, *The Great Transition: Climate, Disease, and Society in the Late-Medieval World* (2016), p. 4.

decade of the fifteenth century and the coldest of the Middle Ages."[62] While the following decades saw a slow rise in temperature, it was not until the late fifteenth century that temperatures began to come close to the heights of those seen in the previous centuries. Returning to Henryson, the *Testament* continues:

> I mend the fyre and beikit me about,
> Than tuik ane drink, my spreitis to comfort,
> And armit me weill fra the cauld thairout.
> To cut the winter nicht and mak it schort
> I tuik ane quair - and left all uther sport -
> Writtin be worthie Chaucer glorious
> Of fair Creisseid and worthie Troylus.
> (lines 36-42)
>
> [I stacked the fire and got warm at the hearth,
> Then took a drink to soothe and lift my spirit
> And arm myself against the bitter north.
> To pass the time and kill the winter night
> I chose a book---and was soon absorbed in it---
> Written by Chaucer, the great and glorious,
> About fair Cresseid and worthy Troilus.]

While not a contemporary of Chaucer, Henryson drew on the poet's work and would have known it well.[63] Here he references Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde,*

[62] Bruce Campbell, *The Great Transition: Climate, Disease and Society in the Late-Medieval World* (2016), p. 345. This period of low solar activity, spanning from around 1450-1550, is commonly referred to as the Spörer Minimum. A., Fogtmann-Schulz, Kudsk, S. G. K., Trant, P. L. K., Baittinger, C., Karoff, C., Olsen, J., & Knudsen, M. F. (2019). "Variations in solar activity across the Spörer Minimum based on radiocarbon in Danish oak." *Geophysical Research Letters*, 46, pp. 8617– 8623.

[63] Henryson's debt to Chaucer has been discussed at length. See: Speirs, John. *The Scots Literary Tradition*. (London: Chatto & Windus, 1940), pp. 3-67; Smith, G. Gregory. "The Scottish Chaucerians." *The Cambridge History of English and American Literature: An*

but the opening lines of Henryson's *Testament* also draw on Chaucer's *Prologue* to the *Canterbury Tales.* Henryson sets his poem "in a dismal season [. . .] when Aries, in the midst of lent, made showers of hail descend from the north. In a great cold [he] barely could withstand" (5-7). Like Chaucer's *Prologue,* Henryson sets his poem in the astrological sign of the Ram, or Aries, whose dates fall between the middle of March and the middle of April. However, the environments described in each of the poems are markedly different.[64] We can recall the opening lines of the *General Prologue:*

> Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote
> The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,
> And bathed every veyne in swich licour
> Of which vertu engendred is the flour,
> Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth
> Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
> The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne

Encyclopedia in Eighteen Volumes. Ed. A. W. Ward and A. R. Waller (Cambridge, 2000); Fradenburg, Louise O. "The Scottish Chaucer." *Writing After Chaucer: Essential Readings in Chaucer and the Fifteenth Century.* Ed. Daniel J. Pinti. (New York: Garland, 1998), pp. 167-176.

[64] A contemporary chronicle describes some of the environmental upheaval during the middle of the fifteenth century, saying: "In the year also from the Incarnation of our Lord, 1467, in the month of January there was so great an inundation of the waters, by reason of the snow and continued rains, that no man living in our times could recall to mind the like. Throughout the whole of this country, and in Hoyland especially, there was scarcely a house or building, but what the streams of water made their way and flowed through it. Nor must you suppose that this happened hurriedly and in a cursory manner only : but continuously, during a whole month, the waters either stood there without flowing off, or else, being agitated by strong gusts of wind, swelled and increased still more and more day after day." H.G. Bohn, *Ingulph's Chronicle of the Abbey of Croyland: With the Continuations by Peter of Blois and Anonymous Writers* (London, 1854), p. 443.

Hath in the Ram his halve cours yronne,
And smale foweles maken melodye,
That slepen al the nyght with open ye
so priketh hem Nature in hir corages,
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages [. . .]
(lines 1-12)

Chaucer's *Prologue* is set in what we might think of as a quintessential English spring scene, with birds singing and tender crops sprouting from the ground. Although set in the same season, Henryson calls the setting of the *Testament* a "wintery night," though it takes place in what would have been traditionally thought of as spring in England and Scotland during the later middle ages. The longer winters of the mid-fifteenth century have been well documented. Richard Hoffman explains that the period was "especially characterized by the *length* of its winters, which dragged on as much as two or three months longer than before."[65] Springtime in Europe during the mid-fifteenth century came "late and cold; autumns came early and cold."[66] Not only does Henryson evoke Chaucer in the opening lines, he plays on Chaucer's language in the *General Prologue:* rather than April's sweet showers that bathe every veined leaf in sweet liquor, Henryson describes "showers of hail descend[ing] from the north" (6). Instead of Zephirus's "sweet breath," the season brings "blastis bitterly" (19-20) which come from the Arctic pole, "whistling loud and shrill" (20). Chaucer's depiction

[65] Hoffmann, *An Environmental History of Medieval Europe* (2014), p. 328.
[66] Hoffman, Ibid.

of spring is one which corresponds to the climatic conditions of the fourteenth century, 1386, when the poem was composed, when temperatures were near their highest of the century, a period that Bruce Campbell has called the "Chaucerian Maximum."[67] Not only does Chaucer's environmental depiction correspond to what paleoclimatologists now know the climatic conditions of the 1370s-80s to have actually been ("The Chaucerian Maximum"), but it also corresponds to the *form* of the poem being told: a pilgrimage narrative.

Chaucer explains that "Nature pricks" the hearts of both the birds (to sing) and "folk" to "long" to "go on pilgrimage." There is a correspondence between the conditions of the environment and the composition of tales on the road to Canterbury. It is essential that the weather between Southwark, where the pilgrims begin, and Canterbury be favorable in order to make the nearly 60 mile walk, taking 2-3 days. Nature "pricks" the hearts of the pilgrims to go on pilgrimage to Canterbury, encouraging their spirits and affording them favorable environmental conditions for composing their tales."Pricking" here may also play on the pricking and ruling of the physical manuscript page. In manuscript production, pricking and ruling of the page allowed scribes to create and organize a template before composing a text. Manuscripts would be pricked with a sharp object, creating little holes in the page. The pricking afforded the scribes lines, guides on which to beautifully craft their letters. In the *Prologue*,

---

[67] Campbell, *The Great Transition,* pp. 15, 52, 337, 341, 363.

Nature's pricking guides birds to compose songs, "to make their melodies," as well as pilgrims to compose their tales—to go on pilgrimage. Chaucer's familiar lines shed light on the entanglement between contemporary environmental conditions and the production and form of poetry.

Unlike the pilgrims of the *General Prologue*, being pricked by Nature and driven out into the environment, in the *Testament of Cresseid*, Henryson experiences the cold landscape from inside his oratory. Upon experiencing the icy blasts, he explains that he was driven inside "against [his] will" (21). From inside, the narrator gazes outside, "through the glass" (15). There he anxiously surveys the frigid earth, the hail, the blasts of icy air beating against the window. Scholars have argued for a parallel between the cold landscape and the poet's own mood in the poem. For example, Jana Matthews has argued that the poet's "grene" or "bitter" heart in line 24 reflects the "fervent," (which can be taken as "bitter") storm that surrounds his oratory. She explains that "the freezing wind that blasts sprouting plants is analogous to the 'greit cald' (27) that deadens sexual virility; and the 'froist' (19) is associated with old blood that 'kendillis nocht sa sone as in youtheid'(30)." In this way, Mathews explains, in gazing at the glass, "[t]he narrator in essence, looks into a mirror, and thus at himself."[68] While Mathews' reading captures some of the

[68] Jana Mathews, "*Land, Lepers, and the Law in* The Testament of Cresseid," in *The Letter of the Law: Legal Practice and Literary Production in Medieval England* (2002), eds. Emily Steiner and Candace Barrington, p. 41.

entanglement between the narrator and the physical landscape that I am trying to get at, I think it goes too far to characterize the landscape as simply a mirror or reflection of the poet's own feeling and to suggest that his gazing over the landscape, or being enmeshed in the materiality of the environment, is simply looking at himself. This seems to erase the landscape as a participant in Henryson's poetic making. The landscape becomes voiceless and wordless, something like a raw material to be formed and molded to the author's own image. On the view that Henryson's "glas" is a mirror, the idea of correspondence loses some of its vibrancy. As we said above, the word means to "correspond, harmonize, reciprocate," from *com-*, meaning "together, with (each other)" and *-respondere* "to answer." Henryson's "glas" is not in fact a mirror, it is a window. Rather than closing off and simply reflecting one's own gaze back at oneself, a window opens up onto the material world itself, allowing for a creative process that emphasizes reciprocity between the environment and human imagination. In this way, poetry is borne out of the mutual entanglement between the material world and the human imagination.

Correspondence and Hylomorphism

Henryson's idea of correspondence in this poem bears some resemblance to Maureen McLane's idea of "Compositionism," adapted from Bruno Latour. Focusing her study on ballads, McLane argues for a "compositionist poetics, a

poetics that registers what balladry reminds us—that poems, like people, thoughts, plants, and ballads themselves, are cocomposed, are made and unmade together in a contingent networking of the animate and inanimate."[69] I want to propose that Henryson's idea of correspondence in these opening lines suggests a view of creativity that takes into account the material environment in which we are enmeshed. It suggests a view of poetic production that sees poetic forms borne out of the "contingent networking of the animate and inanimate." In other words, poetic forms emerge out of our various engagements with the environment.

Interestingly, this view of poetic production seems to run counter to the view of hylomorphic poetic production expressed by medieval medieval grammarians like Geoffrey of Vinsauf, who says in the opening of his *Poetria Nova* that

> The mind's hand shapes the entire house before the body's hand builds it. Its mode of being is archetypal before it is actual. [. . .] As a prudent workman, construct the whole fabric within the mind's citadel; let it exist in the mind before it is on the lips.[70]

[69] Maureen McLane, "Compositionism: Plants, Poetics, Possibilities; or, Two Cheers for Fallacies, Especially Pathetic Ones!" *Representations,* No. 140, Special Issue: FALLACIES (Fall 2017), pp. 101-120, p. 112.
[70] Geoffrey of Vinsauf, *Poetria nova,* trans. Margaret F. Nims (Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2010), p. 20.

Vinsauf's idea in this passage is to employ scholastic hylomorphism as the basis for understanding the process of invention and poetic production.[71] On this view, invention, the beginning point of poetic production, begins in the mind of the poet, as raw materials are formed "according to the script of some idea, as the *forming* of an object guided by some thought."[72] According to Geoffrey of Vinsauf, the poet imposes his will on the raw materials, shaping those materials into whatever form he has in his mind. As Susan Schibanoff explains, "In acting upon his raw materials, assembling stones or timbers in a house, Geoffrey's poet-builder traces a long history back to the father-craftsman of ancient Greek cosmology and embryology, as do the related medieval figure of the poet as artisan (sculptor, cointer, smith, mason, and the like)."[73] However, Schibanoff demonstrates the ways in which a number of medieval authors eschewed the hylomorphic theory of artistic production in favor of a "queer poetics" that offered "alternative models and metaphors of art" and "implicitly challenge[d] hylomorphic, heterosexual art."[74]

Rather than the hylomorphic model of taking brute matter and forming it into whatever idea the author has in their head, Henryson's idea of correspondence brings the material world into the creative process, allowing for

---

[71] Martin Camargo, ''The Late Fourteenth-Century Renaissance of Anglo-Latin Rhetoric,'' *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 45 (2012): 107–33.

[72] Christopher Cannon, "Form," in Strohm, *Middle English*, p. 177.

[73] Susan Schibanoff, *Chaucer's Queer Poetics. Rereading the Dream Trio* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 2006), p. 19-20.

[74] Ibid. pp. 22-23.

a theory of creativity and poetic making that seems to be more in tune with the world. This theory of correspondence, of a reciprocity between the poet and the material world, is more in line with phenomenological notions concerning the actual processes of making. For example, without the use of modern methods of splitting timber, medieval carpenters had to "[follow] the grain of the tree" when sawing beams for the assembly of frames for timber buildings.[75] Trees often grow with slight bends and knots, which means that "the traditional carpenter must have constantly faced the problem of making maximum use of irregular timber."[76] In this case, the materials themselves are part of the creative process, as the timber affords the carpenter with certain shapes and lines with which to work. In this way, the materials themselves help dictate the shape and form of the structure. Richard Harris suggests that "changes in the growth of available timber" in the late medieval period may have led to changes in the form of late medieval buildings, dictating stylistic considerations such as beam size.[77] While these architectural considerations were once thought to be a

---

[75] Richard Harris, *Discovering Timber-Framed Buildings* (Bloomsbury, 2009), p. 17. Doreen Sylvia Leach explains that medieval "[f]raming was a skilled task that necessitated dealing with heavy timber which tended to bow and spring when sawn because it distorted as it dried and as a consequence there were no straight lines." Doreen Sylvia Leach, *Carpenters in Medieval London c.1240-c.1540* (University of London, 2017), p. 177.

[76] Harris, *Discovering,* p. 18. For more on the materials and methods of medieval carpentry, see: Jane Grenville, "Materials and competence: the practicalities of medieval building," *Medieval Housing* (Leicester Press, 1997) pp. 23-65.

[77] Harris, *Discovering,* p. 18-20. In a similar vein, the author of the Middle English *Speculum Humanae Salvationis* paints a picture of late medieval craft in which materials (in this case an oak tree) seamlessly lend themselves to the creative processes of a monastery: "A certain

product of function or aesthetic choice, it is most likely the case that they are the result of ecological changes and fluctuations in timber growth.

Following the Grain

Against the hylomorphic model of creativity, Deleuze and Guattari use the example of splitting a log and explain that creative processes are about "surrendering to the wood, then following where it leads by connecting operations to a materiality, instead of imposing form upon a matter"[78] Correspondence is about following the grain of the wood, joining with the flows of the material world. As anthropologist Tim Ingold explains,

---

monastery had a huge oak standing in its grounds, which had to be felled and grubbed out on account of the smallness of the site. When it had been felled, servants of the monastery gathered there and each chose the pieces appropriate to his office. The master smith cut off the lower trunk which he realized was suitable [for an anvil-base] in his smithy. The master of the leatherworkers chose the bark for himself, which he crushed into powder for tanning his hides. The master of hogs took the acorns, with which he intended to fatten his piglets. The master builder chose the tall trunk, from which to cut beams and roofs. The master fisher chose the curved parts, to make the ribs of ships from them. The master of the mills grubbed out the roots, which he realized would be suitable for the mill on account of their strength. The master baker gathered together the branches with which he afterwards heated his oven. The sacristan carried away green leafy boughs and with them decorated his church for a feast. The scribe picked about a hundred galls or oak-apples with which he made up ink. The master cellarer took various pieces from which he wanted to make amphoras and other vessels. Last of all, the master cook collected the fragments and took them away for the kitchen fire." A. Henry, ed., *The Mirour of Mans Saluacion[e]. A Middle English Translation of Speculum Humanae Salvationis. A Critical Edition of the Fifteenth-Century Manuscript Illustrated from Der Spiegel der menschen Behaltnis Speyer: Drach, c. 1475* (Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1986), p. 227. Translated by R. Hoffmann.

[78] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 408.

> When you take an axe (or a wedge if you are using greenwood techniques) to split a log, you are not imposing a form on the log. What you are doing is finding the grain; and then the axe or the wedge will follow it. The line it follows is one that has already grown into the wood when it was part of a living tree, as part of its process of growth. Thus the material you are working with is not formless, nor is it homogeneous. It already has lines of growth, it has a grain, and the maker is not someone who is imposing form on material but is rather one who finds the grain and then bends it to an evolving purpose. This, I think, is what making is all about: it's not imposing form on material but finding the grain of the way the world is becoming and then turning it this way or that in order to make it match what your own evolving purpose, as a designer or maker, might be.[79]

Rather than "someone who is imposing form on material," I argue that Henryson's use of correspondence is much closer to following the grain of the material, as Ingold would put it, and sees poetic making as a process that is deeply entwined with our perception and engagement with the material world.[80] Ingold says this of correspondences with regard to creativity and drawing, but we may just as effectively substitute drawing here for the process of poetic making. Ingold explains,

> I have developed this idea about drawing as a process of correspondence, in which one thing is continually answering to another as in a conversation. And the thing about the drawing hand is that it is both observing something and making a trace at the same time. So that the

[79] Tim Ingold, "An Ecology of Materials: a rock is a rock is a rock," in *Power of Material – Politics of Materiality*, eds. Kerstin Stakemeier and Susanne Witzgall (UChicago, 2017).
[80] A. Henry, ed. The Mirour of Mans Saluacion[e]. *A Middle English Translation of Speculum Humanae Salvationis.* A Critical Edition of the Fifteenth-Century Manuscript Illustrated from Der Spiegel der menschen Behaltnis Speyer: Drach, c. 1475 (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1986), 227. Translated by R. Hoffmann.

> movement of your hand, and the movement of your thought that is guiding the hand, correspond with the movement of whatever it is that you are attending to in the world and that you are corresponding with.[81]

In both Chaucer's *Prologue* and Henryson's *Testament*, the poetic process is one in which nature corresponds with poetic making, storytelling, and ultimately our phenomenal being-in-the-world. Poetic making in these texts is characterized by an attention and openness to the world—once again, the *glas* is not a mirror but a window. The changing climate of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the shifting atmosphere in two different Spring seasons, are intertwined *with* the poetic process. As the environment shifts, so does poetry.

Like the *General Prologue*, Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* begins in the Spring, with two lovers meeting in the "the pleasant time of April," "when the fields are softly spread with new green leaves [. . .] and sweetly smelling flowers" (*TC,* 1.156-58). Henryson's tale does not relate a story of spring love, but follows the tragic fate of Cressida, which was left untold by Chaucer. The mood of Henryson's retelling corresponds with the turbulent atmosphere of fifteenth century Scotland. In this way, Henryson is following the grain of the natural world, so to speak, and his poem is formed out of the correspondence between the maker and the material. In the words of Chaucer himself:

> For it sits well---this truth is certainly plain----

[81] Tim Ingold, *Knowing from the Inside: Correspondences* (Bloomsbury Press, 2017), p. 125.

A woeful being should have a dreary companion,
And to a sorrowful tale, a sorrowful mood. (*TC,* I 12-14)

"For wel sit it, the sothe for to seyne,
A woful wight to han a drery feere ,
And to a sorwful tale, a sory chere"

What is the relationship between late-medieval climate change and the production and form of poetry? And how does the material world in which we are enmeshed influence creative processes? I think Henryson's phenomenologically grounded concept of *correspondence* helps shed some light on these questions while also offering an alternate view of creativity to that of the traditional hylomorphic model.

I complicate this notion of correspondence throughout the dissertation. What happens when environmental forms work against the process of creativity? In order to explore this question, I turn to the poetry of John Gower and John Lydgate in Chapter Three, who use poetic form to negotiate unsettling changes in the atmosphere. In the next chapter, I begin by situating Chaucer's *House of Fame* in larger contemporary discourses on movement. I chart some of the ways in which natural science influenced late-medieval conceptions of poetry. I argue that Chaucer's *House of Fame* emphasizes Aristotelian natural science and environmental forms in order to develop a poetics interested in questions of matter and movement. Ultimately, I argue that the *House of Fame*

displays a view of creativity that encourages poetic engagement with the "matere" of the world.

Chapter Two

The Whirl of Materials: Form and Movement in Chaucer's *House of Fame*

From the first line, Geoffrey Chaucer's *The House of Fame* situates movement as a central concern: "God *turne* us every drem to goode!" (1) The poem opens with a meandering *dubitatio* on the "causes" of dreams, throughout which the narrator wonders whether dreams have their genesis in sources ranging from physical humors (blood, phlegm, choler, black bile), to asceticism, to "spirites" (41). Chaucer ends his lengthy discourse on dream classification by echoing his opening supplication, once again asking "he that mover ys of all" (81) to "Turne us every drem to goode!" (58). As Deanne Williams explains, "Dreams are subject to interpretation: they can be "turned" for better or worse."[82] Classifying Chaucer's proem to *The House of Fame* as a "noisy opening," Williams argues that the first line is a "prayer" for a "goode" "interpretation that acknowledges the difficulty of finding any stable meaning in the text."[83] Indeed, the relationship between textual stability (both interpretive and formal) and a world in perpetual motion, where texts "turne," "moveth" (851), "congeal" (1126), "multiply" (784), and "enclyne" (734), is on full display in *The House*

[82] Deanne Williams, "Dream Visions," in *The Yale Companion to Chaucer* ed. Seth Lerer (Yale University Press, 2005), p. 147.
[83] Ibid. p. 147.

of Fame. The first part of this chapter argues for movement as an important feature of late medieval aesthetics, and explores the overlapping discourses between poetics and physics in the fourteenth century. After situating *The House of Fame* within a late medieval aesthetics of movement, the second half of the chapter explores the relationship between poetic form and the movement of the natural world in *The House of Fame.* I conclude by exploring the relationship between movement and Chaucer's conception of *multiplication*, concluding that the *House of Fame* encourages a view of poetry predicated on engagement with the materiality of the world.

Movement and Aesthetics

Movement figures prominently as a literary trope in many late medieval texts. The pilgrimage motif—which Chaucer comically employs in *The House of Fame*—is perhaps the most obvious place where medieval literature and movement meet. At the opening of *The House of Fame*, we find "Geffrey," the dreamer, having fallen fast into a deep sleep as if he had made a two mile "pilgrymage" (116). As he sleeps, Geffrey dreams that he is wondering through a temple "ymad of glas" (120). Moving "up and doune"(140) the hall of the glass temple, he surveys images depicting scenes from Virgil's

Aenied—pictorial representations that Kathryn McKinley has argued are "alive with motion."[84]

Whether it be geographical pilgrimage or "life as pilgrimage," movement was an essential requisite for religious pilgrimage and for closing the gap between the human and the divine.[85] Dante's movement through the circles of hell and the starry heavens, the spiritual and temporal movement of Guillaume de Deguileville's *Le Pèlerinage de la Vie Humaine*, and the movement of Chaucer's pilgrims along the road to Canterbury, all exemplify an aesthetic and formal interest in movement. In other words, these texts feature movement as a prominent literary trope and aesthetic object. Mary Carruthers argues that, in the later middle ages, the pilgrimage, or "journey," functioned as a central concept for understanding the mechanics of literary composition. Carruthers explains,

---

[84] Kathryn McKinley, "Ekphrasis as Aesthetic Pilgrimage in Chaucer's *House of Fame* Book 1," in *Meaning in Motion: the Semantics of Movement in Medieval Art,* eds. Nino Zchomelidse and Giovanni Freni (Princeton Press, 2011), p. 223.

[85] On pilgrimage as a literary motif, Dee Dyas explains, "The idea of journey was exploited by many medieval writers, offering as it did a framework within which characters could encounter new people and places, and explore not only new surroundings but also new levels of understanding and self-knowledge." Dee Dyas, *Pilgrimage in Medieval English Literature 700-1500* (2001), p. 2. Additionally, kinesthesis (the sense of movement) was not only an important feature of the journey of the pilgrim, but also a critical aspect at the physical site of pilgrimage. As Dyas explains, "in the later Middle Ages as bells rang, heavenly music filled the air, and the scent of burning candles or the fragrant healing oil exuded by tombs such as that of William of York surrounded pilgrims, and they themselves were moving, kneeling, crawling, and placing themselves in niches, connecting through every form of touch with their sacred surroundings." Dee Dyas, *The Dynamics of Pilgrimage: Christianity, Holy Places, and Sensory Experience* (Routledge, 2020), p. 30.

> The concept that an artistic work is a journey (while certainly to be found in ancient rhetoric) achieves a particular importance – even ubiquity – in medieval analysis. One is said to travel through a composition, whether of words or other materials, led on by the stylistic qualities of its parts and their formally arranged relationships. *Ductus* and its synonyms analyse the experience of artistic form as an ongoing, dynamic process rather than as the examination of a static or completed object. [. . .] The art of the Middle Ages does not hold up a perfect 'globed fruit' but leads one in a walk along converging and diverging paths.[86]

As Carruthers notes, *ductus* is the "quality in a work's formal patterns" which "sets a viewer or auditor or performer in motion with its structures," an "experience" more akin to "traveling through stages along a route than perceiving a whole object."[87] As Geoffrey of Vinsauf explains in his *Poetria nova*,

> The poem's progress now invites you onward. By means of your pre-visualized image, direct your step further along the road's course. The way continues along two routes: there will be either a wide path or a narrow, either a river or a brook. You may advance at a leisurely pace or leap swiftly ahead. (lines 203-8)[88]

---

[86] Mary Carruthers, "The Concept of Ductus, or, Journeying through a Work of Art" in *Rhetoric beyond Words: Delight and Persuasion in the Arts of the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 190.
[87] Ibid.
[88] Geoffrey of Vinsauf, *Poetria nova:* "The material's order may follow two possible courses: at one time it advances along the pathway of art, at another it travels the smooth road of nature. Nature's smooth road points the way when "things" and "words" follow the same sequence, and the order of discourse does not depart from the order of occurrence. The poem travels the pathway of art if a more effective order presents first what was later in time, and defers the appearance of what was actually earlier (II.87-94) . . . [The artistic order is superior.] The air in this region of art may seem murky and the pathway rugged, the doors

For Geoffrey, even the phenomenal experience of reading a poem is characterized by motion. Both readerly distraction and authorial digression can be explained through concepts of motion where the author or the reader leaves "the middle of the road" and, with a "leap," "fl[ies] off to the side." Carruthers sums up the phenomenal experience of reading, viewing, performing, and composing medieval art under the rubric of movement—"all medieval art moves," she explains, and "the characteristic values of aesthetic delight" in the middle ages all "[imply] some movement."[89]

What drives this coupling of movement and "aesthetic delight" in late medieval literature? The aestheticization of movement owes much to the concept of *musica universali*s, or the harmony of the "whirling heavens," as Boethius puts it.[90] The Pythagorean "doctrine that the celestial bodies in their eternal revolutions make a sweet harmony" was known to medieval writers as the "harmony of the spheres."[91] Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis,* from which

---

locked and the theory itself entangled with knots. Since that is so, the words that follow will serve as physicians for that disorder. Scan them well: here you will find a light to dispel the darkness, safe footing to traverse rugged ground, a key to unlock the doors, a finger to loose the knots. The way is thrown open; guide the reins of your mind as the nature of your course demand" (II.104-112).

[89] Mary Carruthers, *The Experience of Beauty in the Middle Ages*, (2013), p. 169.

[90] 4 *Cons. phil*. 1.m5.1–4: O stelliferi conditor orbis, / qui perpetuo nixus solio / rapido caelum turbine uersas / legemque pati sidera cogis.

[91] Andrew Hicks, *Composing the World: Harmony in the Medieval Platonic Cosmos* (Oxford, 2017), p. 20.

Chaucer drew inspiration for the opening lines of *The House of Fame*, explains the concept of *musica universalis* in this way:[92]

> "Hic est" inquit "ille qui interuallis coniunctus inparibus, sed tamen pro rata parte ratione distinctis, inpulsu et motu ipsorum orbium efficitur, et acuta cum grauibus temperans uarios aequabiliter concentus efficit; nec enim silentio tanti motus incitari possunt, et natura fert ut extrema ex altera grauiter, ex altera autem acute sonent. (88-89)
>
> [That is a concord of tones separated by unequal but nevertheless carefully proportioned intervals, caused by the rapid *motion* of the spheres themselves. The high and low tones blended together produce different harmonies. Of course such swift *motions* could not be accomplished in silence and, as nature requires, the spheres at one extreme produce the low tones and at the other extreme the high tones.] (73)

While medieval commentators held that the harmony caused by the rotation of the spheres could not be heard by human ears, nonetheless the relationship between rotation and harmony in the *musica universalis* led medieval writers to equate motion with beauty. As Boethius explains:

> Hic si frena remiserit,
> quicquid nunc amat invicem
> bellum continuo geret
> et quam nunc socia fide

[92] Chaucer knew the *Somnium Scipionis* through Macrobius's commentary on the work. In his *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio,* which Chaucer references in *PF, HoF,* and *BD,* Macrobius dedicates several chapters to the mathematical qualities of music and an explanation of *musica universalis.* Ambrosius Theodosius Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*. ed. and trans. William Harris Stahl (NY: Columbia UP, 1952).

> pulchris motibus incitant
> certent solvere machinam.
>
> [If love's rein slackened
> All things now held by mutual love
> At once would fall to warring with each other
> Striving to wreck that engine (*machina*) of the world.
> Which now they drive
> In mutual trust with motion beautiful.][93]

This celestial harmony is driven by divine love while also being "grounded in material interactions and intermaterial relations" (the planets themselves) and, as Andrew Hicks has argued, "serves not just as the foregrounded subject of discourse about the world but even as the unarticulated ground for thinking and theorizing the world at all."[94] It is important to draw attention to the essential role that movement plays in Boethius's conception of cosmic harmony and to also note the aestheticization of movement in his reference to the *pulchris motibus* "motion beautiful" that drives the engine of the world.[95] In his Middle English translation of the *Consolation*, Chaucer translates Boethius's *pulchris motibus* as "fayre moevyngs," saying:

> And yif this love slakede the bridelis, alle thynges that now loven hem togidres wolden make batayle contynuely, and stryven to fordo the

---

[93] Boethius (2.m8.16–21)

[94] Andrew Hicks, *Composing the World,* p. 5.

[95] (Par. XXXIII, 143-45) "But already my desire and will were turned, like a wheel that spins with even motion, by the Love that moves the sun and the other stars." Dante's lines closing paradiso.

> fasoun of this world, the which they now leden in accordable feith by fayre moevynges.[96]

Averroës, writing in the twelfth century, illustrates the close relationship between motion and harmony by explaining that "if motion were destroyed, so would the heaven itself. Indeed, the heaven exists because of its motion; and if celestial motion were destroyed, the motion of all inferior beings would be destroyed and so also would the world."[97]

By the fourteenth century, movement played a central role in the study of natural philosophy, particularly in the work of writers such as John Buridan, Thomas Bradwardine, and Nicole Oresme.[98] William of Ockham (1287-1347) devotes ample time to the discussion of motion and mobility, starting book three of his *Brevis Summa Libri Physicorum* by quoting Aristotle, saying, "Since nature is a principle of motion or of change and our inquiry is about nature, we should not neglect to inquire what a motion is, for if we are ignorant of what a motion is, we are of necessity ignorant of what

---

[96] Chaucer, *Boece,* Book II, Met. 8. p. 420.

[97] Edward Grant, *History of Natural Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 174–75.

[98] John Buridan, "The impetus theory of projectile motion, from 'Questions on the Eight Books of the Physics of Aristotle'" (translated by M. Clagett), in *A Source Book in Medieval Science*, edited by Edward Grant (Harvard University Press, 1974); Nicole Oresme, *Nicole Oresme and the Kinematics of Circular Motion: Tractatus de commensurabilitate vel incommensurabilitate motuum celi.* Translated by Edward Grant (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1971); Thomas Bradwardine, *Thomas of Bradwardine: His Tractatus de proportionibus; Its Significance for the Development of Mathematical Physics.* Translated by H. Lamar Crosby (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1955).

nature is."[99]Anneliese Maier has argued that motion was the "first and foremost problem of scholastic physics" explaining that its "importance to scholastic thinking is far greater than the corresponding concept of motion in Galilean and post-Galilean mechanics, and it in fact amounts to a generalized concept of physical process."[100] As Matthew Boyd Goldie explains, "In the Middle Ages, motion was not as it is today, a subfield of the larger discipline of physics. It was central to virtually all understandings of the natural world."[101] The study of motion and the study of the physical world were virtually synonymous in the later middle ages. Concepts such as generation, corruption, alteration, change, and multiplication all belong to the study of movement in late medieval natural philosophy. These concepts within natural philosophy, concerning the nature of movement, worked their way into the vernacular poetry of England and Scotland in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Aristotelian science supplied forms and concepts that, in turn, influenced the form and production of poetry, particularly for poets such as

[99] *Ockham on Aristotle's Physics: A Translation of Ockham's Brevis Summa Libri Physicorum*, translated by Julian Davies, (St. Bonaventure, NY: The Franciscan Institute, 1989) p. 39. From Aristotle, *Physics* 3.1. William of Ockham, *Opera philosophica,* vol. VI*: Brevis summa libri physicorum, Summula philosophiae naturalis, et Quaestiones in libros physicorum aristotelis* (St. Bonaventure: Editiones Instituti Franciscani Universitatis S. Bonaventurae, 1974), 39
[100] Anneliese Maier, "The Nature of Motion," *On the Threshold of Exact Science: Selected Writings of Anneliese Meier on Late Medieval Natural Philosophy,* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), p. 22.
[101] Goldie, *Scribes of Space: Place in Middle English Literature and Late Medieval Science* (Cornell University Press, 2019), p. 123. Goldie presents a helpful overview of motion and space in the later middle ages.

Chaucer and Gower.

Poetry and Natural Philosophy

Alongside geographic and internal pilgrimage and the *musica universalis*, the idea of movement as an aesthetic concepts also derives from the late medieval coupling of natural philosophy and poetry. For example, in his prologue to the *Legendys of Hooly Wummen,* Osbern Bokenham (1393-1464) describes the material and formal causes of his poetic work using the Aristotelian language of causation. He explains that there are "Two thyngys owyth every clerk/ To advertysn, begnnyng a werk": the "what" and the "why." These two words correspond to Aristotle's four causes ("The foure causys combrehendyd be") and must be parsed out at the beginning of "of every book." Bokenham begins with the "what," explaining:

> The fyrst is clepyd cause efficyent,
> The secunde they clepe cause materyal,
> Formal the thrydde, the fourte fynal.
> The efficyent cause is the auctour,
> Wych aftyr his cunnyng doth hys labour
> To acomplyse the begunne matere,
> Which cause is secunde; and the more clere
> That it maye be, the formal cause
> Settyth in dew ordre clause be clause.
> And these thre thyngys longyn to "what":
> Auctour, matere, and forme ordinat. (Lines 1-20)
>
> [The first is called the efficient cause

The second they call the material cause,
Formal the third, the fourth final.
The efficient cause is the author,
Which, according to his skill, is his labor
To finish the matter he has begun,
Which is the second cause; and the more clear
That is may be, the formal cause
Sits in due order clause by clause.
And these three things belong to "what"
Author, matter, and form properly ordered.][102]

Bokenham's lines refer to what A.J. Minnis has termed the "Aristotelian Prologue."[103] The Aristotelian Prologue draws on Aristotle's theory of causality to make sense of *auctorite* and the composition of literature. The theory goes that, based on the Aristotelian scheme, the efficient cause (*causa efficiens)* was the *auctor,* the material cause (*causa materialis)* was the subject matter or the source materials of the author's work, the formal cause (*causa formalis)* was the organizational structure of the work, and the final cause (*causa formalis)* was the purpose of the work, the end (*finis)* or justification for "why," to quote Bokenham, the work exists.

This four-fold system of causation made its way into the prologues and writings of both Latin and English authors in the fourteenth century. By implementing this system of causation, fourteenth-century writers bridged the

---

[102] Osbern Bokenham, *Legendys of Hooly Wummen* in *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280–1520*, eds. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, Nicholas Watson, Andrew Taylor, and Ruth Evans (University of Penn State Press, 1999).
[103] Alistair Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship,* p. 28.

gap between contemporary understandings of materiality—based in scholastic commentaries on Aristotle's *Physica* and *Metaphysica*—and literary theory.

The entwining of contemporary understandings of materiality and literary theory, and the framework of the Aristotelian prologue, owes much to the popularization of Aristotle's writings in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. In 1255, the faculty at The University of Paris formally prescribed Aristotle's scientific works on the material world for study and public discussion---including the *Physics*, which was devoted to the principles of change and motion; *Metaphysics*, which was concerned with questions of being, causation, form and matter; *On the Heavens*, which was concerned with the motions and the heavenly and terrestrial bodies; *On Meteorology*, which described things like wind, thunder, lighting, rain, and other upper-terrestrial phenomena; *On Animals*, which considered animal behavior and the complex cognitive process of animal life; and *On Generation and Corruption*, which was concerned with transformation, alteration, growth, chemical change, and transmutation of the four basic elements.[104] By the middle of the thirteenth century, Aristotle's works on logic and science made up the core curriculum of study for the Master of Arts degree at Oxford and Paris. It is hard to overstate

[104] "The Natural Books of Aristotle in the Arts Curriculum at The University of Paris in 1255," letter from the Paris Faculty of the Arts. Trans. Lynn Thorndike in Grant, Edward. *A Source Book in Medieval Science* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974), pp. 44-45.

the importance of Aristotle's scientific works on late medieval higher education.[105] Virtually all beginning arts students were required to learn these scientific texts before advancing to higher degrees in canon and civil law, medicine, and theology.[106] In The General Prologue, Chaucer's portrait of the Oxford clerk who remarks on "Twenty books, clad in blak or reed,/ Of Aristotle and his philosophie" (I. 294-5) is a direct reference to Aristotle's *libri naturales* (natural books) and demonstrates the centrality of natural philosophy to all university students, even ecclesiastical students such as the Clerk.

[105] While Aristotle's scientific works were formally prescribed at Oxford and Paris, they were not accepted uncritically. Most famously, in 1277, Stephen Tempier, the Bishop of Paris, prohibited the teaching of 219 philosophical theses being discussed at the University of Paris. Tempier's condemnation of many tenets of Aristotelian science raised questions, both inside and outside of the university, about the status of Aristotle's philosophy and whether or not parts of it were heretical. Parts of this expansive condemnation included questions of the physics of motion—in particular, rectilinear motion. While natural philosophers in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries acknowledged the importance of motion, debates about the finer points concerning the physics of movement were prevalent. For a helpful overview of the condemnations of 1277 and the subsequent questioning of medieval natural philosophy, see: Thijssen, J. M. M. H., *Censure and Heresy at the University of Paris, 1200–1400* (Philadelphia, 1998); Aertsen, Jan A., Emery, Kent and Speer, Andreas. *After the Condemnation of 1277: Philosophy and Theology at the University of Paris in the Last Quarter of the Thirteenth Century.* (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2013). Concerning early tensions at the University of Paris, see: Spencer E. Young, *Scholarly Community at the Early University of Paris: Theologians, Education, and Society, 1215-1248* (Cambridge, 2014). For a study of debates surrounding Ockham's work (an important figure in the history of the physics of motion), see: William J. Courtenay, "The Academic and Intellectual Worlds of Ockham," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ockham*, ed. Paul Vincent Spade (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
[106] Edward Grant, *Physical Science in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), pp. 21-22.

Chaucer takes Aristotelian natural philosophy as his subject in Book II of *The House of Fame.* In the poem, Geffrey is carried up into the atmosphere by an eagle who has been tasked with guiding the poet to Fame's house. Along their journey through the air, the eagle gives the poet a lesson on Aristotle's principle of motion. The eagle explains,

> Geffrey, thou wost ryght wel this,
> That every kyndely thyng that is
> Hath a kyndely stede ther he
> May best in hyt conserved be;
> Unto which place every thyng
> Thorgh his kyndely enclynyng
> Moveth for to come to
> Whan that hyt is awey therfro
> (729-36)
>
> Geffrey, you know this quite well,
> That every natural thing that is
> Has a natural place where
> It will be most well suited;
> Towards which place every thing
> Through its natural inclination
> Moves so as to come there
> When it is far from that place[107]

The eagle explains that "every kindly thing" has a place to which it moves. The eagle puts forth this theory of motion in order to explain the process by which

[107] See Aristotle, especially *Physics,* VIII: "And yet this is what is being inquired into, namely, why it is that the light and the heavy do move to their own place. And the cause is that it is natural for them to be somewhere, and this is the being for the light and the heavy, the one being determined by up and the other by down." *Physics,* VIII.4.

all sound, both poetry and noise, arrives at the House of Fame or the House of Rumor. The notion that everything has its proper place, or "stede," derives from Aristotle's *Physics*—where physical things like stones and smoke move either upwards or downwards according to their natural inclination.[108] Questions of natural philosophy in general and motion in particular were equally at home in late medieval poetry as they were in philosophical commentaries or the Aristotelian *questiones* in which university students were engaged. Kellie Robertson has argued for the importance of natural science to late medieval poets, including Chaucer, Jean de Meun, Guillaume de Deguileville, and John Lydgate. In particular, Robertson focuses on late medieval poetry which features the allegorical figure of Nature. She explains, "Aristotelian science was a [. . .] significant influence on certain medieval poets, who found in natural philosophical texts sources of formal and generic distinction that, in turn, shaped the literary field."[109] Aristotelian notions of movement and motion influenced the formal properties of *The House of Fame* and provided concepts

[108] Chaucer was exposed to many sources through which he would have encountered Aristotle's notion of natural inclination, including Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy.* Chaucer's translation of the *Consolation* states, ''Alle thynges seken ayen to hir propre cours, and alle thynges rejoysen hem of hir retornynge ayen to hir nature. Ne noon ordenaunce is bytaken to thynges, but that that hath joyned the endynge to the bygynnynge, and hath maked the cours of itself stable (that it chaunge nat from his propre kynde).''See Rebecca Davis, "Fugitive Poetics in Chaucer's *House of Fame,*" pp. 108-110.
[109] Kellie Robertson, *Nature Speaks*, p. 15.

through which Chaucer theorized the way in which poetry moves, circulates, multiplies, and corresponds with the natural world.

It was not just Chaucer that took interest in questions of natural philosophy; contemporary poets such as John Gower and Thomas Usk appealed to Aristotelian terms in order to reckon with their own poetic projects. For example, Gower explains,

> And forto speke of this matiere
> Touchende love and his Supplant,
> A tale which is acordant
> Unto thin Ere I thenke enforme.
> Now herkne, for this is the forme.
> (*Confessio Amantis,* 11.2496-500)[110]

Genius, the lover's guide, desires to put his "matiere" into a "forme."[111] The pairing of matter and form in this passage is standard to Aristotelian natural science. Just as the Aristotelian Prologue drew on Aristotle's theory of causation, examining the material and conceptual causes of a work, Gower here appeals to "hylomorphism," another, related, facet of Aristotelian philosophy (see Chapter One).

[110] John Gower, *Confessio Amantis* edition from *Gower's Confessio Amantis,* ed. Russell Peck, with Latin Translations by Andrew Galloway. 3vols. Kalamazoo, Mich.: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000-2005 (vol. 1 revd. 2006;vol. 2 revd 2013; translations revised 2021 [online only]). All Gower citations from this edition.

[111] James Simpson has noted the "standard philosophical pairing (of form and matter)" in this passage. See Simpson, *Sciences and the Self in Medieval Poetry: Alan of Lille's Anticlaudianus and John Gower's Confessio Amantis* (1995), p. 4.

Late medieval poets did not use Aristotle's work uncritically. Chaucer and Gower elaborated upon and broke from a number of Aristotelian concepts widely accepted in medieval natural philosophy. For example, Gower problematizes the same notion of matter and form that he appeals to in the passage above. Gower posits a matter called "Ylem," a Middle English rendering of the Aristotelian Greek term "hyle," for primordial matter. Gower says,

> For yit withouten eny forme
> Was that matiere universal,
> Which hihte Ylem in special.
> Of Ylem, as I am enformed,
> These elementz ben mad and formed,
> Of Ylem elementz they hote
> After the Scole of Aristote,
> Of whiche if more I schal reherce,
> Foure elementz ther ben diverse.[112]

Not only does Gower coin an English term for Aristotle's prime matter, putting formless matter into linguistic form, he also challenges Aristotle's conception of *hyle*.[113] Gower explains that "ylem" was "withouten eny forme." This statement is an impossibility in Aristotelian hylomorphism, as even prime matter cannot exist apart from form. Furthermore, Gower plays on the meaning of "form" in this passage, explaining "Of ylem, as I am enformed." On one level, Gower is

[112] John Gower, *Confessio Amantis* VII.214–22 [239].
[113] For a helpful overview of Gower's concept of Ylem, see: J. Allan Mitchell, *Becoming Human: The Matter of the Medieval Child* (Minn. Press, 2014), pp. 52-55.

formed from the primordial matter that he is referencing, and at the same time he is *informed* from his studies, after the "Scole of Aristotle," in that same matter. The formation of elements in this passage and Gower's poetic informing and reformation of his *matiere* extend Aristotle's hylomorphism into the realm of late medieval literary theory.

We should note the relationship between medieval poetry and materiality is evidenced in the multiple meanings of the word *matere*. Gower uses the term in the passage above to refer to the subject matter that he will be writing about, but the play between the subject matter of a work and the material matter of the world was not lost on medieval authors. Rather than a dead metaphor, the relationship between physical matter and poetic matter was very much alive for late medieval poets. Instead of a separation between scientific discourse and poetics, as is imagined today, medieval poetry assumed knowledge of the material world and was considered a standard forum for asking questions about the nature of the material world and its relation to the human.[114]

Critics such as Kathryn L. Lynch, Mark Miller, J. Allen Mitchell, and James Simpson, have noted the ways in which late medieval poets such as Chaucer and Gower were interested in contemporary philosophical questions. Though they were not interested in philosophy in a technical sense, and they most often refused to take particular positions on any one philosophical issue,

[114] See Kellie Robertson, "Medieval Materialism: A Manifesto," p. 114.

Chaucer and Gower were both familiar with contemporary philosophical debates on a range of subjects. Kathryn L. Lynch has argued that Chaucer was deeply acquainted with thirteenth century scholasticism and, in the tradition of the Boethian consolation, drew on scholastic discussions in his dream visions in order to raise philosophical problems concerning morality, logic, and epistemology.[115] Indeed, even Chaucer's contemporaries and predecessors lauded him as a great "philosophical poete."[116] Thomas Hoccleve (1368-1426) praises Chaucer as "hier in philosophie/ To Aristotle."[117] In his *Testament of Love*, Thomas Usk (d. 1388) praises Geoffrey Chaucer as "the noble philosophical poete in Englissh speche."[118] What did these poets and commentators mean when they called Chaucer a philosophical poet? It is often assumed that, in the later middle ages, references to philosophy—or "philosophie" in middle english—primarily referred to questions of moral philosophy.[119] While critics such Kathryn Lynch, Diane Watt, and Mark Miller have shown that moral philosophy figured heavily in Chaucer and Gower's poetry, it is hardly the case that references to "philosophie" in late medieval

---

[115] Kathryn L. Lynch, *Chaucer's Philosophical Visions* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2000).
[116] Thomas Usk refers to Chaucer as "the noble philosophical poete in Englissh speche." *The Testament of Love,* ed. R. Allen Shoaf (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1998), 3.4.231.
[117] Thomas Hoccleve, *The Regiment of Princes,* 2087-88.
[118] Thomas Usk, *Testament of Love*, 3.4.231. William Caxton, writing nearly a century after Usk, praises "that noble & grete philosopher Gefferey chaucer the which for his ornate wrytyng in our tongue maye wel haue the name of a laureate poete."
[119] For an excellent overview of the term "philosophie," see Kellie Robertson, *Nature Speaks* (2017), pp. 11-16.

poetry were confined to the moral or ethical. As we have seen, a university education in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries would have primarily consisted of work in natural philosophy. Furthermore, Aristotle's *Ethics* was not adopted into the university curriculum at Paris and Oxford until the middle of the fourteenth century, nearly a century after the *libri naturales* (Aristotle's books on natural science), and it wasn't until the fifteenth century that it began to be intensely studied.[120] With this in mind, it is not a stretch to suggest that Hoccleve and Usk most likely had natural philosophy in mind when they lauded Chaucer as a great philosophical poet.[121] I do not mean to suggest that the term "philosophie" can be strictly relegated to either natural philosophy or ethics in late medieval literature. In fact, as Kellie Robertson argues, pre-Enlightenment culture had a "philosophical ambidexterity" that was "broad enough to render a writer's physics inseparable from his or her ethics."[122] This dynamic understanding of philosophy emphasizes the importance of examining pre-Enlightenment notions of materiality, as "the theories of material substance a society embraces (or chooses to reject) have a profound influence on the narratives that it can use to explain its own cultural values to itself."[123] In *The*

[120] Georg Wieland, "The Reception and Interpretation of Aristotle's Ethics," in *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy*, ed. Norman Kretzmann, Anthony Kenny, Jan Pinborg, and Eleonore Stump, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 657–72.
[121] After the general sense of "knowledge, learning, scholarship," the *MED* lists "natural science" as the most common definition of "philosophie." The relationship between medieval ethics and physics is the subject of Kellie Robertson's *Nature Speaks* (2017).
[122] Robertson, *Nature Speaks*, p. 15.
[123] Ibid.

House of Fame, the physical world of flux and motion set out by Aristotelian philosophy provides a template for Chaucer's understanding of poetics.

In its obsession with motion, medieval art (and poetry in particular) is in tune with the physical world that it seeks to represent. As Mary Carruthers explains, "[t]he biophysical world of compounds, mixtures, flux, affect, and continuous movement among opposites is also the realm of medieval aesthetic experience, embracing all that responds to human-created arts and their artefacts."[124] The relationship between poetry and the environment (or art and nature) cuts to the heart of a larger argument running throughout the dissertation: that medieval poetry not only looks to the "biophysical world" in order to faithfully represent that world, but also looks to the environment for the forms through which it may represent that world. I argue that this idea, that poetry looks to nature for its own forms, is one that Chaucer engages with throughout *The House of Fame.*

Movement in *The House of Fame*

Many scholars have noted Chaucer's concern with movement in *The House of Fame.*[125] Steven Kruger has argued that the poem "is held together not so much

[124] Mary Carruthers, *The Experience of Beauty in the Middle Ages* (2013)*,* pp. 34-5.
[125] Thomas R. Schnieder, "Chaucer's Physics: Motion in *The House of Fame*." In *The Passenger: Medieval Texts and Transits*. Ed. James Smith (New York: Punctum Books, 2017); Matthew Boyd Goldie, "Motion in Literature: Place and Movement in *The House of Fame,*" in *Scribes of Space: Place in Middle English Literature and Late Medieval Science* (2019)*;*

by central themes or unities as by a consistent, if complicated pattern of movement," noting the relationship between movement and the poem's self-conscious examination of "its own status as a poetic construct."[126] However, as Kruger notes, in its self-examination, the poem is "not self-enclosed," but rather explores the process of poetic production with gentle attention to the "forces beyond the self that shape the poem and even the self itself," one of these "forces" being movement. Exploring the relationship between form and motion, Rebecca Davis has argued for what she terms a "fugitive poetics" in *The House of Fame,* where poetic form accommodates the dynamism of the material world of flux and "transit."[127] Davis explains,

> In *The House of Fame*, physics works against notions of form as a fixed structure, a container for matter, or an ordered arrangement of parts, but Chaucer does not give up on form. Instead the poem asks us to reconceive form's relationship to matter, and to think of poetic form not as an end point but as a conduit through which dynamic matter takes shape.[128]

Along with Kruger and Davis, this chapter explores the ways in which the poem "moves out into the natural world" in order to negotiate the relationship

---

Alexander N. Gabrovsky, "Thought Experiments in Geffrey's Dream: The Poetics of Motus Localis, Measurement, and Relativity in the *House of Fame*," in *Chaucer the Alchemist* (Palgrave, 2016), pp. 27–64.

[126] Steven Kruger, "Imagination and the Complex Movement of Chaucer's *House of Fame*," *The Chaucer Review* 28, no. 2 (1993): 117–34, at 117.

[127] Rebecca Davis, "Fugitive Poetics in Chaucer's *House of Fame"* p. 102.

[128] Ibid. pp. 103-4.

between form and an Aristotelian world where matter moves, congeals, multiplies, and inclines.[129] Similar to the notion of *correspondence* in the previous chapter, I argue that Chaucer follows along the affordances of the natural world. In this case, the vigorous and motile nature of the material world. The movement, proliferation, and generation presented by the natural world supply Chaucer with the very forms that allow him to represent that same world. Chaucer develops a poetics that follows along the dynamic lines of movement afforded by the environment, participating in the same process of correspondence that we saw in Henryson's poetry.

As I noted above, Book II of *The House of Fame* begins with "Geffrey" stepping outside of the Temple of Glass and being snatched up in the eagle's talons. He is then led through the air into the atmosphere, moving from standing in a "large felde [. . .] withouten toun or hous or tree" (482-84) to "See yonder, lo, [. . .] the Milky Wey" (936-37). While journeying upwards, the eagle's physics lesson centers on issues of sound and movement. The eagle explains,

> That every speche of every man,
> As I thee telle first began,
> Moveth up on high to pace
> Kindely to Fames place. (849-52)

All "speche," indeed every sound, moves towards "Fames place." This movement can be taken in the physical sense of moved air, as Priscian explains

[129] Steven Kruger, "Imagination," p. 117.

in his *Institutiones grammaticae* that *vox* is “aerem tenuissimum ictum vel suum sensibile aurium” “thin struck air or its sensible effect on the ears” (1.1.1). The eagle draws on Priscian:

> Soun is nought but air y-broken,
> And every speche that is spoken,
> Loud or privee, foul or fair,
> In his substaunce is but air; (765-68)

The eagle also says that speech “ys but air” (768), and “Enclyned ys upward to meve” (824-25). Chaucer is commenting here on the long grammatical tradition that classifies the nature of *vox* as “spoken utterances [that] have a corporeal substance — air.” The relationship between sound and poetry in this passage has been noted by a number of scholars.[130] As Stephen Kruger explains, the “fate of sound and tidings in the realm of Fame is clearly related to the poet’s craft. After all, the pillars of the poets

---

[130] See Katherine Zieman, "Chaucer's Voys." *Representations* 60 (1997): 70-91. Zieman explains: “Within a culture that was in many ways sustained by performative speech acts, a peasant's "voice" (rather than his "speech" or "talk") would not inevitably suggest access to a peasant consciousness. Nor would a "voice" necessarily imply "orality" (in its current and inaccurate usage as "not related to writing"). Given the scripted, self-consciously textualized nature of such speech acts and their frequently intimate connection with written texts, the presence of a "voice" would not immediately signal opposition to, or exclusion from, literate discourse,” p. 72. See also: Martin Irvine, “Medieval Grammatical Theory and Chaucer’s *House of Fame*.” Speculum 60, no. 4 (1985): 850–76. For the most thorough study of sound in *The House of Fame* see: Adin Lears, *World of Echo: Noise and Knowing in Late Medieval England* (2020). Lears’s chapter on noise in the poem is “interested in the fluid movement of information and of meaning in the poem and in the ways that Chaucer evokes this flux through the poem’s form.” *World of Echo,* p. 130.

are set up in Fame's hall. And the dreamer's journey to the Houses of Fame and Tidings depends on his own status as a poet."[131] Therefore, in speaking of how articulate sound (*vox*) moves, the eagle is teaching Geffrey about poetry as well as the "communicative and memorializing processes upon which poetry depends."[132] The close relationship between *vox* and air underscores, at the most basic level, the ways in which poetic form is indebted to the material forms of the environment. Ingrid Nelson comments on the importance of air in this passage, explaining:

> Air in this passage acts as the physical medium through which speech is transmitted, like a premodern radio: it "up bereth" speech, or indeed any sound. The eagle's explanation emphasizes the materiality of air, its status as a "body," as Aristotelian science has it, equivalent to the human body in its capacity to represent and to mediate, as well as its hypermediacy in the "multiplicacioun" of sounds.[133]

The relationship between air and poetry is emphasized again later in the poem as Eolus, the god of the winds, acts as Fame's laborer. In Book III, groups of individuals stand before Fame where she decides if their "werkes" (1666) should be lost and forgotten or remembered forever throughout the world. After Fame hears the plees of each group, she

[131] Kruger, "Imagination and the Complex Movement of Chaucer's *House of Fame"*p. 119.
[132] Ibid. p. 120.
[133] Ingrid Nelson, "Ambient Media and Chaucer's *House of Fame,*" p. 571.

commands Eolus to blow their “werkes and [. . .] name” (1696) all “thurgh the world” (1674) or to the depths and hidden places of the earth to be forgotten. Eolus, and by extension the air itself, mediates the poetry that arrives at the Fame’s house, distributing to its “ kyndely stede” (731).

In order to explain the way in which every “speche, or noyse, or soun” (783) — even those “piped of a mous” — is carried to the House of Fame, the eagle employs a phenomenological example, drawing on one’s perception of a stone dropping into a body of water. The eagle explains,

> I preve hyt thus -- take hede now --
> Be experience; for yf that thow
> Throwe on water now a stoon,
> Wel wost thou, hyt wol make anoon 790
> A litel roundell as a sercle,
> Paraunter brod as a covercle;
> And ryght anoon thow shalt see wel,
> That whel wol cause another whel,
> And that the thridde, and so forth, brother, 795
> Every sercle causynge other
> Wydder than hymselve was;
> And thus fro roundel to compas,
> Ech aboute other goynge
> Causeth of othres sterynge 800
> And multiplyinge ever moo,
> Til that hyt be so fer ygoo,
> That hyt at bothe brynkes bee.

By appealing to Geffrey’s phenomenological experience of rippling water,

the eagle literally asks Geffrey to look to the physical forms of the environment in order to understand how *vox* moves and therefore how poetry moves and is shaped. The form of the passage takes the rippling effect of the water as its model. The ripples "multiplying ever moo" (801) is captured in the proliferation of words containing the letter "W" that proceed after the introduction of "water" at the beginning of the passage: "Wel," "wol" (790); "wel" (793); "whel," "wol," "whel"(794). These terms follow one another and multiply in quick succession, just as the movement of one "sercle" in water causes the next in the eagle's example. We see another example of movement and the multiplication of form later in the poem, as Geffrey approaches the House of Rumor.

The House of Rumor is the destination originally promised by the eagle (2000-01), the place where Geffrey will hear some "newe tydynges" from which he will create poetry. Geffrey describes the House of Rumor as a whirling wicker structure that

> Was mad of twigges, falwe, rede,
> And grene eke, and somme weren white,
> Switch as men to these cages thwite,
> Or maken of these panyers,
> Or elles hottes or dossers;
> That, for the swough and for the twygges,
> This house was also ful of gygges,

> And also ful eke of chirkynges,
> And of many other workings;
> And eke this hous hath of entrees
> As fele as of leves ben in trees
> In somer, what they grene been;
> And on the roof men may yet seen
> A thousand holes, and wel moo,
> To leten wel the soun out goo.
> (1936-50)

The whirling structure contains all of the sounds that have traveled upwards before they are processed by Fame. The promise of entering the House of Rumor and hearing "newe tydynges" is the "promise of locating the raw materials of vernacular poetry."[134] Interestingly, the raw materials of poetry are housed within a structure woven of "twigges" (1936). These twigs are described as being vibrantly multi-colored, appearing as "falwe," "rede," "grene," and "white." This description bears a striking resemblance to the figure of Nature herself in Alan de Lille's *De planctu naturae.* Alan describes the dress of Nature, saying:

> [Nature's] dress, woven from silk-smooth wool, kaleidoscopic in its various colours, served the purpose of a robe of office for the maiden. Changing circumstances, which substituted one hue for another, altered the garment with a varied display of colour. At first whitened to the brightness of the lily, it dazzled the eyes. Secondly,

[134] Katherine Zieman, "Chaucer's Voys" p. 84. Zieman concludes that what Geffrey ultimately finds in the House of Rumor is "chaos."

> as though moved to repentance and struggling to amend, it shone forth in a blood-red colour. Thirdly, at the peak of perfection, it gladdened the eyes with an emerald green. This garment, however, was woven so exceedingly fine that it evaded the searching eyes and its material reached such a degree of fineness that it and air shared the same nature.[135]

Chaucer directly references this passage in *The Parliament of Fowls:* "And right as Aleyn in the Pleynt of Kinde/ Devyseth Nature of aray and face" (316-17). Like the multi-colored twigs that make up the House of Rumor, Nature's dress is described as "kaleidoscopic in its various colours." Additionally, the dress seems to move in this passage, changing color and undergoing alterations, evoking a similar (albeit less intense) sense of movement as that of the House of Rumor. The connection between these two passages underscores the relationship between poetry and the forms of Nature, as the House of Rumor, dressed in the garments of Nature, contains the "raw materials of vernacular poetry." Rather than advocating for a view wherein these raw materials are formed according to some internal structure first generated in the mind, Geffrey instead enters into the whirling structure and is enmeshed in the mass of raw materials. In the midst of this whirling structure, Geffrey describes the "tydynges" that he experiences. He

[135] Alan de Lille, *De planctu naturae* Prose I, pp. 85-6.

explains,

> And over alle the houses angles
> Is ful of rounynges and of jangles
> Of werres, of pees, of mariages,
> Of reste, of labour, of viages,
> Of abood, of deeth, of lyfe,
> Of love, of hate, acord, of stryf,
> Of loos, of lore, and of wynnynges,
> Of hele, of seknesse, of bildynges,
> Of faire wyndes, and of tempestes,
> Of qwalm of folk, and ek of bestes;
> Of dyvers transmutacions
> Of estats, and eke of regiouns;
> Of trust, of drede, of jelousye,
> Of wit, of wynnynge, of folye;
> Of plente, and of gret famyne,
> Of chepe, of derth, and of ruyne;
> Of good or mys governement,
> Of fyr, and of dyvers accident.
> (1959–76)

As with the ripples of water in the eagle's physics lesson, the "tydynges" in this passage proliferate and multiply. The position of "O" at the beginning of each line mimics the effect of the "litel roundel[s] as a sercle" (791, "little ripples shaped like a circle") in the eagle's physics lesson, with the beginning of each line initiating a new "roundel."[136] Eleanor Johnson argues

[136] Concerning these lines, Rebecca Davis argues that the series of "O"s mimic the form of the House of Rumor itself. She explains: "Visually the anaphora ''pokes holes'' in the text. Its vertical line of capital ''O''s conjures the form of Rumor's ventilated edifice upon the perforated manuscript page. Aurally the repetition of ''O'' (not only in the initial genitive ''Of,'' but in the ''O''s that proliferate along each horizontal line) echoes the assonant description of the roof's ''thousand holes, and wel moo,'' rounded apertures designed to let the

that “the very grammar of this passage reinforces its lack of logical causality and necessity,” suggestion that

> This wicker house of tidings figures architecturally what the poem has been suggesting narratively all along: there is no one single, natural, necessary, or inevitable path for knowledge to travel down; instead, a plethora of apertures, none with logical or causal relation to another, form conduits for the pushiest or most urgent bits of tidings to escape from and return to.[137]

The lack of causal relations between the multitude of tidings returns us to the beginning of the poem, where Chaucer asks “what causeth swevenes” (3, “what causes dreams”). Indeed, *The House of Fame* displays a sustained interest in the nature of causation, from dreams to ripples to tidings, and the “unpredictabilities of a universe not governed by causality in any useful or stable way.”[138] The lack of a final cause or end goal throughout the poem, as well as the fact that the poem itself is unfinished, underscores the attention to movement in the poem and concern with poetry as *process.* Rather than searching for some sense of formal stability, *The House of Fame* eschews

---

‘‘soun out goo’’. As the catalogue enumerates its contents, it simultaneously disperses them. It also draws attention to the speaking mouth as orifice of outgoing sound, framing the poet’s (or any reader’s) own body as the material passageway of ‘‘tydynges.’’”Adin Lears argues: “In oral recitation, these lines produce the same result in the mouth as it shapes itself into a circle pronouncing the repeated “Of ”s. In effect, the poem’s form at this moment turns both the page and the body into a porous and resonant echo chamber like the House of Rumor itself.” *World of Echo,* p. 159.

[137] Eleanor Johnson, “Against Order,” in *Chaucer and the Subversion of Form* (Cambridge University Press, 2018)*,* p. 68.

[138] Ibid. p. 70.

neat, anthropocentric (or internal) approaches to literary creation in order to embrace the Aristotelian world of flux and movement. Just as a carpenter engages with the materials of the environment and follows along the grain of the wood, poetic *makyng* is about entering into the chaotic whirl of poetic "matiere" and following the forms afforded by that matter. In *The House of Fame*, the world of motion, flux, and non-linear causality constitute what Rebecca Davis has called a "fugative poetics." As Davis explains, in *The House of Fame,* "fugitive poetics discovers in motion not an antithesis to form but its condition of possibility."[139] Indeed, rather than finding stability in a world of movement, it is the poem itself that enacts connectivity and provides structure. Like the House of Rumor, the passage above provides a "propre mansyon" (754, "dwelling place") in its ability to collect and contain the ever proliferating list of "newe tydyngs." As Tom Griffiths explains, "narrative is not just a means, it is a method, and a rigorous and demanding one. The conventional scientific method separates causes from one another, it isolates each one and tests them individually in turn. Narrative, by contrast, carries multiple causes along together, it enacts connectivity."[140] This type of poetic formation and enactment stands in stark

---

[139] Davis, "Fugitive Poetics," p. 132.

[140] Tom Griffiths, "The Humanities and an Environmentally Sustainable Australia," *Australian Humanities Review* 43 (2007). Interestingly, the one place in the poem where movement seems to stop is when Geffrey is standing at the center of the House of Rumor. Standing in the midst of a house whirling with the "raw material of vernacular poetry," Geffrey explains,

contrast to the view of representation espoused by Jonathan Bate and other "ecopoetry" advocates. *The House of Fame* does not represent the material world as rythmic, harmonious, or static; it does not seek to represent the environment as a calcified backdrop or stable material awaiting human-guided creativity (as with Vinsauf). Instead, the poem captures and enacts an Aristotelian world of vibrant material movement, charged with poetic materials ("tydyngs") that are all "enclyning," mingling, and moving in their own ways. For Chaucer, the task of the poet is to enter into the whirling mass of materials and follow along with their movements. Fittingly, the only moment in the poem that Geffrey experiences any form of stability occurs as he stands in the middle of the whirl of raw materials. After entering the House of Rumour, Geffrey explains:

> And at a wyndowe yn me brought,
> That in this hous was, as me thoghte—
> And therwithalle, me thought hit stent,
> And nothing hyt about wente —
> And me sette in the flor adoun.
> (2029-33)

> And I was brought in through a window,

> And at a wyndowe yn me brought,
> That in this hous was, as me thought —
> And therwithalle, me thought hit stent,
> And nothing hyt about wente —
> And me sette in the flor adoun.
> (2029-33)

That was in this house, as I thought—
And at that point, it seemed to stand still,
And nothing moved about it —
And I sat down on the floor.

Multiplication and the Problem of Representation

Upon arriving to Fame's house, the narrator sees "all maner of mynstralles" "stonden" all around the "castle," "[. . .] tellen tales/ Both of wepinge and of game, /Of al that longeth unto Fame" (1195-1200). As he proceeds closer, the first sound he hears before entering Fame's house is Orpheus and a host of harpists playing their instruments "ful craftely":

> Ther herde I pleyen on an harpe,
> That sowned bothe wel and sharpe,
> Orpheus ful craftely,
> And on his syde, faste by,
> Sat the harper Orion,
> Chiron, and other harper many oon,
> And the Bret Glascurion;
> And smale harpers with her glees
> Sate under hem in dyvers sees,
> And gunne on hem upward to gape,
> And countrefete hem as an ape,
> Or as craft countrefeteth kynde.
> (1201-1212)

Chaucer comments on the "smale harpers" (1208) who sit under Orpheus and the other masters and gaze fixedly with open mouths at their skill. These lesser harpists spend their time attempting to mimic the master harpists, or "countrefete hem as an ape" (1211). Chaucer goes on to liken this mimicry to the way that "craft countrefeteth kynde" (1212), or "(artistic) craft imitates nature." Alongside movement and causation, the medieval idea that art imitates nature, *ars imitatur naturam,* also has its roots in Aristotle's *Physics*, where the task of art is to follow nature, picking up where nature has left off. As Hans Blumenberg explains,

> This interchangeability of art for nature extends so far that Aristotle can say that the builder of a house only does exactly what nature would do, if it were able, so to speak, to "grow" houses. Nature and "art" are structurally identical: The immanent characteristics of one sphere can be transposed into the other.[141]

This transposition, or mimicry, calls to mind the eagle's physics lesson in Book II, where sound ripples outward, amplifying and resulting in physical "multiplicacioun" (784). As the "smale harpers" in the passage above "countrefete" the craft of Orpheus and the other harpists, they partake in the same process of "multiplicacioun" (820) central to Aristotelian physics, as

---

[141] Hans Blumenberg, "Imitation of Nature: Toward a Prehistory of the Idea of the Creative Being," trans. by Anna Wertz, *Qui Parle*, Spring/Summer 2000, Vol. 12, No. 1, pp. 17-54.

described by the eagle. The persistent duplication of artistic forms is similar to the proliferation of sound in the eagle's physics lesson.[142]

What is nature's authority over art in *The House of Fame?* What do environmental forms afford poetry? In the passage above, the line between art and nature is blurred: instead of the goddess Nature, Orpheus is the figure at which the "smale harpers" gape. Susanne Akbari goes so far as to argue that "the distinction between nature and art [. . .] is completely dissolved in *The House of Fame*." While I do not understand the poem to be advocating for a complete transparency between the human and material world, or that the lines between nature and art are completely dissolved, it is clear that Chaucer is playing on the porous and intertwined categories of artistic/natural production and formation. I think a more apt formulation would be to say that Chaucer is drawing attention to ways that nature and art correspond, or follow along the same lines in the shaping of *matere*, so that at times it is unclear whether we are gaping at Orpheus or goddess Nature. In this correspondence between nature and poetry, aesthetic categories such as movement, balance, harmony, and rhythm are formed from art's tendency to follow the forms present in the natural world, from the circulation of the heavenly spheres to the ripples that form

[142] Stephen Kruger argues for the relationship between sound and the generation of new texts in *The House of Fame*, saying that "In Chaucer's fiction about sound, at each reading every written work is made new, mixed up with every other kind of sound, and resubmitted to the memorializing, distorting, and obliterating actions of Fame." Kruger, p. 133.

when a pebble is tossed into a still pond. Imitation itself, the following or tracing along the artistic forms afforded by the natural processes of nature, is also part of the aesthetics of movement.

Interestingly, Chaucer's porous formation between art and nature veers from that of *The Romance of the Rose.* The poem explains,

> Art makes her models, but she does not make her forms as true. However, with very attentive care, she kneels before Nature and like a truant beggar, poor in knowledge and force, she begs and requests and asks of her. She struggles to follow her so that Nature may wish to teach her how with her ability she may properly subsume all creatures in her figures. She also watches how Nature works, for she would like very much to perform such a work, and she imitates her like a monkey.[143]

Just as the "smale harpers" sit beneath Orpheus and the other harpists to "countrefete hem as an ape," Art "kneels before Nature" in *The Romance of the Rose,* imitating "her like a monkey." The poem goes on to explain that "Art, no matter how hard she tries, with great study and great effort, [. . .] for all her representations and skillful touches, will never make them go by themselves, love, move, feel, and talk." The poem makes clear that Art cannot "countrefete" Nature. While Chaucer most likely had this passage in mind when he wrote Orpheus and the harpists into *The House of Fame*, his view on the capacity for Art to counterfeit Nature is more complicated than that of *The Romance of the Rose.* In Book II, as the eagle is carrying Geffrey further and further into the

---

[143] Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *Romance of the Rose,* 16020-16033.

atmosphere, the “hevenes region” (988), the eagle criticizes Geffrey’s lack of experience of the world outside of his “house” (655), where, “In stede of reste and newe thynges” (654) he sits “domb as any stoon,/ [. . .] at another book.” The eagle explains,

> Domb as any stoon,
> Thou sittest at another book
> Tyl fully daswed ys thy look;
> And lyvest thus as an heremyte,
> Although thyn abstynence ys lyte. (655-60)
>
> [Dumb as any stone,
> You sit at another book
> Until full dazed is your look;
> And thus live as a hermite,
> Although your abstinence is little.]

The eagle critiques Geffrey’s stationary lifestyle and lack of experience outside of his “studye” (633). As they ascend further, the eagle encourages Geffrey to cast up his eye to see “yonder, loo, the Galaxie,/ Which men clepeth [“call”] the Milky Wey” (935-37). He explains that he “beheld”

> Clouds, mistes, and tempestes,
> Snowes, hailes, raines, windes,
> And th’engendring in hir kindes,
> And al the wey through which I cam.
> (966-68)
>
> [Clouds, mists, and storms,
> Snows, hail, rain, wind,
> And the formation of their kinds,

And all the way through which I came.]

Geffrey goes on to explain that upon seeing the stars and other natural phenomena, he thought on "Marcian,/ and eek on Anteclaudian" (Martianus Capella and Alain de Lille) and how their poetic "descripcioun/ Of al the hevenes regioun" was "sooth," "true" (985-90).[144] In other words, Chaucer's experience of the natural world simply confirmed what he had read in the poetry of Martianus Capella and Alain de Lille. He explains that in this moment he had been sent "clere entendement" (983), meaning both "understanding (as distinguished from fantasy or imagination)" as well as "interpretation of a word or a discourse."[145] In this passage, we begin to see the same blurring between art and nature that was present in the "smale harpers" scene, as the line between reading nature and reading poetry becomes increasingly thin. At this point in the poem Geffrey is interrupted by the "crye" of the eagle (991). The eagle interrupts, "'Lat be,' quod he, 'thy fantasye,'" suggesting that the narrator is still in some deluded state, still grounded in the realm of books and imagination ("fantasye") rather than attuned to reading, and observing, the physical world. The eagle goes on to explain,

For whan thou redest poetrye,

---

[144] The reference here specifically refers to Martianus Capella's *Marriage of Mercury and Philology* and Alain de Lille's *Anticlaudianus.*

[145] *MED,* "entendement."

How goddes gonne stellifye
Briddes, fissh, beste, or him or here,
As the Raven or either Bere,
Or Ariones harp fyne,
Castor, Pollux, or Delphyne,
Or Athalantes doughtres sevene,
For though thou have hem ofte on honde,
Yet nostow nat wher that they stonde. (1001-10)

The eagle explains that though the narrator has the names of stars "on honde," he still does not know where they "stonde." In other words, similar to the view expressed in *The Romance of the Rose*, "poetry" is, at best, a feeble imitation of nature. The eagle's charge that poetry cannot convey the place where "that they stonde" also serves as a critique of art's ability to put things into forms. For the eagle, poetic forms will always be poor representations, dim and misplaced, when trying to counterfeit the forms afforded by nature. This critique likely stems from the eagle's formulation of the relationship between movement and poetry expressed earlier in the poem. Drawing on Prinscian's *Institutiones grammaticae,* the eagle explains that "Soun," and poetry by extension, "is nought but air y-broken" and therefore in its "substaunce is but air" (765-68). The close relationship between poetry and air suggests that, like both air and sound, poetry is continually in motion, fluctuating, and

ungrounded, making its ability to put matter into form (convey where things "stonde") questionable. While the eagle's view on the relationship between art and nature is clear, the narrator seems to disagree. In reply, Geffrey explains,

> "No fors," quod I, "it is no nede;
> I leve as wel, so God me spede,
> Hem that wryte of this matere,
> As though I knew her places here;
> And eek they shynen here so bryghte,
> It shulde shenden al my sight
> To look on hem." (1011-17)

> "So what," I said, "there is no need;
> I believe as well, so God help me,
> Those that write of this matter,
> As though I knew their places here;
> And also they shine here so bright,
> It would ruin all my sight
> To look at them."

Geffrey says "No fors" in reply to the eagle's argument that, because he has only experienced the stars through the mediation of poetry, Geffrey "nostow nat wher that they stonde" (1010). Chaucer plays with the relationship between poetic *matere* and physical matter in this line. In believing ("leve") those "that wryte of this matere," the Dreamer is saying that he trusts the ability of poetry to shape the natural world in a way that is faithful to the forms that nature affords, equating the physical matter of the stars with the poetic *matere* of

Martianus and Alan de Lille. Kathryn Lynch glosses "as though I knew" (1014) as "had direct knowledge of," further emphasizing the porousness of the Dreamer's experience of poetry and nature.[146] For the Dreamer, reading poetry is equated with having direct knowledge of the stars.

This passage suggests that poetry has the ability to represent the natural world in such a way that one's phenomenological experience while reading poetry is similar to the phenomenological experience that one has while "actually" being present. Mary Carruthers argues for this exact concept, contending that "[a]ll medieval art moves, not only emotionally but directionally. It conveys one to some (other) place or some other feeling or sensation."[147] (169) This sense of movement is captured in this scene from *The House of Fame*, but also in the early fourteenth-century *Bestiaire d'amours* of Richard de Fournival. The imagination, he declares, "makes what is past seem as if it were present. And to this same end, one can come either by painting or by speech. For when one sees a story painted, whether a story of Troy or of some other thing, one sees the deeds of the brave men who were there in past times as if they were present. And so it is with speech," Richard goes on to say, "For when one hears a tale read, one perceives the wondrous deeds as if one were to see them taking place." In this way, he explains, through literature "one

---

[146] Kathryn Lynch, *Chaucer Dream Visions*.
[147] Carruthers, *Experience of Beauty,* p. 169.

is converting the past into the present."[148] Just like the physical "multiplicacioun" (784) of form in the ripples of water that proliferate outward when a stone is dropped in a pool of water, so too the form of nature itself proliferates outward in the production of poetry.

Interestingly, Geffrey goes on to say that the stars in the sky are too bright to look at anyway, saying that it would "shenden" his "sight" to "look on hem" (1016-17). This curious statement further complicates the ability for poetry to represent the material world. Is Geffrey suggesting some type of superiority that poetry has over direct experience of the natural world? When in poetic form, Geffrey is able to gaze at the stars in the sky without blinding his eyes. At the same time, however, this passage also suggests that something is lost in the poetic representation of environmental forms. The blinding immediacy of the physical world is defracted by the lines of poetry. I do not mean to suggest that Chaucer holds any neat view about the ability of poetic form to represent environmental form. Instead, I want to draw attention to the ways in which Chaucer complicates the representational view, refusing to clearly ally himself with the type of "ecopoetry" view wherein poetry simply

---

[148] *Le Bestiaires d'amours*, from V.A. Kolve, *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative: the first five Canterbury Tales* (Stanford, 1984), p. 25. Richard de Fournival. *Li Bestiaires d'amours di Maistre Richart de Fornival e Li Response du Bestiaire*. Ed. Cesare Segre.(Milan: Riccardo Ricciardi), 1957.

mimics environmental forms, while also refusing a view of poetry that has no room for representational power.

Chaucer's focus on movement throughout *The House of Fame* is influenced by larger aesthetic considerations of movement, drawn from Aristotle to Boethius. The emphasis on movement, a world in flux, perpetual multipication, and the proliferation of forms, gives way to an understanding of poetry that is marked by movement and relationality. In *The House of Fame,* the task of the poet is to enter into the whirl of the material world and become caught up in the proliferation of "tydynges," the "raw material" of poetry. In this way, the poet discovers new poetic forms by entering into the flow of the material world.

In the next chapter, I turn to the poetry of Gower and Lydgate in order to explore the formal relationship between poetry and the constantly shifting atmospheric "impressions" of the air. I demonstrate the ways in which poetic form once again fails to transparently represent environmental forms, showing how even the most mundane atmospheric phenomena work to upset the formal logic of Gower's poetry. I argue that both poets see poetic form as a tool for negotiation between the roiling atmospheric forms that unsettle and destable human experience. While this project of formal negotiation challenges the idea of correspondence, I conclude that negotiation is ultimately characterized by the

same attentiveness and reciprocity essential to my formulation of correspondence in Chapter One.

Chapter Three

Composing the Air: Atmosphere and Climate in Gower and Lydgate

This chapter explores the ways that John Gower (c. 1330 – October 1408) and John Lydgate (c. 1370 – c. 1451) conceptualize the roiling atmosphere and attempt to poetically shape it into a sustainable form. The process of conceptualizing and *climatizing* the atmosphere shares some similarity to Doreen Massey's insistence that "we recognize space as always under construction [. . .] always in the process of being made."[149] This chapter explores the ways that atmospheric forms, ever shifting, fluctuating, and "always in the process of being made," present a formal problem to medieval poets.

How can poetry capture such ephemeral and fleeting forms? Or, as Lydgate asks, in light of the ever-changing nature of the atmosphere: "How shuld man than be stable in lyvyng?"[150] In his *De Proprietatibus Rerum,* John Trevisa comments on the multitude of atmospheric figurations, saying:

> Eyre bryngiþ forth of hitsilf dyers kyndes of þinges. [. . .] eyre strongly imeued makeþ wyndis, lyȝtnynge, and þondringe; idrawe togidre it

---

[149] Doreen Massey, *For Space* (SAGE, 2005), p. 9.
[150] Lydgate, *Pageant of Knowledge,* in Henry Noble MacCracken,, ed and Sherwood, Merriam, ed., *Minor Poems of John Lydgate* (Early English Text Society Extra Series 107 and Original Series 192, 1911-1934).

> makeþ clowdis þicke and reyny; and whenne it is congelid to makeþ snowe and hayle [. . .].[151]
>
> [Air brings forth of itself many diverse kinds of things [. . .] air strongly moved makes winds, lightning, and thundering; drawn together it makes clouds thick and rainy; and when it is congealed makes snow and hail]

The meteorological phenomena of the air are "moved," "drawn together," and "congealed." Distinct from climate, these atmospheric changes are what we generally refer to as weather. Weather captures the "atmospheric conditions in which sentient creatures live, sense, imagine and build."[152] Human life is caught up in the fluctuations of the weather.

While attention to ground and landscape have traditionally occupied a privileged position in ecocritical studies, scholars in the last few decades (particular in light of climate change and the Anthropocene) have drawn attention to weather as an essential feature of the material world and have worked to "place" weather in ecocritical discourses.[153] As Tonino Griffero asks, "Why on earth, in fact, should solid and contoured bodies be more real than

---

[151] Trevisa, p. 566. (12-15).

[152] Mike Hulme, *Weathered: Cultures of Climate* (SAGE, 2016), p. 3.

[153] Louise Westling, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Environment*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014). Johannes Ungelenk, *Literature and Weather: Shakespeare - Goethe - Zola* (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2018); .J. Hamilton, "Weathers of Body and World: Reading Difference in Literary Atmospheres before Climate Change." In A. Johns-Putra & K. Sultzbach (Eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Climate* (Cambridge Companions to Literature, pp. 55-68) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2022); R. R. Boyson, "Air and atmosphere studies: Enlightenment, phenomenology and ecocriticism." *Literature Compass*, 19 (1–2) (2022).

vague entities, which we experience without referring them to solidity, such as fluids, gas processes or even quasi-things like atmospheres?"[154] As Tim Ingold explains:

> The equation of materiality with the solid substance of the earth creates the impression that life goes on upon the outer surface of a world that has already congealed into its final form, rather than in the midst of a world of perpetual flux. Between mind and nature, persons and things, and agency and materiality, there is no conceptual space for those very real phenomena and transformations of the medium that generally goes by the name of weather.[155]

As we will see, poetry affords a space for Gower and Lydgate to negotiate the interactions between the world of human experience and the world of weather. How might we term this project of formal negotiation?

Climate is normally conceived of as "a statistical description in terms of the mean and variability of relevant quantities of certain variables (such as temperature, precipitation or wind) over a period of time ranging from months to thousands or millions of years."[156] This scientific definition captures the

---

[154] Tonino Griffero, *Atmospheres: Aesthetics of Emotional Spaces*, p. 10. For recent theoretical work on atmospheres, see: Gernot Böhme, *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres* (London: Routledge, 2017); Sumartojo Shanti, *Atmospheres and the Experiential World: Theory and Methods* (London: Routledge, 2019).
[155] Tim Ingold, "Rethinking the Animate, Re-animating Thought," p. 16 Along the same lines, Dora Zhang explains that "[atmospheres] alter the kinds of things that can be said in a space, the kinds of actions that are thinkable, and the modes of sociality that are possible, and I want to suggest that we have still yet to fully recognize and attend to their importance as social and political phenomena of everyday life." Dora Zhang, "Notes on Atmosphere," *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences*, Volume 27, Number 1, June 2018: 121-155. p. 121.
[156] World Meteorological Organization (WMO)(n.d.) "Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)," http://www.wmo.int/pages/prog/wcp/ccl/faqs.php. See also: David Archer and Stefan

evolving interactions between "the atmosphere, hydrosphere, the cryosphere, the lithosphere and the biosphere," but does not do "justice to the deep material and symbolic interactions which occur between weather and cultures in places."[157] Literature is one avenue through which to negotiate and shape the phenomenal interactions between the ever-changing weather and localized human cultures. Recent scholarship has explored the role of literature in describing and stabilizing relationships and patterns between the atmosphere and humans. As Adeline Johns-Putra explains:

> The discourse of climate is not simply the kind of studiously 'objective' observation and measurement one tends to associate with climatological data; it encompasses the history, possibly as old as human civilisation, of attempts to apprehend and describe patterns in the weather. These attempts include, then, both ostensibly neutral observation and the embellished, affectively charged descriptions one might call literature –along with all the forms of description in between. Climate, as weather documented, necessarily possesses an intimate relationship with language, and through language, to literature.[158]

Rahmstorf, *The Climate Crisis: An Introductory Guide to Climate Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); H. H. Lamb, *Climate, History and the Modern World*, (London: Routledge, 1997).

[157] Mike Hulme, *Weathered: Cultures of Climate*, p. 2. See also: James Graham, ed. *Climates: Architecture and the Planetary Imaginary* (New York: Lars Müller Publishers, 2016); Smith, Tyszczuk, Butler, *Culture and Climate Change: Narratives* (2014); Bristow and Ford, A *Cultural History of Climate Change* (2016).

[158] Johns-Putra, Adeline. "Introduction," in *Climate and Literature*, edited by Adeline Johns-Putra, 1–12. Cambridge Critical Concepts. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 3-4. See also Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry*, 35 (Winter 2008).

Jesse Oak Taylor's recent work on climate in the nineteenth-century novel explores how, in this period, the "work of art [. . .] becomes not merely a representation of climate but an active constituent of it."[159] Indeed, "[o]nce climate is understood to be at least in part a consequence of human handiwork, it becomes a construction, open to interpretation with the rubric of human endeavor."[160] But climate does not appear wholesale from the human mind, climate takes form as a *response* to atmospheric phenomena. As Dora Zhang explains, "one cannot help but be affected by [the atmosphere] regardless of who one is, and that one's being affected—and subsequent ways of being in the world—affects the atmosphere in turn."[161] To be sure, climate is the "consequence of human handiwork," but it exists as a mode of negotiation and reciprocity between the human and the nonhuman. Even the simple portioning off of the air into different regions (as Gower and many other medieval writers do) is a way of forming and controlling the atmosphere.[162] Climate exists as a narrative form that must be constantly composed and recomposed to make sense of the unpredictable patterns of weather. It is formed as a response to the

---

[159] Jesse Oak Taylor, *The Sky of Our Manufacture* (2016), p. 1.
[160] Ibid.
[161] Dora Zhang, "Notes on Atmosphere," *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences*, Volume 27, Number 1, June 2018: 121-155. p. 121.
[162] Bronislaw Szerszynski, "Reading and Writing the Weather." *Theory, Culture & Society* 27, no. 2–3 (March 2010): 9–30. Also Nerlich, Brigitte and Rusi Jaspal "Metaphors we die by? Geoengineering, metaphors and the argument from catastrophe," Metaphor and symbol (2012): 131-147.

multitude of atmospheric forms that present themselves and bear upon human experience. At the same time, as human induced fluctuations of the weather appear more steadily in the emergence of the Anthropocene, we must recognize the ways that this loop of reciprocity has been altered. Taylor, along with others, have commented on the receding forms of nature, proposing an idea of "Abnatural ecology," which "attempts to capture the experience of dwelling in a manufactured environment, wherein everything from the bloodstream to the weather bears the traces of human action."[163] The changing reality of what we call "nature" in the Anthropocene makes it all the more important to interrogate the ways that humans have historically negotiated and formed their environments.

This chapter takes its structure from Gower's three "periferies" (or regions) of the atmosphere. Each section explores one of these atmospheric regions to interrogate the ways that forms of weather are stabilized and negotiated by poetic forms. Commenting on the various "impressions" (atmospheric forms) of each region and examining the ways that these environmental forms are situated, I demonstrate that even the most mundane atmospheric forms sometimes elude formal containment. Atmosphere's propensity to challenge formal containment provides a helpful example wherein poetic-environmental relationships exist in tension rather than correspond (as I

[163] Jesse Oak Taylor, *The Sky of Our Manufacture,* p. 5.

argue in Chapter One). That said, this tension still operates in a reciprocal way, as poetic and environmental forms are composed at the intersection between human experience and atmospheric change. I show that, in the midst of the extreme atmospheric changes of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (Chapter One), Gower and Lydgate employ poetic form as a means of coping with such fluxuations.

The First *Perifierie*

Although the first recorded use of the term *atmosphere* does not occur in English until the seventeenth century, in the form of "Atmo-sphæra" to refer to an "orbe of grosse vaporous aire,"[164] the concept itself was present throughout the late medieval period. John Trevisa explains that "þe eyr strecchiþ hym kyndely al aboute fro þe ouer partye of þe erþ and of watir anon to þe spere of fire."[165] The gaseous sphere of air that encircles the earth was commented on by Isidore of Seville and Bede in the early medieval period, both influential sources for Trevisa. In his *Confessio Amantis,* Gower uses the term "periferies" to denote the "thre" atmospheres that encircle the earth. Gower explains,

> This air in periferies thre
> Divided is of such degré,
> Benethe is on and on amidde,
> To whiche above is set the thridde,

[164] "atmosphere, n.". *OED* Online. March 2021. Oxford University Press.
[165] John Trevisa, *On the Properties of Things*, 133.

And upon the divisions
There ben diverse impressions
Of moist and ek of drye also,
Whiche of the sonne bothe tuo
Ben drawe and haled upon hy,
And maken cloudes in the sky,
As schewed is at mannes sihte;
(*CA,* 7.265-75)

While “periferies” did not take hold in the English language—Gower’s use of the word being both the first and last occurrences in English—nonetheless, Gower’s use of “periferie” to describe the concept of atmosphere in English demonstrates an interest in developing the concept within a vernacular poetic context. As a wisdom text, meant for the instruction of a king, Gower positions himself in the role of an encyclopedist and natural philosopher.[166] His predisposition towards coining terms associated with natural science is evident in his usage of *ylem,* as we saw in Chapter Two, and is present again with *periferies* in the passage above. Gower proceeds to explain the features of the three divisions of the atmosphere. He begins:

The ferste periferie of alle
Engendreth myst and overmore
The dewes and the frostes hore,
After thilke intersticion

[166] For more on the structure of Book VII, see George R. Coffman, "John Gower in His Most Significant Role," in *Elizabethan Studies in Honor of George F. Reynolds* (University Press of Colorado: 1945), pp. 52–61; Judith Ferster, *Fictions of Advice: The Literature and Politics of Counsel in Late Medieval England.* (Philadelphia: 1996); Derek Pearsall, *Gower and Lydgate* (Harlow: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1969); Russell Peck, *Kingship and Common Profit in Gower’s Confessio Amantis* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 1978).

In whiche thei take impression.
(*CA,* 7.280-84)

The first "periferie" of the sky generates such atmospheric phenomena as mist, dew, and frost. These phenomena "take impression" (284) within the periferie of the air. Alongside *atmosphere* as a vaporous sphere, we also see the development of the concept of atmosphere as it is related to mood and psychological states. Late medieval poets used "impression" to mean both "something formed or produced by forces in the air" as well as "an image, a sensation, or an emotion produced in the mind, heart, soul, or senses."[167] The overlapping atmospheric and psychological connotations of "impression" underline the relationship between weather and mood that we saw with Henryson's notion of correspondence in Chapter One. Notably, Gower is also the first writer to use both "intersticion" and "impression," respectively, in English to refer to atmospheric phenomena.[168] Medieval poets and encyclopedists were deeply interested in the machinations and influences of atmospheric "impressions" formed in the lowest "periferie" of the air. The anonymous author of the fifteenth-century treatise entitled *For knowlege of the inpressions concerning þe wedur*, comments on the nature of dew and its adverse effects, saying:

[167] impressiŏun n., *Middle English Dictionary Online* (2022).
[168] Ibid.; intersticiọ̄n n., *Middle English Dictionary Online* (2022).

[. . .] wherfor the mater of dewe ys a watyry vapor assendyng þe fyrst regyon of the eyer, or evyr it may come to þe seconde region taken with colde, the whyche colde takeþe awey the hete of the seyde vapor and so causethe it to fall doun. And so þer apperithe upponn the herbis a stilled water, whyche water, when it ys dry, apperythe lyyng uppon herbis like flour; of þe whyche schepe yf they ete, þey dey sone after of þe rott, for it is ovyr-swete and causethe them to have þe flyx. And thys is kalled myldewe. (lines 37-46)

[wherefore the matter of dew is a watery vapor ascending the first region of the air, or it may come to the second region taken with cold, wherein cold takes away the heat of the said vapor and so causes it to fall down. And so there appears upon the plants a stilled water, which water, when it is dry, appears lying upon plants such as flowers; which sheep, if they eat it, they die soon after the *rott*, for it is over-sweet and causes them to have the *flyx*. And this is called *myldewe.*][169]

The treatise agrees with Gower that "dewe" belongs in the "fyrst regyon" of the air, but it also suggests that the formation of dew primarily occurs in the "seconde region" of the air. While both texts follow the traditional division of the air into three distinct regions, the fact that dew does not sit comfortably within either region demonstrates the porous nature of such attempts to form the atmosphere into discrete categories. In this way, the atmosphere resists Gower's poetic form. In another way, Chaucer's anxiety, throughout the *House of Fame,* over how to poetically form a material world that is constantly in flux is affirmed in this passage. Even in the hands of a skilled poet such as Gower, the

[169] Edition of the text is from Auvo Kurvinen, "Inpressions Concerning Þe Wedurying," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 58, no. 2 (1957): 49–69. Translation is my own.

atmospheric *matere* of this passage does not sit neatly into the form of his verse. The poem itself hints at this fact as the divisions of the "periferies" overlap within Gower's octosyllabic couplets. For example, the poem explains,

> After the times of the yer
> Among ous upon erthe her
> In sondri wise thinges falle.
> The ferste periferie of alle
> Engendreth myst and overmore
> The dewes and the frostes hore,
> (7.279-282)

The rhyming couplet is formed in this passage across the conceptual divisions of the atmosphere into periferies, as the pairing of "falle/alle" blends the first section (describing the properties of air) with the second section (describing the "ferste periferie"). In other words, the form of the poem fails to hold the subject matter in discrete sections.[170]

The treatise explains that "dewe" is a "stilled water" that "apperithe upponn the herbis" and is volatile to "schepe" (sheep) due to its "ovyr-swete" nature. This sweetness is captured in the word "myldewe," the first part of the

---

[170] While this section explores the inability of Gower's form to contain the atmospheric subject *matere,* I am not making any larger claims about the formal unity or disunity of the poem as a whole, a subject long debated in scholarship on the *Confessio Amantis.* See Hugh White, "Division and Failure in Gower's *Confessio Amantis,*" *Neophilologus*, Vol. 72, Iss. 4, (Oct 1, 1988); Lewis Beer, "The Tactful Genius: Abiding the End in the *Confessio Amantis,*" *Studies in Philology*, Vol. 112, No. 2 (Spring, 2015), pp. 234-263; Kathryn L. Lynch, *The High Medieval Dream Vision: Poetry, Philosophy, and Literary Form* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988); R. F. Yeager, John Gower's Poetic: The Search for a New Arion (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1990). J. Allen Mitchell, *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative in Chaucer and Gower* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004).

word deriving from the Latin *mell-,* meaning “honey.”[171] Overconsumption of dew results in “flyx,” a symptom of “rott,” a sickness which John Trevisa explains is caused from a humoral imbalance as a result of “to moche moisture [. . .] comeþ to þe stomak [. . .] and brediþ diariam, þat is, þe flux of þe wombe” (“too much moisture [. . .] entering the stomach [. . .] and breading diarrhea, that is, the flux of the womb”). [172] As this passage demonstrates, in the medieval imagination even the most seemingly mundane impressions of the atmosphere, such a dew, can have drastic environmental effects for animals and humans alike.

Medieval writers often use dew as a feature of an idyllic setting, as with Lydgate’s opening to *The Testament*: “Aurora, hir licour distyllyng, Sent on herbes the perely dropis shene Of siluer dewes,” suggesting a sense of untouched newness and a gift from the heavens.[173] Trevisa explains that rainbows take shape when beams of light shine through “a litil dewinge,” and pearls (“margarite”) form when “oystres” are “y gendred of dewe.”[174] Dew also

---

[171] "mildew, n.". *OED* Online. June 2022. Oxford University Press. Also the origin of the word “honeydew.”

[172] John Trevisa, *On the Properties of Things*, *John Trevisa's Translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus De Proprietatibus Rerum, a Critical Text*, eds. M. C. Seymour, et al., vols. 1 and 2 (1975); vol. 3 (1988). 47a/b.

[173] *The Minor Poems of John Lydgate*, ed. H. N. MacCracken, vol. 1, Early English Text Society, Extra Series 107 (1911; reprint 1961). Line 288.

[174] Also see: “Þerof comeþ a litil dewinge in þe whiche schyneþ þe beme þat is þere afore and so þe raynebowe is I schape.” Trevisa, 137a/a; 202a/a : In plato it is y seide þat margarites ben y gendred of dewe. þe more dewynge is y founde, þe more and þe gretter þe margarite is y gendred of þe dewe; In springinge tyme oystres openeþ hemsilf aȝaynes dewe & fongiþ

features prominently in late medieval religious imagery. Underlining the connection between weather and humoral theory, dew is often used to refer to blood. Lydgate writes of an open wound with "blood dystellyng doun As deuhy dropis," and the *The Pilgrimage of the Lyf of the Manhode* invites readers to imagine the "blood with which thilke cros was bi dewed and spreynt."[175] The close humoral association of dew and blood is perhaps most famously employed by Julian of Norwich in her *Shewings* where she describes her vision of Christ's "plentious bledeing" (242), which she likens "to the dropys of water that fallen of the evys after a greate showre of reyne that fall so thick that no man may numbre them with bodily witte."[176] The relationship between dew and religious imagery is further enhanced by Richard Rolle, who explains that "ters & sighynge" ("tears and sighing") are a type of "heuenly dewynge" coming "fro a-bofe to soft þat saule þat langes in lufe."[177] Rather than being formed in the first or second "periferies" of the air, this spiritual "dewyng of heuenly swetnes" is seemingly formed in the dwelling place of God, which is beyond

---

dew..þat dew so I-holde and I-kept fediþ þe fissche..and by his incorporacioun wiþ þe inner partyes of þe fissche brediþ..a stone þat hatte margarite." 137 b/a.

[175] *St. Giles,* in *The Minor Poems of John Lydgate*, ed. H. N. MacCracken, vol. 1, Early English Text Society, Extra Series 107 (1911; reprint 1961), 159; *The Pilgrimage of the Lyf of the Manhode*, ed. W. A. Wright, Roxburghe Club Publications 91 (1869), line 42.

[176] Julian of Norwich, *The Shewings of Julian of Norwich* ed. Georgia Ronan Crampton (Medieval Institute Publications, 1994), p. 47.

[177] Richard Rolle, *Richard Rolle and the Holy Boke Gratia Dei,* ed. M. L. Arntz (1981), 76.

the highest atmosphere, further troubling the place of dew within the three regions of the air.

Though dew presents an example where the conceptual regions of the air are unable to hold its numerous fluctuations, Gower's tripartite division of the air is demonstrative of the wide range of ways in which poetry is used to shape conceptions of the natural world. Not only does the environment shape the forms of late medieval poetry, from correspondence to movement, but the entwining of poetry and the environment means that poetry can also shape the natural world. In other words, regardless of whether the three discrete "periferies" of the air exist in any objectively measured, "scientific" sense, the poetic division of the air in Gower's *Confessio* bears on contemporary phenomenological experiences of the atmosphere.[178] The contours of the environment take shape under the weight of Gower's pen. Just as paths form out of the repeated traversal of humans through a given environment, thereby becoming part of that environment, so too the sky becomes divided within a poetic tradition that repeatedly draws lines in that sky. This poetic shaping of *matere* becomes part of the late medieval phenomenal experience of the world.

In this way, Gower's portioning of the sky contributes to the late medieval conception of what we now call "climate." As the phenomenologist

---

[178] Russell A. Peck has also argued for a phenomenologically concerned practice of poetics in Gower. See Russell A. Peck, "The Phenomenology of Make Believe in Gower's *Confessio Amantis,*" *Studies in Philology* 91 (1994), pp. 215-38.

Julien Knebusch explains, climate is a "multidimensional phenomenon in which are combined the contributions of nature, culture, history and geography, but also the imaginary and the symbolic."[179] Not only do measurable factors such as temperature, air pressure, wind, and humidity contribute to a historical understanding of climate, but our phenomenological perceptions of meteorological fluxuations also contribute to an understanding of climate. Gower's perception of climate in the *Confessio Amantis* operates as "the perception of an arrangement, a configuration of the real by the subject; this perception is a certain presentation (and presentification) of an ensemble of natural atmospheric facts embraced and expressed by a sensitive being."[180] While atmospheric phenomena like "dewe" may continually dissipate beyond the boundaries of Gower's "periferies," his portioning of the sky functions as a subjective "configuration of the real." In other words, Gower's poetic "periferies" can be understood as an articulation of climate. Furthermore, styled in the form of the pseudo-Aristotelian *Secretum Secretorum*, which was widely read in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, book VII of Gower's *Confessio* is structured as a wisdom text for the instruction of a king. As such, Gower's articulation of climate is a social one, demonstrating that our formal

---

[179] Julien Knebusch, "The Perception of Climate Change," *Leonardo,* Volume 40, Number 2 (MIT Press: April 2007), p. 113.

[180] Julien Knebusch, "Art and climate (change) perception: Outline of a phenomenology of climate," in Sacha Kagan and Volker Kirchberg (ed.), *Sustainability: a new frontier for the arts and cultures,* (Frankfurt: 2008), p. 5.

configurations of the environment diffuse into the realms of the social and political.

The Second *Perifierie*

The *Confessio* goes on to explain the features of the second "periferie" of air, where meteorological phenomena such as rain, snow, and hail "take impression."

> Fro the seconde, as bokes sein,
> The moiste dropes of the reyn
> Descenden into middilerthe,
> And tempreth it to sed and erthe,
> And doth to springe grass and flour.
> And ofte also the grete schour
> Out of such place it mai be take,
> That it the forme schal forsake
> Of reyn, and into snow be torned;
> And ek it mai be so sojorned
> In sondri places up alofte,
> That into hail it torneth ofte.

Characterized by the persistent changing of "forme," this region of the atmosphere is the place where meteorological phenomena such as rain, snow, and hail "take impression" and are persistently "torned" from one atmospheric impression to another. The language of this passage hints at some recognition of the formal problems presented by the turbulent weather, even as they escape the bounds of the poem's atmospheric divisions. I want to further explore the

problem of atmospheric instability and poetic formation by turning to the poetry of John Lydgate.

In the tradition of Bernard Silvestris's *Cosmographia*, Lydgate's *Pageant of Knowledge* draws a connection between the persistent macrocosmic changes of the natural environment and the microcosmic mutability of humanity.[181] In the poem, Lydgate appeals to the changeability of the second region of the atmosphere to consider, in light of this constant mutilibility, "How shuld man than be stable in lyvyng?" ("How, then, can humanity be stable in living?"). This refrain occurs at the end of each stanza, in various forms, throughout the entirety of the poem, as Lydgate compares the instability of humanity to the "ayre" that is "so remevable" (160). For example, Lydgate explains,

> The monthes vary, everyche hath his sygne
> And harde hit ys all wedyrs for to know,
> The tyme somewhyle ys gracious and benygne,
> And uppon hilles and valeys that ben low
> The foure wyndes contrariosly do blow
> In every storme man ys here abydyng,
> Som to release, and som to overthrow,
> How shuld man than be stedfast of lyvyng?
> (248-255)

We are reminded that Lydgate lived during a period "characterized by irregular cycles of climatic extremes, with concomitant regional bouts of catastrophic

[181] See Kellie Robertson,"Scaling Nature: Microcosm and Macrocosm in Later Medieval Thought" *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* (September 2019); 49 (3): 609–631. Bernardus Silvestris, *Poetic Works*, ed. Winthrop Wetherbee, Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library, 38. (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 2015).

weather," making the poem's central question of how to live with any sense of stability when "[t]he months vary" and "harde hit ys all wedyrs for to know" even more appropriate.[182] Lydgate asks how humanity can live when the seasons endlessly shift and the weather is so unpredictable. Amitav Ghosh explains the jarring effect that this awareness of environmental "interventions" can have, arguing "[. . .] that non-human forces have the ability to intervene directly in human thought. And to be alerted to such interventions is also to become uncannily aware that conversations among ourselves have always had other participants: it is like finding out that one's telephone has been tapped for years, or that the neighbors have long been eavesdropping on family discussions."[183] These atmospheric changes unsettle narratives of human independence, at the level of experience as well as in our creative endeavors.

Lydgate ultimately employs the contemporary, ever-shifting climate for a didactic purpose. The poem concludes by encouraging readers to "lyft up thyne ey unto hevyn" ("lift up your eye unto heaven"), the only place that is immutable. The constant changing of "forme" and shifting of weather, ultimately inspires the didactic form of the poem. The idea of the atmosphere as a creatively inspirational force is present in the poem itself. Lydgate explains that "Ayre of kynde yeueþ inspiracion/ To mannys hert" ("Air, the normal kind,

---

[182] Hoffmann, *An Environmental History of Medieval Europe* (2014), p. 324.
[183] Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (University of Chicago Press, 2016), p. 31.

gives inspiration to man's heart," 181-2). Seasonal air provides "inspiracion," both in the sense of "breath" but also in the sense of "a creative impulse," a meaning often used in a religious context to refer to the Holy Spirit's generative influence in the composition of Scripture.[184] This later sense of "inspiracion" accords nicely with Lydgate's didactic encouragement to look towards the heavens.

Ultimately, for Lydgate, the troubling part of the atmosphere is that we cannot free ourselves from it (at least in this life), and it remains a force that dictates, upholds, and even works against our phenomenal engagements with the world—our life is woven in the atmosphere.[185] As Julien Knebusch explains, "[i]t is impossible to extract ourselves of climate [. . .] to turn around climate, so much climate is supporting and bathing us at the same time."[186] This statement captures Lydgate's predicament. How do we contend with such a formative environmental force from which we cannot escape? Lydgate goes on to express the entanglement between humans and the atmosphere:

> Man hath in somer drynesse and hete,
> In theyr bok as auctors lyst expresse,
> And when Phebus entreth the Ariete
> Dygest humours upward done hem dresse,

[184] "inspīrāciŏun n.," *Middle English Dictionary Online* (2022).
[185] See Tim Ingold, "Footprints through the Weather-World: Walking, Breathing, Knowing," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 16 (2010), S121 - S139.
[186] Knebusch "Art and climate (change) perception: Outline of a phenomenology of climate," (2008), p. 7. See also: Nigel Clark, *Inhuman Nature: Sociable Life on a Dynamic Planet* (SAGE, 2011).

> Porys opyn that seson, of swetnesse
> And exaltacions, diverse wyrkyng,
> How shuld man than be stable in lyvyng?

The poem conveys the complete immersion and dependance we have on the atmosphere, as seasonal weather "opyn[s]" the "Porys" of the human body, influencing the bodily "humours" in its "diverse wyrkyng." Conversely, while the "somer" weather tends to open the pores to "swetnesse" and "exaltacions," autumn weather is explained as opening the body up "To many uncouthe straunge infirmitees." Winter weather "Closeth" and "constreyneth, the poores," preserving the "workyng" of heat that has been trapped inside the body. Structurally, Lydgate couples his section on the times of the year with a section on the "disposicion of the complexyons" (lines 196-219), a group of lines devoted to the machinations of the bodily humours. In medieval humoral theory, the weather gets inside the human body and has profound psychological and physiological effects. Jeffery Jerome Cohen explores the porous interchange between the atmosphere and the humoral body in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, explaining,

> The four humours do their work within skin that offers a permeable membrane rather than a barrier. This open, fleshly system enmeshes the gravity of the moon, the impress of place, the agency of matter and the density and humidity of atmosphere, creating what Gail Paster has called

> 'an ecology of passions' and 'the body's weather', which may be both shared with the environment and heavy.[187]

The influence of weather on the inner workings of the body lends itself to the macrocosmic/microcosmic conception of the world. Cohen points to Gower's figuration of the macro/microcosmic scale in his *Confessio Amantis* in order to argue that when "human society is divided against itself, turbulent and divisive, the world likewise becomes unstable, stormy."[188] In his poem, Gower explains that,

> The man, as telleth the clergie,
> Is as a world in his partie,
> And whan this litel world mistorneth,
> The grete world al overtorneth.
> The lond, the see, the firmament,
> Thei axen alle jugement
> Agein the man and make him werre.
> (*CA,* 994-961)

Gower argues that "man" is a "litel world," a little form of the environment itself, or the "grete world." The close interrelation between the environment and the body meant that disruptions in one had resulting effects for the other.

---

[187] Jeffery Jerome Cohen, "Heavy Atmosphere," in *Contemporary Chaucer Across the Centuries*, edited by Anne McKendry, et al. (Manchester University Press, 2018), p. 93. For more on the medieval macro/microcosmic conception of the world, see Kellie Robertson "Scaling Nature: Microcosm and Macrocosm in Later Medieval Thought," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies,* 1 September 2019; 49 (3): 609–631. Greta LaFleur, "Ch. 1 - The Natural History of Sexuality" in *The Natural History of Sexuality in Early America* (Johns Hopkins, 2020) for a review of climate/humoral theories of sexuality.

[188] Ibid. p. 97.

While Gower firmly establishes that, due to the sinful nature of humans, the “lond,” “see,” and “firmament” are thrown into “jugement” against humanity, Lydgate suggests the opposite. For Lydgate, the “overturned” nature of the atmosphere is not a result of man’s instability, but is the ground and cause of such instability. Gower blames humanity for the chaotic upheaval in the “firmament,” saying that “The purest Eir for Senne alofte / Hath ben and is corrupt fulofte” (Pr. 921–2). For Gower, under the curse of human sin, the atmosphere “becomes unstable, stormy.”[189] This conceit is demonstrative of the range of discourses that contribute to historical conceptions of climate, from theological to the political, each one working to create a narrative about the fluctuating air.

In a number of Lydgate’s poems, the air is figured as an oppressive and untamed force that consistently works against humanity. In his short poem, *Stella Celi Extirpauit,* Lydgate prays to heaven for protection against “al wedrys of corrupt pestilence” (13) and asks the “heuenly queen” (1) to “retreyne” (13) the “mystis blake” (25). In *The World is Variable,* Lydgate looks toward the sky at dawn in “contemplacioun” (2), which calls “to mynde worldly variacioun” (4). A few lines later, Lydgate concludes that such an “Exsperience shewith the world is variable” (8). In each of these works, the blame for the variability and instability of the world is placed on the atmosphere itself, where “[t]empest in

[189] Jeffery Jerome Cohen, “Heavy Atmosphere,” p. 97.

see and wyndes sturdynes maketh men unstable and ferefull of lyuyng" (*Pageant,* 262-3).[190]

As we have seen, one avenue for gaining some control over the atmospheric fluctuations and disruptions is to put the roiling air into poetic form. Though Lydgate's vision of the atmosphere is characterized by instability, pessimism, and fear, poetic form offers a way of containing and interpreting the chaotic matter of the air*,* even if it cannot completely tame it. Poetry's didactic function in these poems works to assure the reader that although the turbulent air surrounds them, there is a heavenly "paleys moost imperial" that sits "so ferre above the sterrys sevene" to which one should "left up thyn eye" (137-140). Mike Hulme explains that any attempt, however slight, to "[mediate] between the human experience of ephemeral weather and the cultural ways of living which are animated by this experience" may be understood as "climate."[191] In this way, "[c]limate offers an ordered container, a linguistic, numerical or sensory repertoire, through which the unsettling arbitrariness of the restless weather is interpreted and tamed."[192] As it attempts to order and contain the air, Lydgate's poetry also verges on climate pessimism, casting the

---

[190] For more on climate blame see Renzo Taddei, "Blame: the hidden (and difficult) side of the climate change debate" *Anthropology News* 49 (8):45–46. 2008; Mike Hulme, *Why we disagree about climate change: understanding controversy, inaction and opportunity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
[191] Hulme, *Weathered, p.* 4.
[192] Ibid., p. 5.

atmosphere as an eternally corrupted and unsettled force.[193] In light of the brutal climate oscillations of the fifteenth century, it is easy to see why Lydgate places the blame for societal and psychological unrest on the atmosphere itself, and why the poem functions to provide some form to that instability.

Both Gower and Lydgate use poetry to establish a narrative about the atmosphere, one that is similar to modern notions of climate. Their poetic forms work to control, tame, and interpret the atmosphere. Gower's *Confessio Amantis* works to portion out the atmosphere into three manageable *periferies*. Though atmospheric phenomena, such as dew, diffuse beyond the bounds of Gower's form, nevertheless, the divisions of the air remain. In this way, Gower's poem functions to mediate the phenomenal relationship between human experience and the air.

For both Gower and Lydgate, this mediation is social—Gower's poem is in the form of advice to a king and Lydgate's poem publicly addresses his readers. Both the *Confessio* and the *Pageant of Knowledge* seek to mediate the *social* perception of climate rather than a merely personal one, though these categories are closely related. Climate is an idea that we compose in order to make our social perceptions of the torrid and ever-changing atmosphere more

[193] Climate pessimism has been a concern of recent ecocritical studies. As of yet, little work has been done in medieval studies to address climate pessimism in the period. For an overview of climate pessimism in ecocritical studies, see: Patrick D. Murphy, *Persuasive Aesthetic Ecocritical Praxis: Climate Change, Subsistence, and Questionable Futures* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2015).

palpable. When climate change occurs, and disrupts our social perceptions of the atmosphere, new stories are forged in order to explain the relationship between human beings and the atmosphere. As with Henryson's idea of *correspondence*, the notion of climate is most often formed as a response to atmospheric phenomena, rather than simply originating in the mind of the composer. As the atmosphere changes and our cultural understandings no longer support the shifting forms of the air, our notion of climate must be reconfigured and recomposed to make sense of those changes. The atmosphere, as the most movable and changeable form of *matere,* calls for continual recomposition. This composition and recomposition of climate was present in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and continues today. As Mike Hulme explains,

> Through cultural imaginaries driven by metaphors such as 'tipping points', narratives such as the Anthropocene and technologies such as Google Earth, the climatic future is already being composed. Before predicted climates come to pass, the imaginative contours of their form will already have changed. And will do so again. And again.[194]

Although more work needs to be done concerning medieval conceptions of climate as a stabilizing and mediating idea between humans and the air, this chapter argues for the place of poetry, in its various forms, as a rich and potent producer of "climate" in the late medieval period.

[194] Mike Hulme, *Weathered,* p. 153.

The Third *Periferie*

I want to begin by briefly explaining the ways that Gower characterizes the final, highest region of the atmosphere, and then conclude by turning to Emily Steiner's work on John Trevisa's (d. 1402) Middle English translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus's *De proprietatibus rerum* (c. 1240). I turn to Steiner's work on Trevisa to demonstrate the overlap between literary form and environmental form in a non-poetic context. I discuss the ways that "ornamentation" of the atmosphere is used by Trevisa to describe his own encyclopedic form.

The third "periferie" takes us into the region of the atmosphere where the sonic impressions of thunder and the fiery emanations of lightning and meteorites occur. Gower draws attention to the shifting forms of "fyr" ("fire") in this region of the atmosphere, one of which he explains is

> Fyr kinled of the same kinde,
> Bot it is of another forme;
> Whereof, if that I schal conforme
> The figure unto that it is
> (7.340-343)

The play on "forme" and Gower's ability to "conforme" the fiery "figure" in question to the name and region with which it corresponds, operates as a moment of poetic self-reflection. In other words, Gower's language plays on the relationship between atmospheric forms and the ability of poetry to "conforme"

these phenomena to figures which accord with natural science, the writings of "olde clerkes" (line 344) and those that "The wise Philosopher tolde" (line 366, most likely referring to Aristotle). Gower begins his explanation of the third region of the air:

> The thridde of th'air after the lawe
> Thurgh such matiere as up is drawe
> Of dreie thing, as it is ofte,
> Among the cloudes upon lofte,
> And is so clos, it may noght oute;
> Thanne is it chased sore aboute,
> Til it to fyr and leyt be falle,
> And thanne it brekth the cloudes alle,
> The whiche of so gret noyse craken,
> That thei the feerful thonder maken.
> The thonderstrok smit er it leyte,
> And yit men sen the fyr and leyte,
> The thonderstrok er that men hiere [. . .]
> (7.297-318)

Marked by impressions of thunder, fire, and lightning, John Trevisa explains that this region of the air is characterized by "liȝt and ornaments [. . .] of fury kynde" ("light and ornaments . . . of a fiery nature").[195] Indeed, "ornamentation" is an important aesthetic word for Trevisa throughout his *De proprietatibus rerum*. As Emily Steiner explains,

> In a larger framework, all created things bear an aesthetic charge because they adorn the earth and inspire praise for the Creator. Insofar as natural encyclopedias take God's creation as their subject, they are formally and

[195] John Trevisa, *On the Properties of Things*, p, 498. Line 19.

> materially invested in the relationship between information and beauty. Bartholomaeus's keyword for the aesthetic property of creation is the verb *ornatare*, along with cognates *ornatus* and *ornamentum* and synonyms *adornare, vestire*, and *insignare*.[196]

As Steiner argues, the aesthetic properties of the environment are compared to the aesthetic properties of Trevisa's text. Just as creation is "ornamented" with beauty, so too Trevisa aims to ornament his text in a similar way. In this way, Trevisa's "encyclopedic form is the aesthetic counterpart to those created things that testify to the earth's special beauty."[197]

Steiner identifies a range of words throughout Trevisa's encyclopedia that operate as aesthetic markers. For example, she explains that Trevisa coined the term "hightness,"in Middle English to refer to"the quality of adornment, ornamentation, or embellishment,"[198] constructing a type of "vernacular textuality by inventing a vocabulary for vernacular aesthetics."[199] Trevisa explains,

> And as they ben naughte ydel of worchyng, so they beth nat bare ne voyde of hightynge nothir ournament. For everyche element his hightenesse hath an ornament: the fuyre hath sterrys, the eire hath briddes and fowles, the water hath fischis and bestis that swymmen

[196] Emily Steiner, *John Trevisa's Information Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), p. 151.
[197] Ibid., p. 153.
[198] Ibid.
[199] Ibid.

> therinne, the erthe hath bestis that move thand gooth therinne, as Beda seith.[200]

Trevisa draws a parallel between the elemental ornamentation of the world and the rhetorical forms of ornamentation and "hightenesse" in his encyclopedia. Throughout his sections on "aire" and "fuyre," Trevisa often uses this same set of aesthetic words to describe the properties of the regions of the air ("hightness, fairness, and ournament," "the ournament of the eire"), which makes up a large portion of his text. Building off of this aesthetic language, Steiner explains that, "[a]s Trevisa shows, if natural properties can be described as ornaments, the ornamental quality of natural properties can help generate an accomplished English prose."[201] She uses the term "accumulation" (an atmospheric term) to refer to the generation and proliferation of Trevisa's "ornaments," particularly in the way that Trevisa's translation expands the original Latin text with rhetorical and poetic language. [202]

I draw attention to Emily Steiner's work to demonstrate the shared language between environmental ornamentation (stars, birds, lighting) and poetic ornamentation (linguistic accumulation, expansion of translation) in Trevisa's translation. Trevisa figures the formal properties of his text in the same language of "hightness" that he terms the properties of the atmosphere.

---

[200] Trevisa, p. 498.
[201] Steiner, *Information Age,* p. 155.
[202] Ibid.

While Steiner does not discuss the atmospheric tones in Trevisa's aesthetics at any length, the importance of "ornamentation,""accumulation," and "hightness" to Trevisa's work demonstrates a conceptual and formal reciprocity between text and environment in a late-medieval prose context. Steiner's work invites more exploration of the formal relationship between late-medieval prose and the environment.

The next chapter turns to consider the question of skillful engagement with the material world. "Skill" refers to the ability of a craftsperson to respond to the material conditions of their working environement in a way that works towards their creative goal. Skill is about "following the grain" of the materials in the process of ones creative endeavors. In Chapter Four, I explore two anonymous Middle English poems, *The Debate of the Carpenter's Tools* and *A Complaint Against Blacksmiths,* to consider the ability of poetry to capture such skilled engagement with the world.

Chapter Four

"Is Skill Wordless?": Poetic Making in Two Anonymous Late Medieval Poems

"Is Skill Wordless?"

How might we think of skill? Perhaps the easiest way to illustrate what I mean by skill is to return to the idea of correspondence that runs throughout this dissertation. In Chapter One, I argue that Henryson's notion of poetic making in the *Testament* is closer to a view that understands creativity as a process of "following the grain" than it is to the hylomorphic model of poetic production put forward by Geoffrey of Vinsauf. Skill is the way that we work with, bend, attend to, and respond to materials for our own creative purposes. This definition of skill is not synonymous with habit. Skill is often thought of as referring to a type of habitual engagement or practice that, over time, allows the practitioner to become so adept at the task at hand that it becomes an almost unconscious routine. Thought of in this way, skill refers to "bodily automatisms, acquired through years of practice in carrying out identical operations" resulting in unreflective "and even automatic" flows of "habitual

action."[203] However, a definition of skill that simply equates it with habitual operations loses the attention and "sensitivity with which these operations can be adjusted to a close perceptual monitoring of the task as it unfolds." Skill is characterized by conscious "variation in response to the conditions at hand," "concentration," and a level of reflexivity and reciprocity.[204] As the carpenter works to split a piece of wood, they follow the grain of the wood, adjusting their tools with sensitivity in response to the form that the wood affords them. These lines of formation are latent in the materials themselves. Carpentry, cooking, sewing, dancing, and even the art of poetry all require careful attention and engagement with the material world.

Can this practice of skillful engagement be put into words? Or, as Tim Ingold asks: "Is skill wordless?"[205] Ingold explains,

> [. . .] there is skill in the practice of the verbal arts – in poetry and song, in storytelling, in handwriting or calligraphy – just as in the practice of any other craft. Many craftsmen are renowned for waxing lyrical about their practice, and feel no inhibition in doing so. Their words, in performance, can be as full of movement and of feeling as a musical phrase or a knitted pattern. To speak is to feel them welling up in the cavity of the mouth; to write is to feel them taking shape in the inflections of the hand. If we think skill is wordless, it is only because we start from a notion of the word already divested of all traces of vocal and manual performance, that is, of affect.[206]

---

[203] Tim Ingold, "Five Questions of Skill." *Cultural Geographies* 25, no. 1 (January 2018): 159–63.
[204] Ibid., p. 161.
[205] Ibid., p. 160.
[206] Ibid., p. 160.

This chapter explores two anonymous late-medieval poems concerned with skillful practice: *A Complaint Against Blacksmiths* and *The Debate of the Carpenter's Tools.* As these poems demonstrate, skillful practice is not "wordless," but can be put into poetic form. I have chosen these poems in particular because they both demonstrate moments of skill, while, at the same time, also serve to highlight moments where skillful practice breaks down. In the *Complaint Against Blacksmiths,* poetic skill is interrupted by the pollution and noise produced by a group of blacksmiths, even as skillful labor is captured in the poem itself. But, as the poet skillfully attends to the pollution and noise caused by the blacksmiths, the poem takes shape, demonstrating that even a "Complaint" can operate as a form of reciprocity. In *The Debate of the Carpenter's Tools,* twenty-seven tools debate the lifestyle of their absent "master," a carpenter, who they criticize for spending more time consuming alcohol than engaging in skilled labor. The speaking tools in the poem serve as an example of the ways in which fictionality can highlight human and nonhuman entanglements. In the end, both poems demonstrate skillful engagement while also serving to highlight moments where skill breaks down and poets and artisans struggle to correspond with their materials.

A Complaint Against Blacksmiths

This section begins by moving from Gower and Lydgate's large-scale atmospheric forms to a poem that describes a more localized but no less vibrant atmosphere. *A Complaint Against Blacksmiths*, a fourteenth-century alliterative poem found uniquely in MS Arundel 292 (a devotional miscellany, including a bestiary,), describes an atmosphere of labor that resounds with the sounds of metal work and thick, smoky expulsions of the forge.[207] Parallels between poetic creation, harmony, and blacksmithing were common throughout the middle ages. For example, returning to Lydgate's *Pageant of Knowledge*, the poem explains:

> Jubal was fadyr and fynder of song,
> Of consonantes, and of armony,
> By noyse and strooke of hamors that were strong.
> Fro Jubal came furst the melody
> Of sugryd musyk, and of mynstralsy,
> So procedyng down fro man to man
> Practyce of concorde, as I have told, began

[207] For studies focused on *A Complaint Against Blacksmiths*, see: Elizabeth Salter, "A Complaint against Blacksmiths," in E*nglish and International: Studies in the Literature, Art and Patronage of Medieval England*, ed. Derek Pearsall and Nicolette Zeeman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 19. Deborah Thorpe, "Heated Words: The Politics and Poetics of Work in 'A Complaint against Blacksmiths,'" *Parergon 32* (2015): 77-101; Richard J. Schrader, "The Inharmonious Choristers and Blacksmiths of MS Arundel 292," *Studies in Philology* (2007): 1-12; Nicola Masciandaro, *The Voice of the Hammer: The Meaning of Work in Middle English Literature* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

(Lines 66-72)

The close relationship between poetry and blacksmithing invites readers to reflect on the nature of poetic formation in the poem. Kept awake by the blacksmiths' late-night work and disturbed by the air and noise pollution produced by their work, the anonymous poet issues a complaint, saying:

> Swarte smekyd smeþes smateryd wyth smoke.
> dryue me to deth wyth den of here dyntes.
> Swech noys on nyghtes ne herd men neuer.
> what knauene cry and clateryng of knockes.
> þe cammede kongons cryen after col col. 5
> And blowen here bellewys þat al here brayn brestes.
> huf puf seyth þat on haf paf þat oþer.
> þei spyttyn and spraulyn and spellyn many spelles.
> þei gnauen and gnacchen þei gronys to gyder.
> and holdyn hem hote wyth here hard hamers. 10
> of a bole hyde ben here barm fellys.
> her schankes ben chakeled for þe fere flunderys.
> heuy hamerys þei han þat hard ben handled.
> stark strokes þei stryken on a stelyd stokke.
> lus. dus. las. das. rowtyn be rowe. 15
> sweche doleful a dreme þe deuyl it to dryue.
> þe mayster longith a lityl and lascheth a lesse.
> twyneth hem tweyn and towchith a treble.
> tik. tak. hic. hac. tiket. taket. tyk. tak.
> lus. bus. lus. das. swych lyf þei ledyn. 20
> All cloye merys cryst hem gyue sorwe.
> may no man for brenwaterys on nyght han hys rest.[208]

[208] Elizabeth Salter, "A Complaint against Blacksmiths," in *English and International: Studies in the Literature, Art and Patronage of Medieval England*, ed. Derek Pearsall and Nicolette Zeeman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 19.

[Sooty, smoked smiths smattered with smoke.
Drive me to death with the din of their blows.
Such a noise at night men have never heard
With the knaves shouting and the clatter of blows!
The crooked connivers cry “Coal! Coal!”
And blow their bellows till their brains near burst,
“Huff, puff”, says one and “Haff, paff” the other.
They spit and sprawl and spin tall stories,
They gnaw and gnash and groan together,
Are kept hot heaving hard heavy hammers.
Their aprons are of bull hide,
Their shanks are sheathed against the sparks.
Huge hammers are handled hard,
Strong strokes struck on steel stock.
“Lus, bus, las, das”, tapping in turn.
Oh the Devil end this dreadful din.
The master lengthens pieces of iron,
Twining and twisting them with terrible twanging,
“Tik, tak, hic, hac, tiket, taket, tik, tak
Lus, bus, lus, das”. Such a life they lead,
Christ punish these horse-shoe benders,
Who cake our clothes and ruin our night’s sleep.
No one, because of these sizzling-waters, may rest a night.]

The poem opens by describing the blacksmiths as “Swarte smekyd smeþes smateryd wyth smoke,” signaling, from the first line, the poem’s interest in the material influences of the environment. The blacksmiths’ form is altered by their skillful engagement with the material world. They take on a “Swarte smekyd” appearance and, “smateryd wyth smoke,” their human form is altered by their engagement with the thick smoky air produced by the smithing forge.

The poetic line itself is thick with alliteration. The string of sibilants along with the doubling of "smekyd" and "smoke," draw attention to the forge's proliferation of smoke and the breathtaking atmosphere that envelopes the "smeþes." The blacksmiths emerge as an entanglement of forms. Unlike recent notions of ecopoetry wherein the forms of the environment are represented as static and "complacent," the *Complaint Against Blacksmiths* works to express relationality, becoming, and dynamic reciprocity between human and nonhuman forces.[209] Here poetry operates as "a domain of entanglement," or what Tim Ingold has called a "meshwork," "a tangled mesh of interwoven and complexly knotted strands."[210] The forms of pollution, both of air and noise, take shape as a result of the blacksmiths' skillful engagements with the world.

The *Complaint Against Blacksmiths* emphasizes the *process* of skillful engagement rather than the material *products* of that engagement. The poem refuses any recognition of the material goods produced from the blacksmiths' work, a refusal which may be attributed to the poet's disdain for the forms of pollution that result from night work. The refusal to acknowledge the ways in which blacksmithing economically contributes to society serves as a critique of their night labor. At the same time, the text does emphasize a type production as it traces the variety of new forms that arise out the process of labor, including

[209] See Introduction.
[210] Ingold, *The Life of Lines* (Routledge, 2015), p. 151.

the smoke smattered smiths (1), the sonic “tik. tak. hic. hac.” (19) of the hammers, and the “spyttyn and spraulyn and spellyn” of “many spelles” (8). These new forms that arise from the process of skillful engagement impose themselves on the poet, introducing material forms that challenge and destabilize the process of scribal and poetic production. As Katherine Jager explains, “the clerical poet cannot do scribal work at night without serious consequence. His labor—copying, scraping, blotting, correcting, reading, blotting— depends on daylight, silence, and decent sleep.”[211] The poet negotiates and employs these material interruptions for creative ends. As Deborah Thorpe explains, the “dints and clattering of the smith” are “transmuted into the music of poetry.”[212] In this way, the “Complaint” displays a level of formal reciprocity. The poem operates as a response to the blacksmiths, but also operates as a response to their pollutive forms, as the poet employs those forms for their own type of material production: the *makyng* of poetry. Confronted with these imposing environmental forms, the poem works, on the one hand, as a “Complaint” and rejection of those forms, while on the

---

[211] Katharine Jager,“‘A Clateryng of Knokkes’: Multimodality and Performativity in ‘The Blacksmith’s Lament,” Sounding Out!: The Sound Studies Blog, https://soundstudiesblog.com/2016/05/02/a-clateryng-of-knokkes-multimodality-and-performativity-in-the-blacksmiths-lament/.
[212] Deborah Thorpe, "Heated Words: The Politics and Poetics of Work in 'A Complaint against Blacksmiths,'" *Parergon* 32 (2015): 77-101.

other hand incorporating “smoke” (1), “dyntes” (2), “knockes” (4), and “lus. bus. lus. das.” (20) as formal properties of the poem.

The intricate processes of blacksmithing are highlighted in the onomatopoeic forms of the poem and attention to subtle details regarding the blacksmiths’ skillful engagement with their materials. Scholars have argued that the poem offers readers a crude and cacophonous vision of blacksmithing.[213] However, I want to suggest that the poem, even as it complains about the blacksmiths, attends to the skillful engagement between the blacksmiths and their materials. For example, the poem explains that “þe mayster longith a lityl and lascheth a lesse,| twyneth hem tweyn and towchith a treble,” this is a dense pair of lines that Elizabeth Salter translates as “The master-smith beats out a small piece of metal, and flattens an (even) smaller piece, (hammers) the two together, turning them edgewise.”[214] Salter’s translation captures the poem’s attention to the complexities of blacksmithing. The poem explains that the “mayster” smith lengthens a “small piece of metal” and “flattens” another “(even) smaller piece,” capturing a skillful attention to the materials themselves. Rather than brutally hammering on anvils, these lines convey a sensitivity to the materials themselves; these pieces of metal are small, requiring a delicate touch and appropriate amounts of heat so as not to completely melt the small pieces of metal.

---

[213] For a helpful overview, see Richard J. Schrader, "The Inharmonious Choristers and Blacksmiths of MS Arundel 292," *Studies in Philology* (2007): 1-12.
[214] Salter, "A Complaint against Blacksmiths," pp. 333-34.

The poem explains that the blacksmith then proceeds to “twyneth” the pieces together, twisting and fusing the forms together. The phrase “longith a lityl” evokes an image of the blacksmith surveying the current shape of the metal, attending to the other piece of metal, and then gently lengthening the one in order to appropriately entwine it with the other.

Such skilled engagement is also represented in the onomatopoeic form of the poem. The long string of “tik. tak. hic. hac. tiket. taket. tyk. tak. |lus. bus. lus. das.” does not convey a mindless clamoring of hammers on metal, but the various sounds convey lighter and heavier strokes of the hammer, with each stroke also suggesting different placements of the hammer on metal. Such material attention is also conveyed by the cries for “col col,” suggesting a sense of urgency as the blacksmiths adjust the temperature and tend the furnace. This is markedly different from a mechanistic view of labor, where machines convey no sense of urgency in completing their programmed tasks. Similarly, the poem explains that the blacksmiths’ have the ability to “blowen here bellewys þat al here brayn brestes.” This line conveys the idea of habit that I discussed at the beginning of this chapter. Due to years of practice, the blacksmiths have the ability to fill their lungs so deeply and blow with such force that it seems their brains will burst. Certainly, habit is not divorced from skill. Many of our skillful engagements with the world are aided by habitual actions that allow us to respond to materials in a more skillful manner. But the line also conveys the

same continual tending of the forge captured in “col col,” and creates an atmosphere of constant breathing and a swirling chorus of skilled engagement.

A Complaint Against Blacksmiths puts skillful engagement with the material world into words. The material byproducts of the forge, the atmosphere of smoke and noise of hammers and air, are recycled into the forms of the poem. The poem, even as it complains, responds to the human-environmental reciprocity that is characteristic of artisanal labor. Beyond just habit, the poem captures the skillful engagements of the blacksmiths, engagements marked by sensitivity to the material world. In the next section, I want to explore the relationship between fictionality and human-environmental entanglement in another anonymous poem entitled *The Debate of the Carpenter’s Tools*.

Fictionality and Entanglement

How does fiction help reveal human and nonhuman entanglements? Recent scholarship, operating in, or adjacent to, the field of new materialism, has drawn on fiction in order to explore matter in a way that attempts to move beyond “anthropocentric regimes of truth.”[215] For example, Jane Bennett employs Kafka’s “Cares of a Family Man" in order to articulate her notion of

---

[215] Tobias Skiveren, “Fictionality in New Materialism: (Re)Inventing Matter.” *Theory, Culture & Society* 39, no. 3 (May 2022): 187–202; p. 189.

vitality, which she explains is "beyond our comprehension."[216] Bennett asks the question, "is it really possible to theorize this vibrancy?," and explains that works of fiction, like Kafka's, may help to cultivate and induce an attentiveness to the material forces, things and their movements, that operate in and around the human body. Bennett is just one example; we could as easily look to the work of Stacy Alaimo or Donna Haraway for examples of the use of fiction in new materialism.[217]

But what role does fiction play in helping us understand our environmental entanglement? What does a text like *The Debate of the Carpenter's Tools,* which explicitly fabricates and makes stuff up, afford scholars that more traditional modes of academic writing do not? As Tobias Skiveren asks, "In short, why fictionalize matter?"[218] Jane Bennett notes the ways that Anthropomorphism can do this, saying,

> A touch of anthropomorphism [. . .] can catalyze a sensibility that finds a world filled not with ontologically distinct categories of beings (subjects and objects) but with variously composed materiality that form confederations. In revealing similarities across categorical divides and lighting up parallels between material forms in "nature" and those in

[216] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Duke University Press, 2010), p. xvii.
[217] Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010). Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).
[218] Tobias Skiveren, "Fictionality in New Materialism: (Re)Inventing Matter," p. 188.

"culture," anthropomorphism can reveal isomorphism.[219]

Certainly, anthropomorphism was used by medieval writers to use nonhuman entities to reflect human concerns, as Alan de Lille says, "Every creature of the world is like a book, a picture, and a mirror for us."[220] But, anthropomorphism can operate in the other direction too, "rendering human traits a mirror reflecting hitherto unnoticed activities and processes of the nonhuman."[221] These activities and processes are revealed through the fictionalization of human and nonhuman entanglements. As a poem with talking tools, *The Debate of the Carpenter's Tools* uses fiction to highlight human-environmental entanglements in the medieval household.

The Debate of the Carpenter's Tools

The Debate of the Carpenter's Tools is preserved uniquely in Bodleian MS Ashmole 61, a miscellany of 41 items comprising comedic poems, religious and moral texts, and a number of romances. The 289 line poem is a debate between 27 tools who argue about their master, a carpenter. The debate breaks into roughly two sides, with one group criticizing the carpenter for excessive drinking and negligence and the other side arguing in the master's defense.

---

[219] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter,* p. 99.

[220] Alan de Lille, "Omnis mundi creatura." in *Literary Works,* ed. and trans. by Winthrop Wetherbee, p. 544.

[221] Tobias Skiveren, "Fictionality in New Materialism: (Re)Inventing Matter," p. 190.

Previous scholarship has drawn attention to the ways in which the manuscript that contains the poem, Ashmole 61, is concerned with the household and domestic relationships. R. K. Ginn described the manuscript as "an anthology of *domestitia,"* concerned with "middle-class domesticity" and relationships between members of the household community.[222] While Ginn does not focus on *The Debate of the Carpenter's Tools,* scholars have argued that her observations extend to the poem. For example, Edward Wilson suggests that "the intervention of the carpenter's wife" provides a marital context in which domestic concerns around labor and economic prosperity are "registered."[223] While the appearance of the carpenter's wife in the poem is interesting for thinking about the relationship between gender and labor in the household, appealing to the one human voice in the poem in order to give context to its role in the manuscript is symptomatic of a general trend to interpret the household book through the human actors in the text and to "assume a central human subject whose transformation is the text's purpose."[224] *The Debate of the Carpenter's Tools* resists this trend by foregoing any transformation on the part of the carpenter, who is absent in the poem itself—he has no voice throughout

[222] R. K. G. Ginn, 'A Critical Edition of the two Texts of "Sir Cleges"', unpublished MA thesis, Queen's University of Belfast (1967), pp. 82,
[223] Edward Wilson, "The Debate of the Carpenter's Tools" *The Review of English Studies*, New Series, 38, no. 152 (1987): p. 446.
[224] Myra Seaman, *Objects of Affection: The book and the household in late medieval England* (Manchester University Press, 2021), p. 22.

the poem and, as an absentee, he is made present only through how the tools imagine him, and the question of how to imagine him is a site of contention rather than consent.

Recently, Myra Seaman has drawn attention to the various ways that Ashmole 61 highlights the role of the nonhuman in the late medieval household. She explains that the household did not simply consist of the life and activities of human actors, but was "rather an ecology of inhabitants," both "human and nonhuman, whose shared occupancy includes entanglement in collective habits and expectations."[225] Focusing on the manuscript as a pedagogical tool and the ways that this entanglement serves moral and spiritual ends, Seaman highlights the role of nonhuman agents (including the book itself) in modeling exemplary moral and spiritual behavior. I want to join with Seaman in extending concerns about domestic life to the role of the nonhuman in this poem and argue that the poem, particularly in its dialogue form, is concerned with the breakdown of skillful engagement and reciprocity between human and nonhuman entities.

Highlighting this breakdown of creative reciprocity, the poem demonstrates the ways in which the household exists as a "meshwork" of human and nonhuman forces whose economic and social success depends on human-environmental correspondence. In the poem, for example, the

[225] Seaman, *Objects of Affection,* p. 34.

Groping-Iron (a concave-bladed chisel or possibly a grooving plane) and the Drill, both defenders of the carpenter, speak. The Groping-Iron explains,

> 'I suere thee . . . by the rode, /
> Wyrke I schall bothe nyght and dey;
> To gete hym gode I schall assey [try]'
> (36– 8).
>
> ["I swear, by the Cross,
> I shall work both night and day,
> to get him wealth, I shall try"]

The Drill says:

> "My maysters werke I wyll remembyr;
> I schall crepe fast into the tymbyr,
> And help my mayster within a stounde
> To store his cofer with twenti pounde."
> (19-22)
>
> ["My masters work I will remember;
> I shall creep fast into the timber,
> And help my master within a moment
> To fill his coffer with twenty pounds."]

Both the Groping-Iron and the Drill explain that they have an integral part in the labor and economic success of the household. Fiction here, anthropomorphism, gives voice to these tools, demonstrating the ways that nonhuman entities are entangled in the process of craft. As Myra Seaman explains, "these tools – who know of what they speak, given their total immersion in the labouring world, and without whom the carpenter literally

could not practise his craft – address concerns of commitment, responsibility, and authority."[226] I agree with Seaman and would add reciprocity and correspondence to these issues. Seaman goes on to explain, "[. . .] nonhuman objects that share the household community with the readers of [the poem] provide their insights and encourage judgement and behaviour adaptation based on their shared investment in and dependence on the health of the household."[227] The Chip-Axe said to the Carpenter,

> "Mete and drynke I schall thee plyght;
> Clene hose and clene schone,
> Gete them wheresoever thou kane.
> Bot for all that ever thou kane,
> Thall never be thryfty man,
> Ne none that longys the crafte unto,
> For nothyng that thou kane do."
> (2-8)
>
> ["Meat and drink I shall promise you;
> Clean stockings and shoes,
> You must earn on your own.
> But for all that you can ever do,
> You shall never be a prosperous man,
> Nor anyone that longs for this craft,
> For anything that you can do."]

In these lines, the Chip-Axe is promising to get the carpenter "mete and drynke," while at the same time explaining that the carpenter play his part and must work hard in order to procure clothing ("Clene hose and clene schone")/

[226] Seaman, *Objects of Affection,* p. 140.
[227] Ibid., p. 140.

These lines further the notion that the household operates as a cooperative entity in which human and nonhuman are intertwined and must strive together in order to achieve economic prosperity in its fullness. The Chip-Axe begins the poem with a balanced view of labor in the domestic household. Neither the tools nor the carpenter alone can achieve a viable level of economic success, but both are dependent on one another in order to create a sustainable domestic environment. In this way, fictional narratives, such as *The Debate of the Carpenter's Tools,* upset the notion that the human is alive and active while the nonhuman, conversely, is dead and passive.

Skillful practice is sometimes thought of as unreflective and therefore unconscious and even automatic. We rely on skill everyday in order to accomplish practical and creative tasks, the operations of which are usually thought of as "wordless," or unable to be spelled out in formal, propositional terms. Skill requires constant correspondence, sensitivity, and perhaps even a type of "dialogue" with the tools and the materials around the skilled carpenter. It involves responding to the conditions at hand, adjusting to the slightest environmental perturbations. Here we see that in order to accomplish a skilled task, one must have a sensitivity to the materials around them. In a sense, listen to them, enter into a dialogue with them. The "Twybyll" explains,

> "Ye, ye," seyd the Twybyll,
> "Thou spekys ever ageyn skyll.
> Iwys, iwys, it wyll not bene,

Ne never I thinke that he wyll then."
(13-16)

["Yeah, yeah," said the Double-edged Ax,
"You speak habitually against skill,
Surely, surely, it will not be so,
Nor never I think that he will prosper then."]

The Double-edged Axe disagrees with The Mallet (who spoke before him) here, saying that they speak "ageyn skyll," The primary definition of "skyll" here is "reason," meaning that The Mallet speaks "contrary to reason," failing to recognize that, without the carpenter's participation, work will not be accomplished.[228] Though not the primary definition, the failure to recognize the place of both the human and the nonhuman in the accomplishment of labor within the household also speaks "against skill," in the sense that it fails to recognize that neither the tools alone nor the carpenter alone can accomplish the tasks at hand. The carpenter's general absence and failure to listen and be attuned to the tools and the material environment means that skilled labor will not be accomplished. The Double-edged Axe recognizes this fact, "Surely, surely, it will not be so." Regardless of how passionately The Mallet wishes to "pelte" (10) on behalf of the carpenter, skilled labor will never be realized without the participation of both the human and nonhuman actors in the

[228] "skil .n," *Middle English Dictionary Online* (March 2020).

household; economic prosperity will never be accomplished—the master will never "prosper."

The carpenter is unresponsive, he does not take into account the resistance or support of the tools and materials at hand and, therefore, tasks are not completed. He is a skill-less carpenter. But skill is not wordless here, in this case, fiction helps us glimpse the type of human-environmental reciprocity that constitutes skill and that is sometimes difficult to put into words. In this way, as Tobias Skiveren explains, fiction allows us to "imaginatively and affectively sense a world in which the nonhuman is partly human, and the human is partly nonhuman," without having to believe that something like a group of tools can have an audible debate in any literal sense.[229] Fiction allows us to capture intangible relational interdependencies and glimpse the ways in which the human and the material are entwined.

Attending to Materials

What little scholarship is available concerning *The Debate of the Carpenter's Tools* has focused on humanizing the twenty seven tools that engage with one another concerning the labor of their master, the carpenter. John Conlee opens his critical edition of the text by explaining that the poem "depicts an altercation between two factions of personified tools who are portrayed as carpenter's

[229] Tobias Skiveren, "Fictionality in New Materialism: (Re)Inventing Matter," p. 192.

apprentices."[230] Rather than tools, these figures are made sense of by suggesting that they are the carpenter's "twenty-seven comrades."[231] In other words, rather than reading them as material objects, they must be read as allegorical, bringing to mind human apprentices or "the rebellious journeymen associations of the post-plague years."[232] This allegorical reading of *The Debate of the Carpenter's Tools* suggests that the debate "operates [. . .] as an animation of and reflection upon the kind of internal strife [. . .] of so many guilds."[233] In this reading, the poem ultimately serves a moral purpose, encouraging laborers to treat their apprentices with more respect and outlining the economic consequences of drunkenness. The poem ends with an entreatment to "take hede of þis":

> Therfor, wryghtys, take hede of this,
> That ye may mend that is amysse,
> And treuly that ye do your labore,
> For that wyll be to your honour.
> And greve you nothing at this song,
> Bot ever make mery yourselve amonge,
> Ne gest at hym that it dud make,
> Ne envy at hym ye take,
> Ne non of you do hym blame.
> (273-281)
>
> [Therefore, carpenters, take heed of this,
> That you may mend what is amiss,

[230] John W. Conlee, ed. *Middle English Debate Poetry: A Critical Anthology.* (East Lansing, Mich.: Colleagues Press, 1991), p. 222.
[231] Lisa Cooper, *Artisans and Narrative Craft in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 85.
[232] Ibid., p. 85.
[233] Ibid., p. 87.

And truly that you do your labor,
For that will be to your honour.
And grieve you nothing at this song,
But ever make merry yourself among,
Nor scoff at him that did make it,
Nor take envy at him (be envious of him)
Nor any of you do him blame.]

Based on these lines, some scholars have read the *DBCT* as a "material metaphor" for contemporary moral, social, and economic issues.[234] Indeed, these final lines do suggest a moral lesson that "wryghtys" should take from this poem, but this need not mean that we should simply see past or forego the material dimensions of the poem in order to get at a "deeper meaning" behind the text. Jeffery Jerome Cohen has explained that this "segregation of human and inhuman, nature and culture belies a complicated reality, an intertwined environmentality. Inhuman forces and objects ultimately refuse domestication, refuse reduction into familiar tales as ancillaries and props (even as they domesticate—ecologize—themselves, each other, us)."

Readings that ignore the material realities of the text or figure the environment as a simple backdrop for human activity are symptomatic of what Mary Carruthers has called the "over-theologized and over-moralized" nature of medieval literary criticism, where "every flourish, every joke, every colour and ornament is said to conceal a lesson for the improvement of the viewer or

[234] Lisa Cooper, *Artisans and Narrative Craft in Late Medieval England.*

listener."[235] Literary criticism has long viewed the medieval production of poetry as informed by and "seamlessly integrated" within medieval pastoral and theological values.[236] These values lurk behind the material and environmental aspects of medieval poetry and the spiritual and moral must be wrestled from the physical. I certainly do not mean to suggest that the spiritual and moral be relegated to the peripheries of medieval literary criticism. But, as I have argued in this dissertation, medieval poetry also drew inspiration from concepts of matter and materiality, so that always reading the material dimensions of a poem as allegory or metaphor for something spiritual obscures the impact of these conversations on late medieval poetics and aesthetics.

---

[235] Mary Carruthers, *The Experience of Beauty in the Middle Ages,* p. 8.
[236] Ibid.

Conclusion

The poems in the previous chapter demonstrate the conceptual overlap between late-medieval views of poetics and artisan craft. The relationship between late medieval poetry and artisan craft has long been recognized since Glending Olson's distinction between the terms "poete" and "makere" in the terminology of Chaucer and his contemporaries.[237] Andrew Galloway has drawn attention to Chaucer's "heavy burden of technical and vocational knowledge" that he shares in common with contemporary artisans and bureaucrats.[238] The gerund, *makyng,* that Chaucer continually uses for his poetic activity can refer to both "poetic composition" as well as the type of skillful engagement exemplified by blacksmiths and carpenters. Chaucer's use of the term attests to his "willingness to recognize and welcome the improvised and the arbitrary" and "work[s] against that claim of perfection, of being at, or past, the end and able to look back."[239] *Makyng* emphasizes process, reciprocity, becoming. Claire M. Waters argues that Chaucer's interest in *makyng* helps make sense of his substantial amount of "un-ended" poems, thinking of him as a poet "who is always still in

---

[237]Glending Olson,"Making and Poetry in the Age of Chaucer," *Comparative Literature* 31 (1979) (3): 272–290.
[238] Andrew Galloway, "Chaucer's "Former Age" and the Fourteenth-Century Anthropology of Craft: The Social Logic of a Premodernist Lyric," p. 538.
[239] A. C. Spearing, *Medieval Autographies: The "I" of the Text* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012), 122; Claire M. Waters, "Makyng and Middles in Chaucer's Poetry" p. 32.

the process of making" and concerned more with "life as it is experienced" than with perfection in the etymological sense, "thoroughly made," *per-factus*.[240] As Noëlle Phillips explains, "Medieval vernacular literary makynge offers an aesthetic model based upon process, conversion, and transformation, rather than the more opaque ideas of creation and inspiration that result in a polished, beautiful product."[241] In other words, late medieval poetry is concerned with the process of production rather than some ideal finished product. Chaucer's view of himself as a *makere*, with its association to artisanal craft and material production, is due in part to his view of poetry as "the skillful integration of other works into a new one."[242] The late-medieval view of poetry as *makyng,* a view suggested by Chaucer and, in particular, his successors (such as Lydgate and Henryson) sees the process of literary production as "one that assimilates divergent information or texts and converts them into something else."[243] Katherine Jager calls this type of "assimilation" a "doing, a perpetration, a way

[240] Claire Waters, "Makyng and Middles in Chaucer's Poetry," p. 31.
[241] Noëlle Phillips, "Vernacular Makynge, Jack Upland, and the Aesthetics of Antifraternalism," p. 238.
[242] Noëlle Phillips, "Vernacular Makynge," p. 241. A number of Chaucer's works are retellings and all lean heavily on classical, biblical, Italian, and French sources---these are the writers that Chaucer would call "poets," rather than "makers."
[243] Noëlle Phillips, "Vernacular Makynge," p. 243.

of being in the world."[244] Drawing on Tim Ingold, and along with Robert Henryson, I call this type of assimilation "correspondence."

There are many interesting intersections with this project that have been left unexplored. Where do vernacular theological movements such as mysticism, charged with concrete, material language meant to express a formless being, fit into this configuration of creativity and the environment? Where does the human body fit in the theory of correspondence? How do our sensory perceptions of the world help mediate and even fabricate these formal environmental engagements? Where do racial considerations fit in our understandings of literary and environmental forms, particularly in light of environmental humoralism and climate theories of race? While many important concerns remain, this project has worked to reopen questions of literary formation and late-medieval vernacular conceptions of creativity, reevaluating the formal relationships between literature and the material world.

I have argued that human and nonhuman entanglements are at the heart of the production of late-medieval poetry, contending that poetic forms (and acts of creativity, more generally) are borne out of correspondences and moments of reciprocal interchange between humans and the environment. Late

[244] Katharine Woodason Jager, "The Practice of Makyngee: Masculine Poetic Identity inLate Medieval English Poetry" (PhD diss, City University of New York, 2007), p. 22.

medieval poets were acutely aware of the ways in which our environmental surroundings have implications for poetic form. The material world not only supplied poets with conceptual metaphors for understanding their own creative process, but was figured as a co-creator in that process. Even as environmental forms such as noise, pollution, and the roiling atmosphere unsettle and destabilize human life, they also present moments for formal negotiation between the poetic and environmental worlds, giving birth to opportunities for creativity and the proliferation of new forms. *Writing with the Grain* argues for a late-medieval vernacular poetics that reconceives the ways in which human creative processes are indebted to the material world.

Bibliography

Aberth, John. *The Black Death: The Great Mortality of 1348-1350: A Brief History with Documents* 2nd ed. (Bedford, 2017).

Aertsen, Jan A., Emery, Kent and Speer, Andreas. *After the Condemnation of 1277: Philosophy and Theology at the University of Paris in the Last Quarter of the Thirteenth Century* (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2013).

Alaimo, Stacy. *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).

Anonymous of Canterbury, *Chronicon Anonymi Cantuariensis: The Chronicle of Anonymous of Canterbury, 1346–1365*, ed. and tr. Charity Scott-Stokes and Chris Given-Wilson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2008).

Archer, David and Stefan Rahmstorf, *The Climate Crisis: An Introductory Guide to Climate Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

Bahr, Arthur and Alexandra Gillespie, "Medieval English Manuscripts: Form, Aesthetics, and the Literary Text," *The Chaucer Review* 47, no. 4 (2013): 346-360.

Bailey, Mark, *After the Black Death: Economy, Society, and the Law in Fourteenth-Century England* (Oxford University Press, 2021).

Barad, Karen. 2007. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning.*

Bate, Jonathan. *The Song of The Earth* (Harvard University Press, 2002).

Batkie, Stephanie and Matthew Irvin, "Incarnational Making in Vox Clamantis II." In *Studies in the Age of Gower: A Festschrift in Honour of Robert F. Yeager*, ed. Susannah Mary Chewning (Boydell & Brewer, 2020), pp. 35–56.

Beer, Lewis. "The Tactful Genius: Abiding the End in the Confessio Amantis," *Studies in Philology*, Vol. 112, No. 2 (Spring, 2015), pp. 234-263.

Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Duke University Press, 2010).

Blumenberg, Hans. “Imitation of Nature: Toward a Prehistory of the Idea of the Creative Being,” trans. by Anna Wertz, *Qui Parle*, Spring/Summer 2000, Vol. 12, No. 1, pp. 17-54.

Böhme, Gernot. *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres* (London: Routledge, 2017).

Bohn, H.G. *Ingulph's Chronicle of the Abbey of Croyland: With the Continuations by Peter of Blois and Anonymous Writers* (London, 1854).

Bokenham, Osbern. *Legendys of Hooly Wummen* in *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280–1520*, eds. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, Nicholas Watson, Andrew Taylor, and Ruth Evans (University of Penn State Press, 1999).

Boyson, R. R. “Air and atmosphere studies: Enlightenment, phenomenology and ecocriticism.” *Literature Compass*, 19 (1–2) (2022).

Bradwardine, Thomas. *Thomas of Bradwardine: His Tractatus de proportionibus; Its Significance for the Development of Mathematical Physics,* trans. H. Lamar Crosby (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1955).

Buridan, John. “The impetus theory of projectile motion, from ‘Questions on the Eight Books of the Physics of Aristotle'” trans. M. Clagett, in *A Source Book in Medieval Science*, ed. Edward Grant (Harvard University Press, 1974).

Bynum, Carolyn Walker. "Why All the Fuss About the Body? A Medievalist's Perspective," *Critical Inquiry* 22 (Autumn, 1995), pp. 1-33

—*The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

Cannon, Christopher. “Form” in *Middle English*, ed. Paul Strohm (Oxford, 2007).

—*The Grounds of English Literature* (Oxford University Press, 2005).

Camargo, Martin. "The Late Fourteenth-Century Renaissance of Anglo-Latin Rhetoric," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 45 (2012): 107–33.

Campbell, Bruce. *The Great Transition: Climate, Disease and Society in the Late-Medieval World* (Cambridge University Press, 2016).

Carruthers, Mary. *The Experience of Beauty in the Middle Ages* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

—"The Concept of Ductus, or, Journeying through a Work of Art" in *Rhetoric beyond Words: Delight and Persuasion in the Arts of the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

Cervone, Cristina Maria. *Poetics of the Incarnation: Middle English Writing and the Leap of Love* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

—*Readings in Medieval Textuality: Essays in Honour of A. C. Spearing*, ed. Cristina Maria Cervone and D. Vance Smith (Cambridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 2016).

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry*, 35 (Winter 2008).

Chaganti, Seeta. "Danse Macabre in the Virtual Churchyard," *postmedieval* 3 (2012): 7–26.

Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd edition, Larry Benson (Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

Clark, Nigel. *Inhuman Nature: Sociable Life on a Dynamic Planet* (SAGE Publications, 2011).

Clyde, Walter. *Chaucer and the Mediaeval Sciences*, 2nd ed. (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1960).

Coffman, George R. "John Gower in His Most Significant Role," in *Elizabethan Studies in Honor of George F. Reynolds* (University Press of Colorado, 1945), pp. 52–61.

Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman* (Minneapolis, 2015).

—“Heavy Atmosphere,” in *Contemporary Chaucer Across the Centuries*, edited by Anne McKendry, et al. (Manchester University Press, 2018).

Conlee, John W., ed. *Middle English Debate Poetry: A Critical Anthology* (East Lansing, Mich.: Colleagues Press, 1991).

Cooper, Lisa. *Artisans and Narrative Craft in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge University Press, 2011).

Courtenay, William J., “The Academic and Intellectual Worlds of Ockham,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Ockham*, ed. Paul Vincent Spade (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

Davis, Rebecca. "Fugitive Poetics in Chaucer's House of Fame," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 37 (2015): 101-32.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993),

Dinshaw, Carolyn. “Ecology,” in *A Handbook of Middle English Studies*, ed. Marion Turner (Oxford, 2013), 347–62.

Dyas, Dee. *The Dynamics of Pilgrimage: Christianity, Holy Places, and Sensory Experience* (Routledge, 2020).

—*Pilgrimage in Medieval English Literature 700-1500* (D.S. Brewer, 2001).

Eggan, Taylor. *Unsettling Nature: Ecology, Phenomenology and the Settler Colonial Imagination* (University of Virginia Press, 2022).

Fagan, Brian. *The Little Ice Age: How Climate Made History 1300-1850* (New York City: Basic Books, 2000).

Faral, Edmond. *Les arts poétique du xiie et du xiiie siècle: Recherches et documents sur la technique littéraire du moyen âge* (Paris: Champion, 1962).

Fein, Susanna, David Raybin, and Jan Ziolkowski, eds. and trans., *The Complete Harley 2253 Manuscript*, 3 vols. (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2015).

Ferster, Judith. *Fictions of Advice: The Literature and Politics of Counsel in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: 1996).

Fogtmann-Schulz, A., Kudsk, S. G. K., Trant, P. L. K., Baittinger, C., Karoff, C., Olsen, J., & Knudsen, M. F. (2019). “Variations in solar activity across the Spörer Minimum based on radiocarbon in Danish oak.” *Geophysical Research Letters*, 46, pp. 8617– 8623.

Fournival, Richard de. *Li Bestiaires d'amours di Maistre Richart de Fornival e Li Response du Bestiaire,* ed. Cesare Segre (Milan: Riccardo Ricciardi), 1957.

Fox, George. *The Mediaeval Sciences in the Works of John Gower* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1931).

Fradenburg, Louise O. "The Scottish Chaucer." *Writing After Chaucer: Essential Readings in Chaucer and the Fifteenth Century*, ed. Daniel J. Pinti. (New York: Garland, 1998), pp. 167-176.

Gabrovsky, Alexander N. *Chaucer the Alchemist* (Palgrave, 2016).

Galloway, Andrew. “Chaucer's "Former Age" and the Fourteenth-Century Anthropology of Craft: The Social Logic of a Premodernist Lyric,” *ELH*, Fall, 1996, Vol. 63, No. 3 (Fall, 1996), pp. 535-553.

Gayk, Shannon and Kathleen Tonry, eds., *Form and Reform: Reading across the Fifteenth Century* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2011).

Ghosh, Amitav. *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (University of Chicago Press, 2016).

Ginn, R. K. G. “A Critical Edition of the two Texts of ‘Sir Cleges,’” unpublished MA thesis, Queen's University of Belfast (1967).

Glissant, Édouard. *Poetics of Relation* (University of Michigan Press, 1990).

Glotfelty, Cheryll. *Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (UGeorgia Press, 1996).

Goldie, Matthew Boyd. *Scribes of Space: Place in Middle English Literature and Late Medieval Science* (Cornell University Press, 2019).

Gower, John. *Gower's Confessio Amantis*, ed. Russell Peck, with Latin Translations by Andrew Galloway. 3 vols. Kalamazoo, Mich.: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000-2005 (vol. 1 revd. 2006; vol. 2 revd 2013; translations revised 2021 [online only]).

Graham, James, ed. *Climates: Architecture and the Planetary Imaginary* (New York: Lars Müller Publishers, 2016).

Grant, Edward. *History of Natural Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

—"The Natural Books of Aristotle in the Arts Curriculum at The University of Paris in 1255," trans. Lynn Thorndike in Grant, *A Source Book in Medieval Science* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974).

—*Physical Science in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971).

Grenville, Jane. "Materials and competence: the practicalities of medieval building" *Medieval Housing* (Leicester Press, 1997).

Griffero, Tonino. *Atmospheres: Aesthetics of Emotional Spaces* (Routledge, 2010).

Griffiths, Devin. "The Ecology of Form," *Critical Inquiry* 48:1 (Autumn 2021).

Griffiths, Tom. "The Humanities and an Environmentally Sustainable Australia," *Australian Humanities Review* 43 (2007).

Grove, Jean M. *Little Ice Ages: Ancient and Modern*, 2 vols., 2nd edn (New York City: Routledge, 2004).

—"The Onset of the Little Ice Age," in *History and Climate: Memories of the Future?*, ed. P.D. Jones, A.E.J. Ogilvie, T.D. Davies, and K. R. Briffa (New York: Kluwer, 2001), 153– 86.

Hamilton, J. "Weathers of Body and World: Reading Difference in Literary Atmospheres before Climate Change," in A. Johns-Putra & K. Sultzbach (Eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Climate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2022).

Hanawalt, Barbara A. and Lisa J. Kiser, eds. *Engaging with Nature: Essays on the Natural World in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Notre Dame, IN, 2008).

Hannah, Ralph. *Penn Commentary on Piers Plowman* vol. 2 (Penn. University Press, 2017).

Haraway, Donna J. *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*. Vol. 1. (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003).

—*Staying with the Trouble* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

Harris, Richard. *Discovering Timber-Framed Buildings* (Bloomsbury, 2009).

Henry, A. ed. *The Mirour of Mans Saluacion[e]. A Middle English Translation of Speculum Humanae Salvationis. A Critical Edition of the Fifteenth-Century Manuscript Illustrated from Der Spiegel der menschen Behaltnis Speyer: Drach, c. 1475* (Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1986).

Henryson, Robert. *Robert Henryson: The Poems*, ed. Denton Fox (OUP, 1987).

—*The Testament of Cresseid and Seven Fables* trans. Seamus Heaney (Faber, 2009).

Hicks, Andrew. *Composing the World: Harmony in the Medieval Platonic Cosmos* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

Hoffmann, Richard. *An Environmental History of Medieval Europe* (Cambridge University Press, 2014).

—"Homo et Natura, Homo in Natura: Ecological Perspectives in the European Middle Ages" in *Engaging with Nature: Essays on the Natural World in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, eds. Barbara A. Hanawalt and Lisa J. Kiser. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008).

Horrox, Rosemary. *The Black Death* (Manchester University Press, 1994).

Hulme, Mike. *Weathered: Cultures of Climate* (SAGE Publications, 2016).

—*Why we disagree about climate change: understanding controversy, inaction and opportunity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

Ingold, Tim. "Earth, Sky, Wind, and Weather." *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 13 (2007): S19–38.

— "An Ecology of Materials: a rock is a rock is a rock," in *Power of Material – Politics of Materiality*, eds. Kerstin Stakemeier and Susanne Witzgall (University of Chicago Press, 2017).

— *Knowing from the Inside: Correspondences* (Bloomsbury, 2017).

— *Correspondences* (Polity, London, 2021).

— "Rethinking the animate, re-animating thought," *Ethnos*, 71:1 (2006), 9-20.

—"Footprints through the Weather-World: Walking, Breathing, Knowing," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 16 (2010), S121 - S139.

—"Five Questions of Skill," *Cultural Geographies* 25, no. 1 (January 2018): 159–63.

—*The Life of Lines* (Routledge, 2015).

Irvine, Martin. "Medieval Grammatical Theory and Chaucer's House of Fame." *Speculum* 60, no. 4 (1985): 850–76.

Jager, Katharine."'A Clateryng of Knokkes': Multimodality and Performativity in 'The Blacksmith's Lament," *Sounding Out!: The Sound Studies Blog* (2016), https://soundstudiesblog.com/2016/05/02/a-clateryng-of-knokkes-multimodality-and-performativity-in-the-blacksmiths-lament/.

Johns-Putra, Adeline. "Introduction," in *Climate and Literature*, ed. Adeline Johns-Putra, 1–12. Cambridge Critical Concepts. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

Johnson, Eleanor. *Practicing Literary Form in the Middle Ages: Ethics and the Mixed Form in Chaucer, Gower, Usk, and Hoccleve* (University of Chicago Press, 2013).

—“Against Order,” in *Chaucer and the Subversion of Form* (Cambridge University Press, 2018).

Kemp, Simon. “A Medieval Controversy About Odor,” *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 33 (1997).

Knebusch, Julien. “The Perception of Climate Change,” *Leonardo*, Volume 40, Number 2 (MIT Press: April 2007).

—“Art and climate (change) perception: Outline of a phenomenology of climate,” in Sacha Kagan and Volker Kirchberg (ed.), *Sustainability: a new frontier for the arts and cultures* (Frankfurt: 2008).

Kurvinen, Auvo. “Inpressions Concerning Þe Weduryng,” *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 58, no. 2 (1957): 49–69.

Kruger, Steven. “Imagination and the Complex Movement of Chaucer’s House of Fame,” *The Chaucer Review* 28, no. 2 (1993): 117–34.

Lamb, H. H. *Climate, History and the Modern World* (London: Routledge, 1997).

Leach, Doreen Sylvia. *Carpenters in Medieval London c.1240-c.1540* (University of London, 2017).

Lears, Adin. *World of Echo: Noise and Knowing in Late-Medieval England* (Cornell University Press, 2020).

LaFleur, Greta. “The Natural History of Sexuality” in *The Natural History of Sexuality in Early America* (Johns Hopkins, 2020).

Levine, Caroline, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton University Press, 2015).

Lorris, Guillaume de and Jean de Meun. *The Romance of the Rose,* 3rd ed., trans. Charles Dahlberg (Princeton University Press, 1995).

Lydgate, John. *Minor Poems of John Lydgate*, ed. Henry Noble MacCracken (Early English Text Society Extra Series 107 and Original Series 192, 1911-1934).

Lynch, Kathryn L., *Chaucer's Philosophical Visions* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2000).

—*The High Medieval Dream Vision: Poetry, Philosophy, and Literary Form* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988).

Macrobius, Ambrosius Theodosius. *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, ed. and trans. William Harris Stahl (NY: Columbia UP, 1952).

Maddern, Philippa. "Imagining the Unchanging Land: East Anglians Represent their Landscape, 1350–1500," in *Medieval East Anglia*, ed. Christopher Harper-Bill (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2005).

Maier, Anneliese. "The Nature of Motion," *On the Threshold of Exact Science: Selected Writings of Anneliese Meier on Late Medieval Natural Philosophy*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

Nicola Masciandaro, *The Voice of the Hammer: The Meaning of Work in Middle English Literature* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

Massey, Doreen. *For Space* (SAGE Publications, 2005).

Mathews, Jana. "Land, Lepers, and the Law in The Testament of Cresseid," in *The Letter of the Law: Legal Practice and Literary Production in Medieval England*, eds. Emily Steiner and Candace Barrington (Cornell University Press, 2002).

McKinley, Kathryn. "Ekphrasis as Aesthetic Pilgrimage in Chaucer's *House of Fame* Book 1," in *Meaning in Motion: the Semantics of Movement in Medieval Art*, eds. Nino Zchomelidse and Giovanni Freni (Princeton Press, 2011).

McLane, Maureen. "Compositionism: Plants, Poetics, Possibilities; or, Two Cheers for Fallacies, Especially Pathetic Ones!" *Representations*, No. 140, Special Issue: FALLACIES (Fall 2017), pp. 101-120.

Mitchell, J. Allan. *Becoming Human: The Matter of the Medieval Child* (Minnesota University Press, 2014).

—*Ethics and Exemplary Narrative in Chaucer and Gower* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004).

Minnis, Alastair. *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages*, 2nd edn (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

Patrick D. Murphy, *Persuasive Aesthetic Ecocritical Praxis: Climate Change, Subsistence, and Questionable Futures* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2015).

Nelson, Ingrid. "Ambient Media and Chaucer's House of Fame" *ELH*, Volume 88, Number 3, Fall 2021, pp. 551-578.

Nerlich, Brigitte and Rusi Jaspal "Metaphors we die by? Geoengineering, metaphors and the argument from catastrophe," *Metaphor and symbol* (2012): 131-147.

North, John D. *Chaucer's Universe* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).

Norwich, Julian of. *The Shewings of Julian of Norwich* ed. Georgia Ronan Crampton (Medieval Institute Publications, 1994).

Ockham, William of. *Ockham on Aristotle's Physics: A Translation of Ockham's Brevis Summa Libri Physicorum*, trans. Julian Davies, (St. Bonaventure, NY: The Franciscan Institute, 1989).

—*Opera philosophica, vol. VI: Brevis summa libri physicorum, Summula philosophiae naturalis, et Quaestiones in libros physicorum aristotelis* (St. Bonaventure: Editiones Instituti Franciscani Universitatis S. Bonaventurae, 1974).

Olson, Glending. "Making and Poetry in the Age of Chaucer," *Comparative Literature* 31 (1979) (3): 272–290.

Oresme, Nicole. *Nicole Oresme and the Kinematics of Circular Motion: Tractatus de commensurabilitate vel incommensurabilitate motuum celi*, trans. Edward Grant (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1971).

Pearsall, Derek. *Gower and Lydgate* (Harlow: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1969).

Peck, Russell. *Kingship and Common Profit in Gower's Confessio Amantis* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 1978).

—"The Phenomenology of Make Believe in Gower's Confessio Amantis," *Studies in Philology* 91 (1994).

Phillips, Noëlle. "Vernacular Makynge, Jack Upland, and the Aesthetics of Antifraternalism," in *Vernacular Aesthetics in the Later Middle Ages: Politics, Performativity, and Reception from Literature to Music,* ed. Katherine W. Jager (Palgrave, 2019).

Postmentier, Sonya. *Cultivation and Catastrophe: The Lyric Ecology of Modern Black Literature* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020).

Prendergast, Thomas A., and Jessica Rosenfeld, eds. *Chaucer and the Subversion of Form*. Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

Pribyl, Kathleen, Richard C. Cornes, and Christian Pfister, "Reconstructing Medieval April–July Mean Temperatures in East Anglia, 1256–1431," *Climatic Change* 113.2 (2012): pp. 393–412.

Quetchenbach, Bernard. "Illuminating the Anthropocene: Ecopoetic Explorers at the Edge of the Naturecultures Abyss," *American Literary History* 31 (2) (2019).

Richmond, Andrew. *Landscapes in Middle English Romance: The Medieval Imagination and The Natural World* (Cambridge University Press, 2021).

Robertson, Kellie. "Medieval Materialism: A Manifesto," *Exemplaria* 22.2 (2010): 99-118.

—*Nature Speaks: Medieval Literature and Aristotelian Philosophy* (UPenn Press, 2017).

—"Abusing Aristotle," in *Speculative Medievalisms: Discography*, ed. The Petropunk Collective [Eileen Joy, Anna Kłosowska, Nicola Masciandaro, Michael O'Rourke] (New York: Punctum Books, 2013).

—"Medieval Things: Materiality, Historicity, and the Premodern Object." *Literature Compass* 5 (2008).

—"Scaling Nature: Microcosm and Macrocosm in Later Medieval Thought" *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* (September 2019); 49 (3): 609–631.

Rolle, Richard. *Richard Rolle and the Holy Boke Gratia Dei*, ed. M. L. Arntz (Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universität Salzburg, 1981).

Rudd, Gillian. *Greenery: Ecocritical Readings of Late Medieval English Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).

Salter, Elizabeth. "A Complaint against Blacksmiths," in *English and International: Studies in the Literature, Art and Patronage of Medieval England*, ed. Derek Pearsall and Nicolette Zeeman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

Schibanoff, Susan. *Chaucer's Queer Poetics: Rereading the Dream Trio* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006).

Schnieder, Thomas R., "Chaucer's Physics: Motion in The House of Fame" in *The Passenger: Medieval Texts and Transits*, ed. James Smith (New York: Punctum Books, 2017).

Schmidt, A. V. C. ed. *The Vision of Piers Plowman: A Critical Edition of the B-text Based on Trinity College Cambridge MS B.15.17* (London, 1978; 2nd ed. 1995).

Schrader, Richard J. "The Inharmonious Choristers and Blacksmiths of MS Arundel 292," *Studies in Philology* (2007): 1-12.

Seaman, Myra. *Objects of Affection: The book and the household in late medieval England* (Manchester University Press, 2021).

Shanti, Sumartojo. *Atmospheres and the Experiential World: Theory and Methods* (London: Routledge, 2019).

Silvestris, Bernardus. *Poetic Works*, ed. Winthrop Wetherbee, Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library, 38. (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 2015).

Simpson, James. *Sciences and the Self in Medieval Poetry: Alan of Lille's "Anticlaudianus" and John Gower's "Confessio Amantis"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

Skiveren, Tobias."Fictionality in New Materialism: (Re)Inventing Matter." *Theory, Culture & Society* 39, no. 3 (May 2022): 187–202.

Smith, D. Vance. *Arts of Dying : Literature and Finitude in Medieval England*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).

Smith, G. Gregory. "The Scottish Chaucerians." *The Cambridge History of English and American Literature: An Encyclopedia in Eighteen Volumes*, eds. A. W. Ward and A. R. Waller (Cambridge, 2000).

— "*Medieval Forma*: Logic of the Work," *Reading for Form*, ed. Susan J. Wolfson and Marshall Brown. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006).

—"The Inhumane Wonder of the Book," *The Chaucer Review 47*, no. 4 (2013): 361–71.

Spearing, A. C. *Medieval Autographies: The "I" of the Text* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012).

Speirs, John. *The Scots Literary Tradition* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1940).

Stanbury, Sarah. "EcoChaucer: Green Ethics and Medieval Nature," *The Chaucer Review* 39/1 (2004): 1–16.

Steiner, Emily. *John Trevisa's Information Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

Stone, David. "The Impact of Drought in Early Fourteenth-century England," *The Economic History Review* 67.2 (2014): pp. 435–62.

Szerszynski, Bronislaw. "Reading and Writing the Weather," *Theory, Culture & Society* 27, no. 2–3 (March 2010): 9–30.

Taddei, Renzo. "Blame: the hidden (and difficult) side of the climate change debate" *Anthropology News* 49 (8):45–46 (2008).

Taylor, Jesse Oak. *The Sky of Our Manufacture* (University of Virginia Press, 2016).

Thacker, Andrew. "Critical Literary Geography," in *The Routledge Handbook of Literature and Space* ed. Robert T. Tally (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017).

Thijssen, J. M. M. H. *Censure and Heresy at the University of Paris, 1200–1400* (Philadelphia, 1998).

Thorpe, Deborah. "Heated Words: The Politics and Poetics of Work in 'A Complaint against Blacksmiths,'" *Parergon* 32 (2015): 77-101.

Treharne, Elaine. *Perceptions of Medieval Manuscripts: The Phenomenal Book.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

Trevisa, John. *On the Properties of Things, John Trevisa's Translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus De Proprietatibus Rerum, a Critical Text*, eds. M. C. Seymour, et al., vols. 1 and 2 (1975); vol. 3 (1988).

Tyler, Elizabeth M. "Where is the Ground of English Literature?" *The Cambridge Quarterly* 34, no. 4 (2005): 408–11.

Ungelenk, Johannes. *Literature and Weather: Shakespeare - Goethe - Zola* (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2018).

Usk, Thomas. *The Testament of Love*, ed. R. Allen Shoaf (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1998).

Vinsauf, Geoffrey. *Poetria nova*, rev. ed., trans. Margaret Nims (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010).

Waters, Claire. "Makyng and Middles in Chaucer's Poetry," *Readings in Medieval Textuality: Essays in Honour of A.C. Spearing*, eds. Cristina Maria Cervone and D. Vance Smith (Boydell & Brewer, 2016).

Westling, Louise, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Environment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

Weston, Daniel. *Contemporary Literary Landscapes: The Poetics of Experience* (Routledge, 2019).

—“Contemporary Poetic Ecologies and a Return to Form,” *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-Century Writings* 4(1)(2016).

Whatmore, Sarah. *Hybrid geographies: natures, cultures, spaces.* (London Thousand Oaks, 2002).

White, Hugh. “Division and Failure in Gower's Confessio Amantis,” *Neophilologus*, Vol. 72, Iss. 4 (Oct 1, 1988).

Wieland, Georg. “The Reception and Interpretation of Aristotle’s Ethics,” in *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy*, ed. Norman Kretzmann, Anthony Kenny, Jan Pinborg, and Eleonore Stump, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 657–72.

Williams, Deanne. “Dream Visions,” in *The Yale Companion to Chaucer,* ed. Seth Lerer (Yale University Press, 2005).

Wilson, Edward. "The Debate of the Carpenter's Tools" *The Review of English Studies, New Series*, 38, no. 152 (1987).

Wolfson, Susan J. and Marshall Brown eds. *Reading for Form* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006).

Yeager, R. F. *John Gower's Poetic: The Search for a New Arion* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1990).

Young, Spencer E. *Scholarly Community at the Early University of Paris: Theologians, Education, and Society, 1215-1248* (Cambridge, 2014).

Zhang, Dora. “Notes on Atmosphere,” *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences*, Volume 27, Number 1, June 2018: 121-155.

Zieman, Katherine. "Chaucer's Voys," *Representations* 60 (1997): 70-91.