

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

Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008. viii + 236 pp. index. illus. bibl. \$30. ISBN: 978-0-268-03083-4.

The seven essays comprising this collection grew out of a 2004–05 lecture series at Ohio State’s Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies. In their introduction, Hanawalt and Kiser make the case that medieval views of nature typically are not available to modern scholars as direct written expression, and that this requires an interdisciplinary interpretation of a broad range of sources on medieval life. In keeping with their opening argument the editors include essays by three scholars who explore medieval views of nature through study of accessible documents of the period, including hunting treatises, philosophical writings, and bestiaries. Susan Crane explores how the ritual form of an aristocratic hunt, detailed in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century manuscripts, was used to reinforce both social hierarchy and man’s place in nature. She also addresses the attitudes of hunters toward both prey and hunting dogs. This essay reminds us that historians often must rely on material left by a narrow segment of the population (e.g., the very wealthy), therefore, we are privy to a limited range of views. A fourteenth-century philosopher, Jean Buridan, is the intriguing protagonist of an essay by Joel Kaye in which he proposes that Buridan was exploring the concept of “balance” in nature long before the term was used in this sense. Kaye argues convincingly that Buridan’s model of a dynamic equilibrium in the composition of the earth opened the door to conceptualizations of abstract ideas on nature. The remaining essay to use medieval sources as a window into the period is by Jeffrey Cohen. In “Inventing with Animals in the Middle Ages” he draws examples from bestiaries and literature to present the idea that anthropomorphized animals served a variety of purposes such as showing human limitations or representing some races as less than human. Missing from the essay is any evidence that this was a distinctly medieval attitude toward animals.

The remaining piece on medieval nature relies on a wide range of sources including historical climate records and contemporary writings on medieval diet and population. Richard Hoffmann thoroughly documents the ecological dynamics in Western Europe from the eleventh century through the fourteenth, and discusses environmental changes that resulted from both natural and man-made causes. He includes the effect of episodes of brutal weather on crop failure, and draws attention to how changes in human diet had a powerful effect on the landscape.

The last three essays in the book jump from the medieval period into the early modern with Pamela Smith’s chapter on sixteenth-century collections. She acknowledges the wide range of recent scholarship on the *Kunst- und Wunderkammern*, but her interest here is the detailed 1565 treatise by Samuel Quiccheberg, which instructs his readers on organizing and displaying a collection in a way that glorifies nature by use of artifice. Smith relates Quiccheberg’s artisanal

work to that of others of the period constructed “to embody and display the powers of art and nature” (125). Marjorie Swann’s partial essay title “Procreate Like Trees” comes from Thomas Browne’s seventeenth-century *Religio Medici*. Browne’s stated wish that he could reproduce asexually seemed as strange to his contemporaries as it does today, and this aspect of his writings does not seem to have had any broad influence. Swann’s exposition of this one quotation from a writer who contributed much to the larger view of nature in his time seems rather fine-grained in the context of this volume. The final essay, on the other hand, is a broad-ranging work by Julie Hochstrasser that manages to clarify a complex set of contributions to the study of plants, animals, and people in seventeenth-century Dutch Brazil. At the same time she provides a great deal of visual and textual support for her compelling contention that much can be learned about human nature by studying how humans represent nature.

This collection certainly models an interdisciplinary approach to the study of how humans engage with nature, but at some expense to a cohesive whole. Readers may be left feeling as if they have dined at a buffet with oddly disparate entrees; the various dishes are enticing and fulfilling on their own behalf, but you are left wondering why they were served together.

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