

# The Merchant's Tale (1)

## Environment, Landscape, and Nature in *The Merchant's Tale*

Heide Estes ([hestes@monmouth.edu](mailto:hestes@monmouth.edu))

### An essay chapter from *The Open Access Companion to the Canterbury Tales* (Summer 2020)

The climactic scene in the *Merchant's Tale* takes place in a pear tree, so it seems as though writing about environment, landscape and nature in the text should be fairly straightforward. But the pear tree is inside a walled garden, and pears are not native fruits to England (or, for that matter, to Italy, where the narrative is set), though they had been cultivated for centuries by the Greeks and, later, the Romans (Silva et al. 1). There are no “natural” landscapes in the Tale: the outdoor space is a walled garden, set off by human actions from the urban environment around it, and its vegetation chosen, planted, and tended by human actions.

May climbs the pear tree saying she is pregnant and requires its fruit, so perhaps the “nature” in the tale is Woman, who is constructed by medieval discourse as closer to nature than Man, in part because of a presumed lesser capacity for reason and in part because of the messy business of childbearing and nursing, not to mention menstrual flow. Early Christian theologians such as Ambrose (339-97 CE) and Jerome (c. 342-420 CE) argue that men are made in the image of God, while women are made in the image of Man, and that the male body is the normative one. According to Ambrose, “She who does not believe is a woman and is still designated by the name of her bodily sex, whereas she who believes progresses to complete manhood.” Jerome connects women’s lesser humanity explicitly with childbearing: “As long as woman is for birth and children, she is as different from man as body is from soul. But if she wishes to serve Christ more than the world, then she will cease to be a woman and will be called man” (qtd. in Lampert 30). In Chaucer’s *Physician's Tale*, we note, “Nature” is characterized as feminine (PhyT 9-11).

Analogously, the philosopher Boethius (c. 480-524 CE), whose *Consolation of Philosophy* Chaucer translated, elevates humans above all else by virtue of the faculty of intelligence, which surpasses sense, imagination, and thought: “The eye of Intelligence is yet more exalted; for overpassing the sphere of the universal, it will behold absolute

form itself by the pure force of the mind's vision. Wherein the main point to be considered is this: the higher faculty of comprehension embraces the lower, while the lower cannot rise to the higher.... Man is a two-legged animal endowed with reason" (trans. James 248-9). Val Plumwood, Karen J. Warren, and other philosophers have connected the hierarchies between human and nature and men and women, arguing that they share a "logic of domination" that is used to justify male domination over "both women and non-human nature" (Warren 48, 51). In using the garden to escape her restrictive marriage, and in climbing the pear tree and claiming she needs its fruit to assuage hunger she attributes to pregnancy, May uses elements of the natural world to pursue her own goals as distinct from those of her controlling husband.

Indeed, Januarie's preparations for marriage to May take the form of a negotiation for a piece of property, rather than the joining into a marital collaboration of two equals: she appears as the legal equivalent of his walled garden, and the greenery Januarie plants for his pleasure. Both the garden and May are "fresshe" (e.g. lines 904, 946). The Merchant comments that "A wyf is Goddes yifte verrailly" (MerT 1311) while goods, lands, rents and pastures are gifts of fortune. Moreover, after January is struck blind, he effectively imprisons May in his house, allowing her to go nowhere unless he is holding her by the hand. The point is underscored by the fact that Januarie's sexual attentions to May—described as unpleasantly forceful—take place in the garden. Gardens produce food and medicinal herbs; May is to produce an heir: each serves patriarchy in general and Januarie in particular.

All of this is potentially undercut by various elements of the narrative. May has her way with Damyan, yet persuades Januarie he has not seen what he saw. She says she must have a pear because she is pregnant, but there is no other evidence for that, and plenty of reason to believe she is prevaricating, simply to provide an excuse for climbing the tree. May's enclosure in the garden in terms of Januarie's constraints on her movements is contradicted by her ability to use the garden to her own desires. Defining "environment," "landscape," and indeed "nature," in the Tale and for that matter in fourteenth-century England, is quite complicated. Ideas about what constitutes "nature" (or doesn't) are intricately bound up with ideas and ideologies about gender, sexuality, and social class. The walled garden isn't really "nature," and the expectations of the characters and early audiences about power and gender are repeatedly violated.

## Tools

Using ecocriticism as a lens through which to read the Tale allows a new perspective on how gender and other human social categories are constructed. "Ecocriticism" or "environmental criticism" focuses on the ways in which literary texts represent the non-human "natural" world and how humans interact with the non-human. Scholars of ecocriticism take a wide variety of different kinds of approaches, but are unified in giving attention to the natural world, and to the non-human (however those might be defined) as involved in processes or cycles, much like the human body, rather than

considering all other than the human as stage or prop, important only in terms of human needs, emotions, or desires.

Scholars have considered the “setting” of literary works simply as inert, unchanging stages for human action. They see such places as having potential to function metaphorically with respect to human needs, concerns, and actions. Ecocriticism, instead, considers places in literature to be interesting in interactions with humans as well as independent of human interests and activities. Ecocriticism sees nature as active, moving and developing, as a set of interrelated systems that together maintain stability but not stasis.

Moreover, ecocritics ask to what extent literary texts or other cultural productions represent the non-human world, including landscape and built environments as well as animals and objects, as valuable and interesting beyond reference to human concerns. While we tend to think of environment and nature as distinct from the human, humans both affect and are affected by our environments, are simultaneously part of nature and separate from it. As William Cronon has written, “human acts occur within a network of relationships, processes, and systems that are as ecological as they are cultural” (1349). Human cultural systems have an impact on ecology much as ecological systems influence the rhythms and patterns of human life.

Much terminology that ecocritics use to talk about the non-human world is largely post-medieval, though a natural world, and ways of thinking about it, clearly existed in the Middle Ages. During the medieval period, “nature” referred to the innate character of a person or a class of people or animals, rather than to the natural world. The word “landscape” as a reference to a natural scenic area as viewed from a distance or in a painting is first attested in 1598. The idea of a natural vista as existing within the human gaze seems to be post-medieval; the Old English word “landscepe” means simply a “region of land.” The word “landscape” does not seem to have carried over into Middle English, but was borrowed from Dutch in its post-medieval sense of aesthetic appreciation. The idea of the “environment” as the natural world in a general sense dates only from the middle of the twentieth century. Reading medieval literature with attention to the natural world is complicated by the modernity of the terms, and the ways they are likely to shape our thinking. Yet it is worth attending to how medieval authors, scribes and audiences saw the natural world and how they interacted with it, and what consequences that has for how they saw themselves in human society.

Since the 1996 publication of *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, the idea of reading literature from an environmental perspective has gained ground. Ecocriticism encompasses multitudes of different perspectives, some foregrounding deep ecology, others animals or things; still others linking ecocriticism to feminist or postcolonial perspectives. As Glotfelty [writes](#), “Despite the broad scope of inquiry and disparate levels of sophistication, all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it. Ecocriticism

takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts language and literature. As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the nonhuman” ([link to this document](#)). Ecological approaches to literature vary significantly in priorities and concerns, including in their focus such diverse concepts as animals, objects, gender, race, and ethnicity. All such approaches, however, share a focus on attention to the connections between nature and culture, between humans and others. Humans are part of the “natural” world, inextricably connected with it, and while it can be easier to see the ways we have impacted the natural world, locally and globally, we are also affected by our surroundings, local and global. From the turns of day and night to the turns of seasons and years, to weather changes and viral or bacteriological drifts, we are part of the non-human world.

Critical ecocriticism is interested in the practice of attending to the actual physical world, observing nature and understanding how literary texts represent and construct it. Theoretical ecocriticism, on the other hand, seeks to understand what words like “human” and “non-human,” “nature” and “culture” mean, and how their meanings intersect with one another. Such theory asks how human cultural productions, whether epics or comic books, describe the natural world and human interactions with it, and what they mean by “human,” “nature,” and related terms. Even though the *Merchant’s Tale* takes place in an urban landscape with an enclosed garden that appears to be completely constructed by humans, the characters interact with nature. Januarie has lived sixty turns around the sun, and has aged. The pear tree functions as a prop, but requires sun and water, and an appropriate climate, in which to live.

Ecofeminists observe the parallels between treatment of land and treatment of women as objects of utilitarian value to male-controlled social organizations. As Val Plumwood has argued, the Greeks articulated a division between body and reason, with the body associated with nature, emotions, landscape, women, and reproduction (80). Women, in other words, were distinct from men in being less reliably regarded as able to use reason and thus to participate in full humanity, and they were linked explicitly with the natural world in this “failing” rather than being a distinct category of human. Thus May is associated metaphorically and descriptively with young animals and with meadow flowers, while Januarie is linked with philosophers and theologians. The garden that features prominently in the narrative is walled and constructed by human actors, and May’s actions are similarly constrained by others in a way that assigns lesser legal and social power to women than to men. Completely constrained in her movements after Januarie’s affliction with blindness, May is trapped as much as is the garden’s pear tree.

A potential problem with a gendered line of reasoning, anticipated by Plumwood and more explicitly laid out by Greta Gaard in her 2017 book *Critical Ecofeminism*, is that human-centered treatment of the natural world as a “resource” has also subordinated males of classes or cultures that are non-dominant. A post-colonial perspective that investigates the ways in which serfs, slaves, and other groups of men and women have been treated as less than fully human is necessary in conjunction with how ecofeminism

recognizes women as a subordinated class. Understanding the intersections between gender and other markers of difference from the cis, heterosexual, non-disabled, white, upper class male is crucial. Human difference is, in the *Merchant's Tale*, inscribed by both gender and class: the distinctions between Januarie and both May and Damyan are substantial in terms of the resources they control. Januarie negotiates for marriage with May in a way that makes clear her status as a non-agential pawn in the process. Damyan, a squire, is Januarie's servant, and Januarie notices Damyan's absence because his accustomed services are not provided.

Contemporary study of disability gives substantial focus to how built environments and social expectations can render certain impairments or embodiments disabling, though studies that connect nature and disability are as of yet sparse. The *Merchant's Tale* traffics in literal and metaphorical blindness within its built urban environments. The Merchant comments that gifts of fortune "passen as a shadwe upon a wal" (MerT 1315). Fortune's mutability is associated with the movement of the sun, evoking the allegory of the Cave in Plato's *Republic*, in which people can see only shadows, not actual truths. Yet the only wall described in the Tale is that surrounding the garden that Januarie builds, in which he will regain literal vision but not comprehension. In the Tale, vision and blindness are both metaphorical and literal in the knight Januarie's quest for power and a "buxom ... wyf" (MerT 1288), a compliant servant who will ease his old age. A full discussion of connections between disability and environment is beyond the scope of this chapter but is worth pursuing.

## **Text**

### **VEGETATIVE AND ANIMAL METAPHORS**

The Merchant is explicit in his telling of his tale that women should be subordinate to men, and he uses a variety of vegetable and animal metaphors to underscore human hierarchies, though not always in expected ways. The Tale begins when Januarie, a knight of Pavia decides, aged sixty, finally to take a wife, after a lifetime of following his desires with, or "on," women (MerT 1250). A bachelor, says the Merchant, lives "but as a byrd or a beest" (MerT 1281), in contrast to the "blisful and ordinaat" (1284) life of a man yoked with an obedient wife who never wearies "hym to love and serve" (1291) and "is for mannes helpe ywroght" (1324). An unmarried man is here presented as unnaturally associated with the natural world. In contrast to the domesticated animals that appear later in the narrative, these animals might be construed as wild, unconnected with domesticating humans or married domesticity.

The expectation that woman should serve man is established immediately: it is Januarie's explicit goal in marriage to find a woman to serve him, domestically and sexually. The Merchant states explicitly that men hold power over women, telling the Genesis story of Eve's creation as a tale of Adam's need for a helper, stating that this

proves “That wyf is mannes helpe and his confort” (MerT 1331), as well as his earthly paradise, his amusement who is “so buxom and so vertuous” (1333) that they must live in unity with one flesh and one heart. It might be noted that “buxom” derives from “bugan” (bow), referring to bending or bowing at the waist or knees in deference to another person. Once they have been married, Januarie’s unpleasant approach to his wife further emphasizes his expectation of domination. Watching her at their wedding feast, he “in his herte he gan hire to manace / That he that nyght in armes wolde hire streyne” (MerT 1752-3). His fantasies involve threats and constraint, cementing his desire for power over her.

Januarie declares that he wants a young wife, and compares her to several animals: “Bet is, quod he, ‘a pyk than a pikerel; / And bet than old boef is the tendre veel” (MerT 1419-20). Moreover, he says that he can guide a young woman, “right as men may warm wex with handes plye” (MerT 1430). In his monologue describing his desire for a woman, his metaphors emphasize her domestication and confinement. He drifts from fish, wild creatures living in water, through domesticated animals kept for human food, and finally to objects of everyday life including wax and “bene-straw and greet forage” (MerT 1422), food for the animals he uses to characterize women over thirty years of age.

Yet Januarie insists that, despite his white hair, he is untouched by the passage of time: “Myn herte and alle my lymes been as grene / As laurer thurgh the yeer is for to sene” (MerT 1465-6). He dismisses his friend Justinus’s advice to be cautious in choosing a wife with further references to plant matter: “Straw for thy Senek, and for thy proverbes! / I counte nat a panyer ful of herbes / Of scole-terms (MerT 1567-9). Meanwhile the Merchant has already said that any man “that halt hym worth a leek” (MerT 1350) should have a wife. The comparison of man to leek rather than a plant of greater size or value is interesting, particularly given Januarie’s apparently high self-regard as suggested in the following passage.

Stone metaphors appear repeatedly in the Tale. After their marriage, when Januarie finally manages to eject his guests from the wedding feast, he has May brought to his room, where she is “brought abedde as stille as stoon” (MerT 1818)—more passive even than vegetation, which at least has life, and reduced to earth itself. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, however, argues that even stones are not truly lifeless; and May’s stillness here may suggest a powerful imperviousness to other natural forces and anticipate her later renegotiation of Januarie’s confinement. A hypothetical man who could take not pity on a love-sick Damyan is described as having “an herte as hard as is stoon” (MerT 1990), juxtaposing the lifeless organ with the man’s social empowerment. A further reference to stone occurs in the description of Januarie’s walled garden, again seemingly inert but less impervious to May and Damyan’s intrigues that he can imagine. The Merchant describes Januarie as “blynd as is a stoon” (MerT 2156), depicting him in his disability as an object and linking him with the hypothetical stone-hearted man who would let Damyan die rather than cure his lovesickness.

The relationship between Januarie and May is not one of mutual pleasure, and its presentation with repeated animal and plant similes and metaphors puts both man and woman in juxtaposition with nature, despite Januarie's insistence that he is the one in power. As they consummate their marriage, Januarie kisses May "with thikke bristles of his berd unsofte" (MerT 1824). The "bristles" evoke a boar, and the Merchant further likens his beard to sharkskin or briars. Januarie's expectation is that he will be domesticated by marriage, but metaphors still associate him with wild animals and fish, and even a thorny bush. For her part, May "preyseth nat his pleyying worth a bene" (MerT 1854), evoking animal fodder, and retreats to her room as long as she can get away with it.

Squire Damyan, too, is likened to an animal. He is smitten with May, completely lovesick, unable to do his usual duties of attendance upon Januarie because he burns in "Venus fir" (MerT 1875). Promised love by May, he returns immediately to health and to service: "And eek to Januarie he gooth as lowe / As ever did a dogge for the bowe" (MerT 2013-24). Like May, he is compared to an animal, his status as servant to Januarie on a continuum with the service given by an animal. Much as May's gender makes her subordinate to Januarie, so does Damyan's class, pointing to the overarching "logic of domination" identified by Warren.

## DIVINE INFLUENCES

Januarie's enclosed garden is populated by and described in terms of metaphors evoking gods of the Roman pantheon. It will be the fairest garden anywhere, so beautiful even Priapus, "god of gardyns" (MerT 2035) would not be able to describe it. The Wycliffite Bible, an unauthorized fourteenth-century translation into Middle English, contains a reference to worship of idols that comments that Priapus is "an idol liyk a man, with outragiose membre of man" (III Kings, chapter 25) suggesting that the phallic sense of Priapus should be understood (*Middle English Compendium*, "Priapus"). Pluto and Proserpina "and al hire fayerye" (MerT 2039) like to dance and sing within the garden. Chaucer here uses the Roman names for the pantheon; Pluto and Proserpina correspond to the Greek Hades, god of the underworld, and Persephone, whom he kidnaps from earth to be his queen, in a story with some parallels to the story of Januarie and May. Chaucer's identification of the gods with the fairies may have been influenced by the Middle English narrative poem *Sir Orfeo* (Benson, 888-889).

The garden is gated, and Januarie carries the only key; in the summer, he brings May with him to do "thynges which that were nat doon abedde" (MerT 2051), perhaps, along with the reference to Priapus, anticipating the things May will do with Damian later in the narrative. The suggestion that Januarie and May have sex in the garden, albeit a walled one, again blurs the distinction between them and domesticated animals, which mate in fields, spaces which have affinities with the natural world but are also, like the garden, highly unnatural as a result of human activities of removing trees, tilling, and

planting. The emphasis here is on Januarie: “he in the garden parfourned hem and spedde,” implying at best passivity on May’s part, and at worst, marital rape.

The well in the garden is suggestive. Water in medieval texts can suggest a simple boundary, though it often functions in trickier ways. The General Prologue tells us that the Merchant “wolde the see were kept for any thyng / Bitwixe Middelburgh and Orewelle” (GP 276-77), towns in England and the Netherlands on opposite sides of the water where the English Channel gives way to the North Sea. Though he wears a “Flaundrish” hat, he wishes for the sea to remain a firm boundary between England and the Continent and for shipping traffic to be protected. Januarie’s well, however, runs underground, and stands beneath an evergreen laurel tree, a vegetative curiosity and a stand-in for things that happen out of season (MerT 2037). In some other fourteenth-century texts, features of the natural world mark boundaries between human and magic or wondrous spaces. For example, in the alliterative romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Lord Bertilak of Hautdesert kills a boar in the middle of a river, demonstrating his own separation from his hunting companions, and perhaps from humans more generally. Later in the poem, Sir Gawain has to seek out the Green Knight and finally finds him in an eerie “Green Chapel,” an otherworldly place he can enter only by jumping over a flowing stream. Elsewhere in the *Canterbury Tales*, the rapist knight finds Alison of Bath’s “hag” or woman of wisdom sitting “on the grene” (WBT 997), and in *Sir Orfeo* Heurodis comes to grief under a tree before she is abducted and taken underground. The juxtaposition of well and laurel in Januarie’s garden, alongside ancient deities associated with fairies, gives it a character of otherworldliness; the garden is a place where anything can happen, rather than the place of control and confinement that Januarie imagines it to be.

The end of the poem is characterized by a series of reversals. Fortune is represented as a scorpion “that flaterest with thyn heed what thou wolt styng” (MerT 2059) and gives death through its tail: brittle joy, sweet deceiving venom, monster in disguise, a departure from the human forms given Pluto and Proserpina. The wheel turns, and Januarie suddenly goes blind, and is stricken with severe jealousy regarding May, such that he will not allow her to go anywhere unless he has her by the hand. She is now constrained as if she were in the gated, locked garden, yet it is the garden that allows her to plan a tryst with Damian. In another reversal, Januarie had imagined his young wife as pliant as warm wax, but now she manages to create an impression in wax of Januarie’s key to the garden, which she gives to Damyan so he can have a copy of the key made (MerT 2116-2124). Entry to the garden is through a “wyket,” a small gate or, in anatomical texts, the vulva (MerT 2118). An Old English riddle written down four hundred years earlier in the collection of poetry in the Exeter Book has comparably punning language: “A strange thing hangs by a man’s thigh, hidden by a garment. It has a hole / in its head” (Crossley-Holland, 52). The double-entendre solution of key and penis is evoked by the rhyme “cliket ... wyket” (key ... gate) as Damian hurries into the garden ahead of Januarie and May (MerT 2151-2).



Additional reversals ensue. Pluto's abduction of Proserpina is described once again, along with the "grisely carte" (MerT 2232) in which he stole her away from home and family, pointing once again to the illegitimacy of Januarie's treatment of May. Pluto sits down on a bench made of turf and holds forth on the wickedness of woman. He promises to give sight to Januarie so that he can see Damian in the tree, whereupon Proserpina promises to give May "and alle wommen after, for hir sake" (MerT 2267) the verbal dexterity to escape, making men "lewed as gees" (MerT 2275). Damian, following May's gestures, has already climbed into the pear tree, and now she tells Januarie to hug the tree and let her climb it via his shoulders because "a woman in my plit" must have a pere, with, as the Middle English Dictionary notes, a pun on "per," a mate or equal. She refers her to her "appetit" (MerT 2336) for fruit, echoing the opening lines of the Tale with their reference to Januarie's "appetyt" (MerT 1250) for women. Januarie's sight is restored, but, with Proserpina's help, May successfully persuades him that his vision is false. May's affair with Damyan recalls Januarie's many affairs with women before he married and it appears that in eating the "pear," May has become a "peer" to Januarie, capable of managing her relations with him so that she, too, can find pleasure and companionship. Literary devices revolving around water, stone, vegetation, and animals repeatedly undercut the meanings their speakers apparently intend. While the poem takes place entirely in built environments, it repeatedly insists upon continuities between humans and the natural world.

## HUMANS, NATURE, AND POWER

In his 1995 book *The Environmental Imagination*, Lawrence Buell argued that literary works that could belong to a new "canon" of environmentally oriented texts should have several characteristics in terms of how they represent the non-human environment and depict interactions between it and humans. He proposed that they should present the non-human environment as more than just a framing device or a static background for human activities and interests. In addition, he argued that they should depict non-human interests as legitimate ones for their own sake, and not just for the benefits they provide to human "actors," and that humans should be presented as ethically responsible and/or accountable to the environment in some way. Finally, he argued that ecologically oriented literature should provide a sense of environment "as a process rather than as a constant or a given" (7-8). The *Merchant's Tale* fails on all of these criteria. The walled garden, the Tale's only apparently "natural" feature, cannot be construed as a non-human environment, and otherwise all references to the natural world serve human interests, used metaphorically to illuminate human concerns. The centrality of the evergreen laurel in the middle of the garden highlights its static nature, denying the possibility of seasonal or other changes that would engage the environment as a living, changing entity. However, a decade later in *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, Buell envisioned a "second-wave ecocriticism" with different priorities and expectations for ecologically inflected interactions with literature. Here, he enlarged the scope of ecocriticism from environmental literature to any literary text or other cultural production, arguing that literature and theory should "take into account the interpenetration of metropolis and outback, of anthropocentric as well as biocentric

concepts” (23). As I have argued elsewhere, ecocriticism also needs to engage with power relationships among different categories of the human and challenge “social structures that differentiate among different kinds of humans, rendering some of them objects while others retain subjectivity and power” (171).

The *Merchant’s Tale* intertwines individual and social power with environmental metaphor in a narrative that needs to be read carefully to understand its presentation of the fictional environment as a backdrop, a stage, with utilitarian and metaphorical functions for the humans that move through it. The framing elements of the full *Canterbury Tales* suggest rather than describe a “real environment” of the pilgrimage from Southwark to Canterbury; this “real” environment is given almost no descriptive language—considerably less than what is afforded fictional environments “somewhere else” in the *Merchant’s Tale* as well as the *Knight’s Tale*. All of these spaces are presented as existing purely for the purpose of the characters’ movement. Neither environment possesses any agency or interest on its own.

Moreover, the Frame and the Tales obscure the labors of humans and animals alike—oxen drawing a plow, humans harvesting crops and butchering animals—that provide food for the wedding feast, of which the Merchant says only the palace is full of “vitaille, / The mooste deyntevous of al Ytaille” (MerT 1713-14). The Tale references minstrels at the feast, and Januarie’s ogling contemplations of his bride, but gives no details about the food that is eaten, or how it came to be grown and harvested and cooked and served for the aristocratic characters in the Tale to consume.

Humans and nature are metaphorically entwined in the *Merchant’s Tale*, with the natural world as well as many women and non-aristocratic human characters present in a utilitarian sense as metaphor, background, and prop, rather than existing on or for their own sake. Reading the *Merchant’s Tale* with an eye toward environmental representations demonstrates the extent to which an author of the fourteenth century could see the natural world as existing solely to fulfill human needs, completely lacking in independent agency. Moreover, attention to the natural world brings forth details about relationships among humans and how those relationships are inflected by gender, class, and disability.

## **Transformation**

### **QUESTIONS & PROJECTS**

1. What does it mean for considerations of environmental detail that Chaucer locates the *Merchant’s Tale* in Italy, rather than in England?

2. May is described in terms of animal, vegetable, and object, much like Alison of the *Miller's Tale*. Compare descriptions of Damyan, who is not (quite) of the same noble class as Januarie and (by marriage, if not by birth) of May. What does the difference in descriptive terms for the two characters suggest about gender and the natural world?
3. What does it mean for our own understanding of urban environments when we take a walled garden as representative of nature in a medieval text? To what extent are built environments part of the (natural) world? To what extent are human beings (male and female) part of the natural world?
4. Revisit the opening lines of the *General Prologue* to the *Canterbury Tales* using the ideas in this chapter. How are human interests and natural phenomena intertwined? To what extent is nature represented as process, an agential entity in flux, versus as a static background for human actors?
5. Consider a private or only partially accessible outdoor space near you, for example a golf course, event site, or park with entrance or parking fees. Compare the use of that space to Januarie's garden, and think about how race, class, and gender affect the interaction of human and nature in that space.
6. In medieval England, human and non-human worlds interact and potentially blur: forests as legally defined spaces, fields for agricultural production, hedges, ports, among others. Research one or more of these blurred spaces and discuss how such a space illuminates and is illuminated by the ideas in the *Merchant's Tale*.
7. Consider Jonathan Hsy's chapter on disability/ability in this *Companion* and discuss how the appearance of blindness, a disability, and its disappearance, relate to the discussion of humans and nature in the tale. To what extent is gender represented as disabling? How does that interact with blindness?

## WORKS CITED AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, 2nd edition. Routledge, 2002.

Benson, Larry D., ed. *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd edition. Houghton Mifflin, 1987.

Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy*. Trans. H. R. James. London, 1987.

*Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism*, edited by Karla Armbruster and Kathleen R. Wallace. University Press of Virginia, 2001.

Buell, Lawrence. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. Harvard University Press, 1995.

—. *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2005.

*Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Environment*, edited by Louise Westling. Cambridge University Press, 2014.

Clarke, Catherine A.M. *Literary Landscapes and the Idea of England, 700-1400*. Boydell and Brewer, 2006.

Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman*. University of Minnesota Press, 2015.

Cronon, William. "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative." *Journal of American History*, Vol. 78, No. 4 (Mar., 1992), pp. 1347-1376.

*Ecocritical Theory: New European Approaches*, edited by Axel Goodbody and Kate Rigby. University of Virginia Press, 2011.

*Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. University of Georgia Press, 1996.

*Ecofeminist Literary Criticism: Theory, Interpretation, Pedagogy*, edited by Greta Gaard and Patrick D. Murphy. University of Illinois Press, 1998.

Estes, Heide. *Anglo-Saxon Literary Landscapes: Ecotheory and the Environmental Imagination*. Amsterdam University Press, 2017.

*The Exeter Book Riddles*, trans. Kevin Crossley-Holland. Enitharmon Press, 2008

Garrard, Greg. *Ecocriticism: The New Critical Idiom*. 2nd edition. Routledge, 2012.

Huggan, Graham, and Helen Tiffin. *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*. Routledge, 2010.

*Inhuman Nature*, edited by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen. Oliphaunt Books, 2014.

*ISLE Reader: Ecocriticism, 1993-2003*, edited by Michael P. Branch and Scott Slovic. University of Georgia Press, 2003.

Lampert, Lisa. *Gender and Jewish Difference from Paul to Shakespeare*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004.

*Middle English Compendium*, edited by Frances McSparran and others. University of Michigan, 2001. <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary>

Neville, Jennifer. *Representations of the Natural World in Old English Poetry*. Cambridge University Press, 1999.

*Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism*, edited by Greg Garrard. Oxford University Press, 2014.

*Place to Believe In: Locating Medieval Landscapes*, edited by Clare A. Lees and Gillian R. Overing. Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006.

Plumwood, Val. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. Routledge, 2003.

*Prismatic Ecology: Ecotheory Beyond Green*, edited by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen. University of Minnesota Press. 2013.

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

Silva, G. J., Tatiane Medeiros Souza, Rosa Lía Barbieri, and Antonio Costa de Oliveira. "Origin, Domestication, and Dispersing of Pear (*Pyrus* spp.)." *Advances in Agriculture* 2014: 1-8.

Slovic, Scott. *Going Away to Think: Engagement, Retreat, and Ecocritical Responsibility*. University of Nevada Press, 2008.

*Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*, edited by William Cronon. W.W. Norton and Company, 1995.

Warren, Karen J. *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What It Is And Why It Matters*. Rowman and Littlefield, 2000.