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Franklin, Kate (2024) Tyers, Theresa L. and Patricia Skinner, eds. Gender and the 'Natural' Environment in the Middle Ages. Religion and Culture in the Middle Ages Series. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2023. 272 pages, £70 for hardback and epub. ISBN 978-1-83772-057-6. [Book Review]

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This rich edited volume is the result of extended discourse on medieval gendered bodies and their diverse relationships with something which might be called nature, the natural, or the more-than-human. As Laura Kalas reflects in the Foreword, the volume emerged from the 2020 Gender and Medieval Studies Conference; the conversation within the book resonates with the unforeseen intimacies and estrangements, juxtapositions and reorientations which unfolded across the Covid-19 pandemic. The authors of the individual chapters, each in their own way, grapple with categories which dissect and vivisection social engagements with the self: body, sex, gender, landscape, animals, plants, rocks, water, matter/spirit, nature/culture, secular/sacred. These categories didn't simply come under renewed scrutiny as a result of the pandemic but, like fragments of polarized glass were held up in new layerings to the sun, to see which configurations shed light, and which leave us in the dark. Similarly, each chapter in this collection is helpful and good to think with on its own, but I also found reading the fragments with and against each other thought-provoking and generative. The volume is focused on works in medieval English and French from the latter centuries of the medieval period, which allows for an emergent thematic intimacy, a leakage among the bodies discussed; some of the questions provoked by these leakages/linkages will be briefly touched on below.

The volume contains seven case studies written by a 'monstrous regiment' of scholars from the US and the UK; these case studies are organized into two sections: 'Women's Spaces' and 'Queer Bodies.' The first of these sections leads the reader through a systematic questioning of the relationship between *nature* and *women* as categories, with special attention to the striations of power which run through the question of who embodies 'natural' orders, and who makes or deploys natural knowledge. Linda Mitchell's chapter provides a critical reminder of our dependence on medieval authors for the light that shines (or doesn't) through their accounts of women in the medieval world. Mitchell's emphasis on how our historical view of medieval women gets tangled in discursive constructions of gender is needful going forward, as we must contemplate how to navigate the 'male femininity' (to crib from Halberstam) embodied in a female figure in a chronicle penned by a masculine writer deeply invested in 'naturalizing' gendered power. Jennifer Borland's chapter is oriented across a different categorical opposition, that between

feminine care and masculine medicine, as she examines the gendered representation of practitioner knowledge in illustrated medical manuals. The figure of the knowledgeable body interpellated and engendered by instructive texts is also raised in Theresa Tyers' chapter, which examines the provoking juxtaposition of forms of knowledge within a single manuscript intended for a feminine reader. Tyers' essay also moves across dilations of time, as she contemplates how medieval gender was shaped by perceptions of climate change, of shifts in biological cycles and transformations of social-natural systems, entwined within eschatological timescales and the attenuated life-course of the Holy Family. Elma Brenner's chapter on distillates and medicinal practices effectively destabilizes the distinction between 'natural' materials and 'cultural' techne, by drawing our attention to the subtle linkages between human bodies and natural elements—and in particular, between the perceived efficacy of natural remedies and the embodied expertise of their distillers.

The queerness of the 'Queer Bodies' section of the book refers as much to the interdisciplinary approaches of the three case studies as it does to the bodies under discussion. In a play of cultural-poetical juxtaposition, Diane Heath's chapter considers the medieval oyster, suspended in a matrix of allegorical signification as fluid as any estuary. This essay shows what can be revealed through tentacular readings across genre and discipline, of indulging in bulging hermeneutics which contain molluscal agency as well as riparian economy, medieval natural history, Marian allegory, and strange 'oystertecture' in the form of the shell grotto. In her close, commingled reading of two verdant late-fifteenth century dream visions, Michelle Sauer invites the reader to contemplate a desiring body given flesh by the text, oriented with other textual bodies in complex and fluid ways. In Sauer's analysis, authorial anxiety about enclosed female community spills over into erotic tensions which animate human bodies, plants, landscapes and poetic hybrids. Finally, Tess Wingard's brilliant essay shows the strengths of combined ecocritical and feminist readings for pulling new insights out of seemingly hegemonic sources like Oresme's *De causis mirabilium*. Wingard's close reading pushes back against a narrow casting of the medieval 'allegorical mindset' which reads the nonhuman world as a Book of Nature which narrates a single story. What happens when the body of the monster, and of the monstrous mother, are freed from the allegorical labor of moral signifying? What other agencies might these queer bodies reclaim, attain, birth into being?

In their Introduction, editors Theresa Tyers and Patricia Skinner do a great job of laying out some of the complex threads which have been picked up by medieval scholars working on the intersections of gender and nature. To pick a term from Donna Haraway, whose work features across the volume, this is a historiography of situated knowledges, by scholars of

medieval scholasticism and medicine, of gardening, politics, poetry, agronomy and epidemiology. The chapters of the volume take differing standpoints in disparate relations to the sexed body, to the social self, to the imbrication of social gender and material flesh. In general, this is a strength, as each chapter is situated within its disciplinary conversations, terminologies, and priorities, including priorities of feminist praxis. Sometimes the diversity of approaches can be confusing, and led me as a reader to reflect that ultimately the medieval bodies, women, and natures discussed across the book were kindred but not the same. This is great, it is an epistemological calisthenics I embrace, but it may challenge a student reader who, for instance, looks for a working or even comparative definition of gender, nature, body, queer(ness, theory), or feminism, none of which are listed in the Index. Ultimately, I think I would have appreciated if the conversation that led to the grouping of papers as 'women' or 'queer' to have been included in the volume—but then perhaps the discussion as to how these differentially-situated bodies leak into one another will take place in classrooms, made possible by this volume's provocative (non)juxtapositions.

This volume is a valuable touchstone on the state of the field in gender history and ecocriticism in the European Middle Ages. It will be of interest to casual readers who are versed in the genres of primary text discussed (chronicles, medical manuals, bestiaries, agricultural treatises, poetry and prose literature, scholastic rummagings around sex and the body) as well as to cultural historians of multiple periods. The chapters will be of exquisite use to teachers putting together syllabi on medieval gender and nature, political economy, medicine and disease, and myriad other leaky themes, and is already popular reading among scholars interested in the future of ecocritical and embodied medieval history.