



3. Animacy, Animal Voices, and Anthropomorphism

Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls*, Or the Invention of Valentine's Day

ENGL133 Imagining Nature

Nirvana, “In Bloom”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PbgKEjNBHqM>

Sell the kids for food
Weather changes moods
Spring is here again
Reproductive glands
. . .
Nature is a whore
Bruises on the fruit
Tender age in bloom

“Now Welcome Summer”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m02DYcDYyDA>

Now welcom somer, with thy
sonne softe,
Now welcome summer, with
your balmy sun
That hast this wintres weders
over-shaker,
Which has shaken off the
winter storms
And driven away the longe
nightes blake!
And driven away the long
dark nights!

Seynt Valentyn, that art ful hy
on lofte,
Saint Valentine, who sits on
high,

Thus singen smale foules
for thy sake.

Is the one who the little
birds sing for!

. . .
Wel han they cause for to
gladen ofte,
They have a good reason
to rejoyce

Sith ech of hem
recovered hath his make:
Since each is reunited
with its mate –
Ful blisful (may) they
singen whan they wake.
They will sing blissfully
together when they
awake.

Today's Class

- Why personify nature?
- How did Nature lose her clothes between the medieval and early modern eras?
- Why do we celebrate Valentine's Day?
- How do poets in different time periods imagine the boundaries between humans and animals?
- How do they imagine nature?
- Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls* and Keat's "Ode to a Nightingale"

Medieval Images of Lady Nature

Why Personify Nature?

-in science?

-in philosophy?



Nature surrounded by planets and stars; historiated initial 'Q' from the opening of Aristotle's *Physics*, Book 3 (ca. 1270).

London, British Library Harley MS 3487, f. 16v

Alan of Lille, *The Complaint of Nature* (ca. 1180)

Narrator:

“Alas! Whither has the loveliness of Nature, the beauty of character, the standard of chastity, the love of virtue departed? Nature weeps, character passes away, chastity is wholly banished from its former high station, and become an orphan. The sex of active nature trembles shamefully at the way in which it declines into passive nature. Man is made woman, he blackens the honor of his sex, the craft of magic Venus makes him of double gender.” (Meter 1.2)

Major theme for Alan: the animal / natural world all follow Nature’s laws but only humans do not follow her laws

Lady Nature:

“Me, then, He appointed a sort of deputy, a coiner for stamping the orders of things, for the purpose that I should form their figures on the proper anvils, and should not let the shape vary from the shape of the anvil, and that through my activity and skill the face of the copy should not be changed by additions of any other elements from the face of the original. ...

[Nature goes on vacation]

I stationed Venus who is skilled in the knowledge of making, as under-deputy of my work, in order that she ... with the assisting activity of her husband Hymen [i.e. Marriage] and her son Cupid, by ... regularly applying their productive hammers to their anvils, might weave together the line of the human race in unwearied continuation.” (Prose 4.7)

Jean de Meun, *Roman de la Rose* (Paris, ca. 1270)



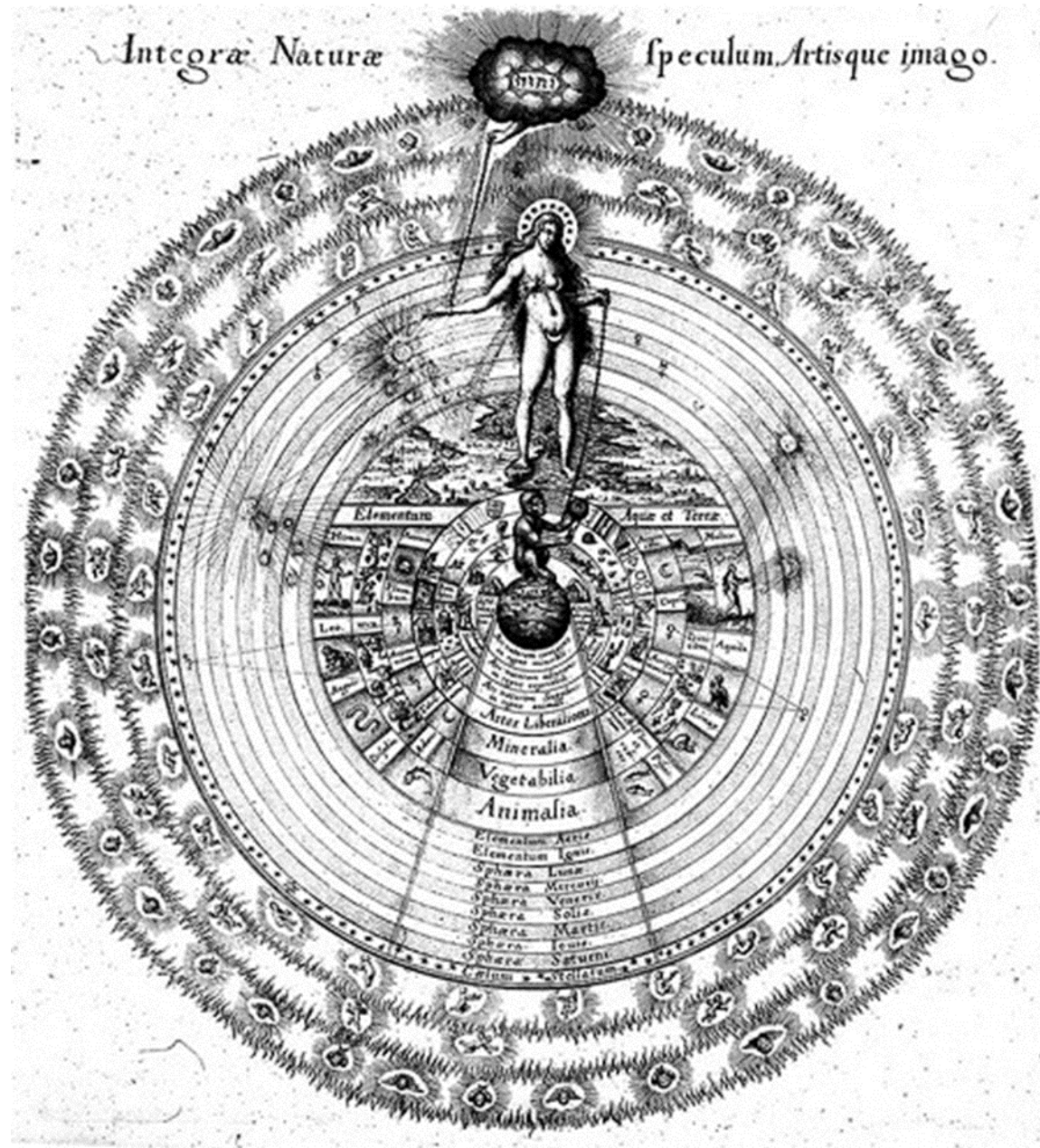
Nature forging a baby from the *Roman de la Rose* (ca. 1270s). British Library, Harley 4425, f. 140 r (Bruges, c.1490-c.1500).

Major theme for Jean's Nature: the animal / natural world all follow Nature's laws but only humans do not follow her laws

Crowned Nature at her forge, from *Romance of the Rose*. University of Chicago Library, Ms. 1380



Early Modern Images of Nature Or, How Nature Lost Her Clothes



The Mirror of All Nature and the Image of Art

(Frontispiece of Robert Fludd's *Utriusque cosmic maioris scilicet et minoris metaphysica atque technical historia*, Oppenheim: 1617-1619.)

Detail from *The Mirror of All Nature and the Image of Art*. A nude Nature linked to God the creator and then to art (the monkey) who copies her.





Medieval Nature vs Early Modern Nature

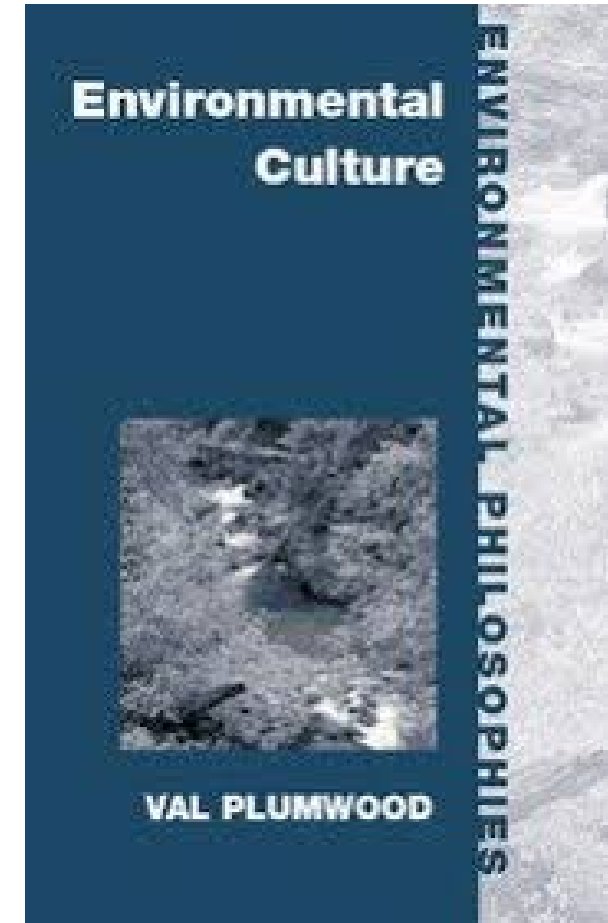
Anthropomorphism vs Anthropocentrism

-Anthropomorphism =“attribut[ing] to non-humans characteristics only humans have” while acknowledging the potential for human and nonhuman behavior overlap

-Anthropocentrism, on the other hand, means “centered around humans;” especially when the human is used as the measure of everything else.

-Why have scientists and animal studies critics tended to reject anthropomorphism?

-Anthropomorphism can be an anthropocentric practice, but it can also (according to Plumwood) be employed in ways that respect the independence of nonhuman identity to various degrees.



Val Plumwood *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*

[Animal] representations must always raise questions about simplifying and assimilating the other. However there can be no general argument that such cross-cultural perspectives representing another's viewpoint are deceptive or illegitimate. Cross-species representation, like cross-cultural representation, is not automatically colonizing or self-imposing, and may express motives and meanings of sympathy, support and admiration. Rather, specific cases have to be argued on their merits. ... Representation should keep in mind the distinction between claiming to *be* the other rather than to represent another's perspective, to see or speak *as* the other rather than to see or speak *with* or in support of the other (Plumwood 60).



Geoffrey Chaucer (1340s-1400),
The Parliament of Fowls (ca.
1380)

What is Chaucer's avian class system?

-4 groups based on their eating habits (ll. 323ff):

1. birds of prey
2. worm fowl
3. seed fowl
4. water fowl



310 For this was on Seynt Valentynes day,
make, Whan every foul cometh ther to chese his

 Of every kinde, that men thynke may;
 And that so huge a noyse gan they make,
lake That erthe and see, and tree, and every

 So ful was, that unnethe was ther space
315 For me to stonde, so ful was al the place.

 And right as Aleyn, in the Pleynt of Kynde,
 Devyseth Nature of aray and face,
 In swich array men mighten hir ther finde.
 This noble emperesse, ful of grace,
320 Bad every foul to take his owne place,
 As they were wont alwey fro yeer to yere,
 Seynt Valentynes day, to stonden there.

For this was Saint Valentine's day, when every
bird of every kind that men can imagine
comes to this place to choose his mate. And
they made an exceedingly great noise; and
earth and sea and the trees and all the lakes
were so full that there was scarcely room for
me to stand, so full was the entire place.

And just as Alan [of Lille], in *The Complaint of
Nature*, describes Nature in her features and
attire, so might men find her in reality. This
noble empress, full of grace, bade every bird
take his station, as they were accustomed to
stand always on Saint Valentine's day from
year to year.

(Chaucer, *Parliament of Fowls*, ll. 309-
322)



The Queen Mary Psalter, [Royal MS 2 B VII](#), f. 243r

Who was the historical St. Valentine (236-269 CE)?

The female eagle's response to Lady Nature

650 "Almighty quene, unto this yeer be doon
I aske respit for to avysen me.
And after that to have my choys al free;
This al and sum, that I wolde speke and
seye;
Ye gete no more, al-though ye do me
deye.

I wol noght serven Venus ne Cupyde
For sothe as yet, by no manere wey.'

"Almighty queen, until this year comes
to an end I ask respite, to take counsel
with myself; and after that to have my
choice free. This is all that I would say. I
can say no more, even if you were to slay
me.

In truth, as yet I will in no manner serve
Venus or Cupid."

What questions about nature are posed by Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls*?

- To what extent are animals like humans and vice-versa? Are they governed by the same sets of rules?
- Is heterosexuality natural and inevitable (Nature's internal 'prikke')?
- Or is it a choice? (and therefore potentially optional)
- Are Nature's rules laws or just suggested guidelines?

Why Talking Animals in the *Parliament of Fowls*?

- Why doesn't Chaucer use humans? What would be the difference if this was a human parliament? How would it feel different?
- How do animals work here?
 - helps us to explore the limits of both humans *and* animals
 - also helps us to understand how nature works
- What are the dangers and possibilities of this?

John Keats (1795-1821), “Ode to a Nightingale”

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget
What thou [i.e. the nightingale] among the leaves hast never known,
The weariness, the fever, and the fret
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last grey hairs, 25
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
And leaden-eyed despairs;
Where beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,
Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow. 30

Darkling I listen; and, for many a time
I have been half in love with easeful Death,
Call'd him soft names in many a musèd rhyme,
To take into the air my quiet breath;
Now more than ever seems it rich to die, 55
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
In such an ecstasy!
Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain—
To thy high requiem become a sod. 60

Birds in Chaucer vs Keat's Nightingale

According to Val Plumwood's definitions, what is going on in each poem? Is this anthropomorphism or anthropocentrism? Why?