QUEER ECOLOGY AND MEDIEVAL NATURE: A BOTANICAL STUDY OF CHAUCER'S MERCHANT'S TALE

by

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Abstract

This thesis is a botanical reading of Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale.* Focusing on the climactic scene in which May, the young bride of January, declares her "sore" desire for "smale peres green" before engaging in adulterous sex with her husband's servant, Damian, I intersect object-oriented ontological theory with aspects of medieval botany to garner an understanding of Chaucer's ecological thought. Through this approach, I find that Chaucer demonstrates sensitivity to what Timothy Morton and Mel Chen describe as "queer ecology": an emerging branch of eco-theory which explores queer challenges to heteronormativity in non-human ecologies and objects. In this way, Chaucer presents an important challenge to the church definitions of "Nature"—particularly as it was defined in Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologicae*—that emerged during the thirteenth century. Thus, this thesis contributes to ongoing studies of animacy and non-human ecologies in medieval literature and complicates Timothy Morton's exclusion of non-moderns from contemporary ecological theory.

Lay Summary

This work distinguishes between "Nature" as it was defined in the medieval (thirteenth century) church versus how it was understood in vernacular contexts. In particular, it examines how medieval works on botany gesture at sexuality in vegetables at a time when vegetables were otherwise understood to be asexual. Because of the intimate, anatomical overlaps between humans and non-humans that medieval botanical works uncover, this thesis suggests that medieval botanists approached an understanding of what we might now call "ecological". Given Chaucer's personal interest in gardening, this thesis argues that, in the *Merchant's Tale,* May's sexualised desire for pears reflects the findings of some medieval botanists and displays a disruptive sexual overlap between human and non-human bodies. In this way, Chaucer covertly challenges church definitions of Nature.

Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Alexander Charles Cosh.

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for Gracie

I Introduction

Before May engages in adulterous sex with her husband January's servant Damian, the young bride in Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale* declares:

> I moste han of the peres that I see
> Or I moot dye, so soore longeth me
> To eten of the smale peres grene (Lines 2331-2333)

Her strong desire for the "smale peres grene" may obscure the fact that her hunger is a pretext to climb the fruit tree in which Damian awaits her. Earlier in the tale, the stone-walled garden in which this episode unfolds was created by January—who in his age begotten blindness is blissfully unaware that his servant hangs above—in order to control May's movements and satisfy "that which was not done abed"—thus consecrating and naturalising their marriage. However, the architecture of this space ironically affords the young bride with an opportunity to carry out her extramarital affair. After May convinces her husband to unwittingly lift her into Damian's lusty clutches, the merchant-narrator, anticipating the crude details of the brazen infidelity, apologetically pleads:

> Ladyes, I prey yow that ye be nat wrooth
> I kan nat glose, I am rude man (Lines 2350-51)

The narrator disregards the pears as he prepares his audience for what he views as a far more pressing matter: a lurid display of adultery between a bride and her servant. But to what extent does

this episode merely exhibit May's "extramarital" desire? After May reaches the top of the pear tree (standing on her blind husband's back) the merchant-narrator declares:

> sodeynly anon this Damyan
> Gan pullen up the smoke, and in he throng (Lines 2352-53)

Damian's violent penetration, signalled by the verb "throng" (meaning to "press" or "crush"), is so prompt and aggressive that May is not given the chance to sample the pears that she sorely longed for. In fact, during she and Damian's short-lived copulation—a mere two lines— there is little indication of consent, enjoyment, or reciprocal sexual bodily movement on May's part. Alcuin Blamires suggests "If we were not persuaded that this precipitousness was something wished for by May after enduing January's protracted laborings, we might wonder how far it is distinguishable from rape" (96). However, Amy Kaufman highlights the male orientation of this reading and its oversight of the titillations of the female body evoked beneath the language of the fabliau. She writes: "Her (May's) pursuit of Damian and her satisfaction through him evokes a female erotic that wreaks havoc on the dominant discourse, giving the reader vicarious pleasure through, rather than 'upon', May's body" (31). In order to appreciate the sexual pleasure conveyed in these lines, we might, instead of seeking enjoyment by reading May through the merchant-narrator, "enjoy reading *as* May" (31).

But how might this enjoyment be inflected by May's desire for the pears? As explored by Carol Falvo Heffernan in her essay "Contraception and the Pear Tree Episode of Chaucer's Merchant's Tale" (1995), it is possible that May's professed desire for pears is not a mere cover-up for sex with Damian, but reflects a genuine craving for the fruit itself. Specifically, Heffernan argues that the contraceptive properties attributed to pears in medieval botany could suggest May's

wish to terminate an unwanted pregnancy. However, Samantha Katz Seal's recent article suggests that a purely medical interpretation of the pears overlooks the clearly sexual implications of May's articulation of her pregnant hunger. Seal posits "Regardless of whether May is indeed nurturing a child in her womb, she seems to tell the truth to January when she speaks of her "greet appetit"" (286). *Pica* (the irrational urges on the part of pregnant women to consume often inedible substances) is used as a metaphor by May to express her transgressive sexual desire. Seal writes: "Since the female sexual appetite was often conceptualised as a carnal manifestation of human sin, the physiological normativity of pica perhaps made it a less threatening system within which to verbalise a shameful and transgressive desire" (286).

By expressing a desire for pears, May is able to covertly articulate her adulterous lust for Damian in terms of a sickness of her body, or "a manifestation of of the dangers of the visual/ imagination system of human arousal" rather than a lapse of moral self-control (286-304). However, despite Seal's reconnecting readers with the lusty desirability of the fruit, her reading ultimately propagates critics' treatment of the pears as mere decorations of an essentially human affair. Elaine Tuttle Hansen's earlier work finds the pears as mimetic spectators of the tale's failure to assert differences in human gender:

> the tree bearing tempting pears, the fruit known in the Middle Ages as an ambiguous symbol or both male genitals and female breasts, stands as an apt icon at the end of the tale for part at least of what has been perceived as the "culminating outrage" of this story: the blurring or failure of gender difference at the moment of heterosexual climax when they ought to be most natural and secure (258).

Taking the queer androgyny uncovered by Hansen's reading of the pears—whilst liberating them from the confines of human symbolism in the tale— this thesis not only explores the pears' essential part in the extra-marital sexuality of the tale's climax, but also seeks to garner through the pears insight into Chaucer's ecological thought. This study asks: what if we read the pears as more than a mere censorship of Damian's genitals, symbols of blurred human gender gaps, a fruit with contraceptive properties, or a metaphor for sinful sexual desire evoked by the libidinous human imagination? Given May's stark desire for the pears, perhaps these juicy green objects can be seen to disruptively extrude anthropocentric systems of signification and projections of meaning at work in the poem, and possess sex-appeal that is simply invisible to the monogamy-obsessed merchant-narrator (who is preoccupied with the vulgarity of adulterous sex) and the control-obsessed January. Intersecting Kaufman's feminist call for the reader to experience sexual pleasure *as* May with Chaucer's personal interest in gardening, I propose that May's passionate hunger for pears indicates sexual desire and agency that exceeds marital infidelity, and crosses anatomical boundaries between human and vegetable bodies.

Informed by the playful treatment of vegetable entities found in the botanical works of Henry Daniel and Albertus Magnus, this thesis will treat the pears as object-actors which disrupt monogamous, procreative, heteronormative, human-to-human, sexual relations, and therefore the church-prescribed ideologies and fields of visibility that demarcate boundaries between human and non-sentient bodies in the *Merchant's Tale*. This study shall therefore extend Lesley Kordecki's question "what if nonhuman creatures through human literary intervention seriously talked, laughed, and interacted verbally?" (3) by suggesting that Chaucer also proffers agency to non-sentient non-humans. The focus on animals by some ecofeminist critics has meant that poems like the *Merchant's Tale* (which does not feature animals besides humans) have been excluded from many recent eco-critical surveys of Chaucer's work. Lisa J. Kiser's recent study of "Chaucer and

the Politics of Nature" in *Parliament of the Fowls* similarly hones attention to the non-human voices of birds (41). Moreover, in some of these studies, non-humans have tended to be treated as little more than ventriloquists of human affairs, as inferred by Kordecki's reference to Chaucerian animals as the "voiceless simulacra of humans" (5). This study by contrast finds that the pears in the *Merchant's Tale* resist assimilation as inanimate objects into dimensions of meaning that correlate exclusively with human emotions, urges, and sexuality: as subordinate, inanimate vegetable entities in a theologically prescribed model of Nature. This study aligns with Bruno Latour's view that non-human objects "too act, they too do things, they too make you do things" including objects that "were supposed to have been ground to dust by the powerful teeth of automated reflex-action deconstructors." (243). Chaucer's pears affect sexual desire rather than passively mirroring it. Furthermore, I argue that by toying with distinctions in human and vegetable sexuality, the *Merchant's Tale* exhibits profound anatomical intimacy between May and the pears, who act as jointly sexual and animate beings, giving rise to what Timothy Morton characterises as "queer ecology" which is described as "not heteronormative, not genital, not geared to ideologies about where the body stops and starts" (15). Mel Chen similarly purports that "animacy can itself be queer, for animacy can work to blur the tenuous hierarchy of human-animal-vegetable-mineral with which it is associated" (98). In turn, the pears' animacy and sexual agency enable Chaucer to problematise the idea of "Nature" defined in terms of mankind's intellectual primacy and divine planning, as propounded in the theology of his contemporaries (in particular, that of St. Thomas Aquinas and his handling of Latin translations of the Aristotle corpus in the mid-thirteenth century). Recognising the agency of non-sentient non-humans in the *Merchant's Tale* can therefore play a decisive role in probing the extent to which Chaucer drew upon his personal interest in botany in his poetry, and how this interest was subsequently deployed to grapple with the broader definitions of Nature in the late Middle Ages. Finally, based on these findings, this study shall complicate past

attitudes towards medieval ecology that were crystallised by Morton's claim that "The ecological thought in its full richness and depth was unavailable to non modern humans" (4).

Others have gestured at object-oriented ecological thought in premodern literature. Despite Timothy Morton's past assertion in *The Ecological Thought* (2010) that the titular concept is restricted to contemporary thinking in the context of imminent ecological catastrophe, medieval eco-theorists seem to have had little difficulty in bringing aspects Morton's approach to non-modern ideas and texts. A similar critical movement found in Owain Jones and Paul Cloke's collaborative essay "The Non-Human Agency of Trees" posits that "trees are not just passive recipients of of human interventions. Rather, they bring their own creative abilities and tendencies to various equations" (49). In this line of object-oriented critical inquiry, Marjorie Swann's treatise of Andrew Marvell's seventeenth-century poetry in "Vegetable Love: Botany and Sexuality in Seventeenth Century England" uncovers premodern botanical principles which held that "ensoulment and physiology linked men with plants" and the possibility that "the botanical realm could be understood as a model for the organisation of human society" (141). Swann attests that what was viewed in seventeenth-century England as "the nonsexual otherness of plants" (141), a belief which held that plants could procreate asexually, compelled Marvell and other poets to eagerly explore "to what extent are people like— or should strive to be like— plants?" (141). This deep fascination with vegetable sexuality leads Swann to find "queer ecology" in the premodern ideas that inform Marvell's work.

Michael W. George's "Gawain's Struggle with Ecology" contemplates competing philosophical branches in medieval thought at work in *Sir Gawain* with regards to the environment. Seeking to complicate the assertions of Lynn White JR's early eco-critical talk "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis" (1967), which homogenised medieval treatments of ecology into a

single theological view (which, according to White, paved the way for the supremacy of western technology and human dominion over nature), George finds the dominant theology of St. Thomas Aquinas in tension with the less prevalent postulations of St. Francis of Assisi. On the one hand, George posits, Gawain represents the anthropocentric doctrine of Thomas Aquinas which held "the environment is hostile and needs to be ruthlessly conquered" (31), whereas Bertilak/the Green Knight reflects the Franciscan view that "humans should be custodians of the environment, working with and respecting it" (31). Whilst the former, more influential position solidifies a binary opposition that restricts mankind's belonging to "a tightly controlled habitation", the Franciscan position by contrast purports a conceptualisation of ecology in a way agreeable to the contemporary eco-critic who views humans and the natural world as being "inextricably interconnected, enmeshed in a continuous web of reciprocating actions, reactions and interactions" (32). This reading indicates that the Green knight/Bertilak's careful stewardship of his environment problematises the privileging of Gawain's human agency above non-human actors in the text.

Recent critical attention to Chaucer has also begun reveal the independent lives of non-human objects in the *Canterbury Tales.* Kellie Robertson's essay "Medieval Things" (2012) eschews the exclusive attention to human subjects that dominated criticism of Chaucer in the twentieth-century. She observes that "focus on subjects and subjectivity has obscured the very intense interest that medieval texts show in objects and their ability to shape human consciousness" (1062), which in turn has generated readings of objects such as the merchant's hat as being a marker of his self-fashioning in spite of sumptuary laws. Robertson finds that such readings ventriloquize premodern objects as little more than mirrors of human affairs. Instead, she calls for a critical approach which recognises the premodern controversies about what counted as a "Thing" versus a human-subject. On this basis, she finds that "By pointing us to the irreducibility of things in themselves, Chaucer has lead us not to a representative cul-de-sac but rather to an

acknowledgement of things as events whose signified is their own interiority, an inwardness that makes possible an agency independent of the human" (1074). In a closely related movement, Julian Yates's paper "What are "Things" Saying in Renaissance Studies?" (2006) has adjudicated advances in Renaissance studies "beyond the New Historicist Project of the nineteen-eighties and nineteen-nineties" (991) to find that "we seem to be left with the "things" or fragments of what once passed as an imagined whole called "Renaissance Culture"" (992). By complicating the objects that served as the content for New Historicism's narratives of culture, and by 'making things speak' and, he explains "By preserving the complexity of "things" as simultaneously material, semiotic, and rhetorical entities, we might be able to disturb the ready settlement that New Historicism provided to many of the key questions that animated the reception of something called theory" (992). As well as troubling distinctions between human and non-human objects, Yates's interest in "things" has also further disrupted the holistic separations made by critics between modern and non-modern culture. Objects in Renaissance and premodern literature problematise Morton's previous wholesale exclusion of non-moderns from the ecological thought.

This study pays attention to garden episode of Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale* because this literary moment starkly displays its author's personal interest in botany (particularly as it was practiced by his contemporary, Henry Daniel), a medieval field which tentatively probed the fuzzy boundaries between human and non-human objects. May's sexualised desire for "smale peres grene" blurs perceived distinctions of human sexuality and vegetable asexuality, reflecting similar findings in studies of plants, herbs, and vegetables conducted by Henry Daniel and Albertus Magnus, whilst also complicating Thomas Aquinas's theological assertion of man's primacy above non-humans within Nature. From this reading, I contend that for the "richness and depth" of ecological thought to be properly theorised, the role that non-modern objects quietly played in problematising Thomas Aquinas's formal declaration of mankind's supremacy must be taken into

account. This thesis does not endeavour to advocate Bruno Latour's simple return to non-modernity as a solution to contemporary ecological catastrophe (*We Have Never Been Modern,* 1991). Instead, it aims to contribute to the ongoing case that non-modern objects cannot be omitted from an eco-critical field in which human and non-humans are purported to be integrated in a de-centred mesh of "ecological" existence.

In the first section, I distinguish between "Nature" as a hegemonic theological concept and set of ontological assumptions versus the "ecological" practices of medieval botanists. By "Nature", I mean a model in which all non-human objects are presumed to exist passively under the stewardship of humans and circumscribed by the creative power of God. By "ecological", I mean as defined by Timothy Morton in *The Ecological Thought* (2010) as a radically de-centred, sprawling ontological mesh that pervades existence and renders untenable hierarchies of animacy that privilege humans above inanimate, non-human objects. This section will begin with an account of St. Francis of Assisi in which I critically assess the implications of his quasi-official title—as proposed by Lynn White JR.— as 'The patron Saint of Ecology'. I will then briefly summarise the impact of the arrival of the Latin Aristotle corpus into Western Europe in the mid-thirteenth century, and its uptake by St. Thomas Aquinas in his profoundly influential work *Summa Theologicae.* After establishing some of the key theological axioms about "Nature" that emerged from this text, I apply a case-study by exploring their allegorical uptake in Bernardus Silvestrus's *Cosmographia.* I then turn to Stephen Epstein's contemporary work *The Medieval Discovery of Nature* (2012) to explore how everyday practises in agriculture such as tree-grafting and cross-breeding served to complicate Aquinas's wholesale distinction between humans and the non-humans. Finally, I examine how the works of Henry Daniel and Albertus Magnus uncover ontological overlaps between sentient and vegetable bodies. I conclude that the differences between the various beliefs of the church towards Nature and those of everyday practice are more significant than the discrepancies within differing

theological doctrines. My second chapter returns to the pear tree episode in Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale* as a case-study of theological definitions of Nature put in tension with medieval botanical insights into ecology. Here I intersect feminist, narratological and eco-critical approaches to May's extramarital desire to find that her adultery is foremost, in the most disruptive sense, an ecological affair with a non-human object: a pear. This in turn will find that Chaucer's interest in the botanical works of Daniel and Magnus allows him to play with fuzzy distinctions between vegetable and human anatomy, and to gesture at an understanding of ontological reciprocity at the basis of all objects.

II Nature Versus Ecology

In this section, I aim to distinguish between "Nature" as a moral, theological axiom in the medieval Christian church and "ecology" as a set of findings that emerged from botanical practices among the wider populace in Europe. In doing so, I find that the dominant doctors of theology, specifically from the thirteenth century and onwards, were far more keen than the wider population to narrow the conceptual locus of Nature and define it as a divinely ordained hierarchy which marked clear boundaries between man, beast, and vegetable. By contrast, botanists had a practical interest in crossing the anatomical boundaries between humans and non-humans in order to achieve optimum efficiency and productivity in their work. In particular, the practices of tree-grafting and cross-breeding explored by Stephen Epstein reveal that ideological lines (drawn by the Church) that marked distinctions between bodies were regularly blurred and overlapped. Based on these findings, I aim to show that the sexual climax of Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale* reflects a conflict between botanical practice and the theological axioms of Nature propounded by the author's contemporaries. I will argue that the distinctions between conflicting theological views of Nature prove to be less significant than the distinction between Christianity's ground intellectual assumptions and findings from practical engagements with nature in the garden. My aim is not to dismiss the plurality of attitudes toward Nature that were held within the Western medieval church, but instead to show that the most prominent of these positions rested on shared ontological assumptions that were covertly problematised by everyday practices in the field of medieval life.

Michael George nuances Lynn White JR's assertion that the medieval christian church established a deeply entrenched superiority complex which placed man above nature. According to White, the cause of modern ecological crisis is traceable back to medieval christian axioms which established that "Man and nature are two things, and man is the master" (42). He states: "by

destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects" (43). Following the ascendancy of the Christendom in Western Europe, people were no longer obliged to placate the guardian spirit of a tree before cutting it down. This important change in attitude towards non-human objects set the course for developments in Western technology and gave sanction to catastrophic violences upon the earth inflicted in the name of industrial progress. According to White, in spite of the progressive environmental views evinced by marginal figures such as Francis of Assisi, the belief in man's supremacy over nature enjoyed hegemony in the medieval church and continued to dominate attitudes towards nature until well into the twentieth century (White's time of writing): "We continue today to live, as we have lived for about 1700 years, very largely in a context of Christian axioms" (43). However, In George's view, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* reveals a debate between theological positions about how nature should be defined and how mankind ought to treat it. On the one hand, George suggests that this text displays the prevalent view of Thomas Aquinas, which posits Gawain in a struggle to suppress his environment. On the other hand, the Green Knight/ Bertilak embodies the espousals of Francis of Assisi, who encouraged responsibility, stewardship, and coexistence with non-humans in nature. Little of Assisi's own work is documented, but an incident cited by Thomas of Celano (a Franciscan friar) exemplifies Assisi's views. Celano recounts a conversation between Assisi and birds:

> Because they do not fly away and seem to want to hear the word of God, Francis addresses them as Fratres, brothers, and is directly quoted here. Francis tells the birds they ought to praise and love their Creator because they have been given feathers and wings and have the air as their dwelling (mansio). (qtd. Epstein, 37)

By engaging Assisi's environmental point of view, the Gawain text does not present a settled definition of Nature. Vexed Roman Catholic scholars have also taken aim at what they regard as

White's homogenising of medieval views on Nature. Roger D. Sorrel in his work *St. Francis of Assisi and Nature* (1988) contends that White's assertions reflect: "The creation of the myth that there was basically only one medieval view of Nature" (4). However, Sorrel also cautions against championing Assisi as an early hero of the modern environmental movement. He writes: "Today, Francis has proven too relevant" (5) and as a result:

> "some of his ideas and attitudes seem to relate to current thought so well that they almost demand to be plucked out of context and taken up into contemporary modes of thinking that distort their original sense and place them at the mercy of modern values and expectations." (5)

Sorrel goes on to situate Assisi's innovations in an older ascetic tradition (16). As a result, he finds that Assisi's ostensibly 'environmental' mode of thinking, which shows a basic concern with the relationship between mankind and other animals, is in fact grounded in a saintly appreciation of the Bible rather than some radically progressive view of nature (7). After all, the first thing Assisi obliges birds to do (according to Celano's account) is to "praise and love their creator". G.K. Chesterton similarly complains that any attempt to separate Assisi's theological objectives from his view of Nature is like "being told to write the life of Nansen and forbidden to mention the North Pole" (*St. Francis of Assisi and St. Thomas of Aquinas,* 123). Assisi's intellectual accomplishment, Sorrel and Chesterton agree, is in his seeking to strengthen the harmony of God's creation by establishing peace between man and beast. Further comment by Thomas of Celano also reveals that Assisi's affinity for non-humans was not equal to his regard for fellow humans:

> "If Francis had this level of affection for creatures, how much more did her have for those more closely related (germaniores) to Christ?" (qtd. Epstein, 38)

Despite Assisi's referral to birds as "brothers", the distinction between humans, or "those more closely related to Christ", and non-human creatures was implicitly upheld. From the standpoint of an object-oriented approach, the tenants of Assisi's thought may not be so different from those of Thomas Aquinas.

Thomas Aquinas's seminal work *Summa Theologicae* (1274) came in response to the arrival of the newly translated Aristotle corpus into Europe in the thirteenth century. Aspects of Aristotle's *On the Heavens* sparked something of an intellectual crisis in Europe as this work reignited what had been long settled questions about the relationship between faith and reason. Rather than submitting to sheer faith in God, Aristotle deduced that

> "If then there is, as there certainly is, anything divine, what we have just said about primary bodily substance was well said. The mere evidence of the senses is enough to convince us of this, at least with human certainty." (*On the Heavens,* 121)

God could be deciphered by "the mere evidence of the senses" rather than simply accepted by faith. Aristotle also contended that the universe was infinite and that the prime mover was a passive, unthinking agency. These assertions ran in contravention of the Genesis account which unambiguously posited God as the conscious instigator and interventionist planner of the cosmos. However, rather than dismissing the corpus out of hand, Aquinas set out to reconcile Aristotle's deductive reasoning with the faith-based doctrines of the church. In doing so, Aquinas set the methodological trajectory for Christian theology and its definition of "Nature" in the proceeding centuries.

Aquinas's enormous and unfinished work honed the locus of "Nature" as an intellectual concept and asserted the primacy of man as a being uniquely able to perceive God's plan in creation. Deductive reasoning was engaged by Aquinas in order to vindicate and glorify what he regarded as God's absolute creative agency at the centre of the universe. Perceiving the divine plan in Nature through sense experience could serve as confirmation of God's omnipresence and power. In the same way that Assisi sought to confirm the glory of God's creation through his eremitic lifestyle and closeness to non-human constituents of the universe, Aquinas codified an intellectual framework that he hoped would lead every subsequent deductive inquiry to the conclusion that God was necessarily the prime mover behind every part of Nature. By tracing backward the chains of cause and effect at work throughout the universe—the working principle of Aristotle's deductive reasoning— Aquinas concluded: "therefore it is necessary to arrive at a first mover, put in motion by no other; and this everyone understands to be God." (10). Furthermore, he asserted:

> "Although we cannot know in what consists the essence of God, nevertheless in this science we can make use of His effects, either of nature or of grace, in place of a definition, in regard to whatever is treated of in this science concerning God." (*Summa Theologicae*, 5)

Whilst human science could never reduce the necessarily transcendent essence of God to mere definition, humans were— by their closeness to God in grace and resemblance— uniquely able to interpret the effects of God's divine plan and codify these findings in Christian dogma and moral axioms. Among the profoundly influential axioms that followed Aquinas's work during the following two centuries was the principle of balance as a governing concept in Nature. As historian Joel Kaye explains, medieval natural philosophers between 1250 and 1350 who worked from the newly translated Aristotelean model "developed a conception of nature as a richly complex, interconnected whole" in which each component body, system, and sub-system "found meaning in

relation to each other and to the functioning whole" (*The Re-Balance of Nature,* 85). At the basis of this model "was the belief that each system and sub-system maintained itself in what we would today term a state of balance or "dynamic equilibrium"" (85). Prior to this period, balance was understood solely in terms of crude weight. However, after the mid-thirteenth century, "balance" as an abstract intellectual concept was used to articulate previously inexpressible ideals of equality, coherency, and functionality in fields including medicine, political theory, economic thought, and natural philosophy (Kaye, 87). "Nature", understood as the sum-total of all interconnected systems, sub-systems, and participant bodies that centred around the creative power and omnipotent authority of God, was believed to be governed by a totalising dynamic equilibrium: God's divine plan. All beings and bodies in Nature necessarily exist in their given form—separate and distinct from one another with prescribed roles— as constituents of a divinely balanced cosmos. Moreover, as detailed by Carolyn Merchant, the idea of balance had deep social and moral implications that changed in accordance with the needs and purposes of society. Order and balance in Nature "imposed ethical norms of behaviour on the human being, the central feature of which was behavioural self-restraint in conformity with the pattern of the natural order" (13). Thus, any "unnatural" manipulation of a body or system, particularly through sex, amounted to a scandalous defiling of Nature. In Aquinas's view, the moral order and ethical standards in the universe that could be perceived through human intellect amounted to *a posteriori* proof of God's supreme power, wisdom, and mercy. This was possible because, unlike other sublunary beings: "human knowledge is assisted by the revelation of grace" (56). Therefore, the unique clout of human reason is granted and prescribed by the transcendent glory of God's grace. God willingly and actively reveals, while humans accordingly establish moral axioms and "Natural" laws.

The world of "Nature" itself was therefore figured as a balanced collection of passive objects that were subordinate to the deductive power and ethical norms established by mankind.

The component parts of Nature were laid out by God in order to be decoded by humans as signifiers of the will of the creator. As Richard C. Hoffman summarises: "On the relationship between nature and humankind, most literate medieval Europeans shared certain basic ideological assumptions. *Homo,* "mankind," was separate and distinct from *Natura,* "Nature." *Homo* in fact had been created to *rule over* Nature, the earth, Creation." (11). This assumption is displayed in Bernard Silvestris's *Cosmographia,* a twelfth century philosophical allegory that tells of the creation of the cosmos. Writing before the arrival of the Aristotle corpus, Silvestrus exhibits Platonic tenants of early church doctrine in which scholars assumed the fixedness of universal order. However, the basic beliefs that persisted in Aquinas's later meditations—that all aspects of Nature are ultimately contingent signifiers of Divine Law and are to be assimilated by human reason—are displayed in *Cosmographia*. In the opening lines, Nature pleads with Noys, the daughter of God, to fashion the formless pile of Silva into full and perfect beauty:

> Nempe Deus, cuius summe natura benigna est,
> larga, nec invidae miseros sensura tumultus,
> in melius, quantum patiture substantia rerum,
> cuncta refert, operique suo non derogat acutor.
> Non igitur livere potes, sed pondus ineptum
> perfecto reddes consummatoque decori,
> consilii si rite tui secreta recordor.

> (Surely God, whose own nature is supremely benevolent, generous, and not liable to the miserable agitation of envy, wills the melioration of all things, so far as their materiality will allow; the author does not disparage his work? Thus you cannot be envious, though

you should bestow upon the unwieldy mass a full and perfect grace, if I recall truly the hidden ways of your deliberation.) (Lines 11-17, trans. Wetherbee)

Tired of existing in material discord and turbulence, Nature is said to yearn for a tempering power that might order her state of confusion into delicate harmony. Appealing to the supreme benevolence of God, Nature asks to be dominated and moulded in the perfect image of her Divine author. Control over Nature—who is depicted as a hapless infant lost in the chaotic void of her own existence— is fundamentally presented as a fatherly act of love:

Has inter veluti cunas infantia Mundi
vagit et ad speciem vestiri cultius orat.

(Within this cradle the infant universe squalls, and cries to be clothed with a finer appearance.) (Lines 39-40, Wetherbee)

This paternal dynamic leaves Nature bereft of agency and perpetually preceded by the creative prerogative of God. Noys, after revealing her status as the daughter of God, concedes that the time is right in the Divine Plan for Nature's wish to be granted. Noys begins by extracting the four elements: fire, water, earth, and air. From these, primordial matter begins to converge and shape the structural layers of the universe: the ether, heavens, and sea, which in turn bear the seeds of life and organic matter. All shapes, forms, and bodies that come into being in the cosmos bear the trace of their creator:

Pigra move, moderare vagis, ascribe figuram,
adde iubar: fateatur opus quis fecerit auctor!

> (Quicken what is inert, govern what moves at random, impose shape and bestow splendor. Let the work confess the author who has made it.) (Lines 62-3, Wetherbee)

In essence, the appearances of celestial and terrestrial objects reflect their contingency and passivity. Moreover, the balance of this newly wrought material is said to be extraordinarily delicate, emphasising the divine wisdom behind its careful design:

> De quorum materiali continentia brevis et quantalibet particula si citra operis sortem relinqueretur extraria, ex co turbam noxamque posset incurrere Mundi molitio mox futura, cum peregrinis ut crat promptum viribus extrinsecus temptaretur.
>
> (I have brought form to creatures and yoked the elements by a harmony which has elicited peace and trust. I have given a law to the stars, and ordered the planets always to pursue the same undeviating course.) (24, Wetherbee)

All objects necessarily exist in their given state, lest their manipulation or improper coercion should lead to a catastrophic chain-reaction that would unravel the fabric of the entire cosmos. While mankind is granted the special privilege of taming and using Nature for his own subsistence, he does so in the risk of violating divinely implemented laws and leaving the universe exposed to destructive foreign elements. Noys cautions that because man consists of an imperfect balance of the elements, he requires heat from external sources that might lead to harm. In light of this danger, God is said to have implemented checks on how Nature can be manipulated:

> Si enim calor naturalem calorem extraneus interpellat, pax turbatur interior, et tranquilla quae fuerat erigitur qualitas ad nocendum. Cautum est igitur altiori consilio, ut cum causis suis succidatur et pereat quicquid possit in tempore vel ingenium. Mundi laedere vel turbare substantiam vel illius officere disciplinae.
>
> (For wherever heat from without aggravates the heat of man's nature, his inner peace is disrupted, and what had existed in a state of calm becomes aroused to destructive activity. Therefore provision was made in the divine plan that whatsoever in the temporal order might violate the scheme of the universe, disorder its substance, or interfere with its operation should be cut away with the sources of its activity and destroyed.) (24, Wetherbee)

The universal order is safe-guarded against disastrous malfunction by the power of Divine council: interfering elements are to be immediately destroyed. From this provision, an implicit hierarchy is conceived: mankind is granted the right to coerce Nature for his bodily subsistence, but in doing so he is circumscribed by the protective and inviolable authority of God. Whilst all constituents of the universe are presented as intricately connected, their individual and divinely ordained roles mark clear distinctions that necessitate particular actions and prohibit others. Human bodies and constituents of Nature are separated by irreducible degrees of being in accordance with their purpose in God's plan.

Despite Aquinas's clear and widely accepted distinction between the divinely ordained faculties of humankind and non-human beings, the idea of "Nature" became ever more complex throughout the Middle Ages. Firstly, as explained by C.S. Lewis in *The Discarded Image* (1964), the widespread belief that the "irresistible rough justice of fortune" (140) ultimately governed the rise and collapse of empires did not pass away with the medieval period. Despite the overarching

Christian doctrines that stipulated divine order and planning, the belief that all beings and organic matter in the sublunary sphere were equally subject to brute fluctuations of chance persisted among the broader populace. Therefore, it is difficult to quantify how consequential the theological doctrine of divine order and dynamic equilibrium could be on, say, a peasant who, while undoubtedly paying lip-service and attendance to the teachings of the church, believed that famine, plague, and depositions of monarchs were fundamentally outcomes of sheer fate rather than consequences of the "total evolution of humanity" (Lewis, 140). In addition, as Richard Jones summarises, "If, by these philosophical and theological stages, nature's place became progressively more restricted, its range of meanings, and how the concept of nature itself was understood, became ever more complex" (*The Medieval World of Nature*, 4). Whilst the church, under the strict guidance of *Summa Theologica,* could dictate what "Nature" meant exegetically and through it determine the moral laws of God's divine plan, the clergy had little control over this concept's manifold definitions, interpretations, and manifestations that proliferated in vernacular contexts. Following the postulations of Aquinas, the theological locus of Nature shrank, but its various guises among the social echelons beneath the clergy multiplied in vernacular texts and everyday practice.

As explored by Stephen A. Epstein in *The Medieval Discovery of Nature* (2012), botany and agriculture demanded more pragmatic understandings of how the concept that the church called "Nature" operated. Through ancient and commonplace practices such a tree-grafting and cross-breeding—both necessary for streamlining productivity in farming and crop production—Epstein notes that some medieval people were able to "discover new things in Nature, even to change it, to make themselves more comfortable in it" (2). Indeed, these practitioner's understandings of "Nature" may have approached an understanding of what we now call the "biosphere" or "ecology". Epstein contends that just because nominal porto-naturalists in medieval works are extremely rare, does not mean we should fall for the lexical fallacy that such understandings did not

exist (1). Despite Aquinas's assertion that moral lessons about God's plan could be deciphered in Nature, such lessons were for the most part taught by the church outside of people's direct experiences with Nature (1). In fact, aspects of what medievals actually discovered in Nature— such as hybridity and multiplication— seem incompatible with Thomist postulations. Principally, Epstein writes, "the problem of the hybrid, be it plant, animal, or human, challenged conventional notions about Nature and purity" (8). Whilst plant grafts—which could be seen to take place in Nature without human interference—were stomached by the church as an asexual and therefore morally neutral process, the fact that animal hybridity afforded farmers with the ability to selectively breed and thus 'improve' Nature problematised the idea that all beings had been created perfectly as part of an infallible plan. For example, if a horse and donkey were to be coerced into cross-breeding by humans, then the mule, an apparently new species, was produced. If God had planned all species perfectly, then how could the idea of an entirely new creature be entertained? Hybridity implies a degree of instability and imperfection in "Nature": beings are susceptible to incremental changes and overlaps that make their structural compositions and individual roles in the cosmos indeterminate and imbalanced. Thus, on the one hand, manipulation amounted to mankind's rightful exercising of his dominion over Nature. On the other, these practices put a strain on ideas about what could be considered 'natural' and what was morally permissible within Nature itself.

Medieval botany brought up similar challenges. For most of the premodern period, plants were presumed to reproduce asexually (Epstein, 26). Whilst much of Aristotle's work on plants did not survive, his premise that plants consisted solely of a vegetable soul provided medieval thinkers in western Europe from the thirteenth-century onwards with a basis to fundamentally distinguish the anatomies of humans and plants. Sentient beings, including humans, had an animal soul enveloping their vegetable soul. Humans alone possessed an intellectual body, which Aquinas attributed to the grace of God. However, plants did—despite their fundamental distinctiveness from humans—play

an essential role in the maintenance of the human body through medicine. Historian Carol Rawcliffe notes: “the garden itself constituted a major weapon in the relentless battle against disease” (5). As with nearly all virtues espoused in medieval texts, the therapeutic properties of plants could be traced back to the gates of Eden:

> “Many scholars believed the fruit, leaves, or perfume of the Tree of Life had arrested the natural process of desiccation and decay that led, inevitably, to death, while also protecting the couple (Adam and Eve) against anxiety and stress” (7).

Perfumes and scents emitted by flowers, herbs, and shrubs were believed to transmit essence directly to the human brain, and could have the effect of restoring the humeral balance of the body (Rawcliffe, 9). Furthermore, during the thirteenth century, based on the Aristotelian theory of optics which figured vision as a convoy of forms, virtues, or similitudes that were transmitted into the human eye, sight “was just as likely to delight, invigorate, or appall the animal spirit” (Rawcliffe, 11). The tranquility of carefully tended green spaces could reconstitute the humeral balance of sentient beings, suggesting an anatomically reciprocal and structurally intimate relationship between between the arrangement of the external world and the physical constitution of the human body: a relationship that we might now describe as “ecological”. A prominent practitioner and advocate in this field was Henry Daniel (d. 1249), a prolific monastic gardener. According to Chaucer critic John Harvey “His garden at Stepney may well have been the earliest deliberate collection planned on a large scale in the British Isles, and certainly contained many more species than would have been present in the herbarium of a monastic infirmary” (81). George R. Keiser notes that, as an elder contemporary of Chaucer, Daniel shared with the poet the desire to make learned materials on his subject available in the vernacular (56). However, Daniel did not attempt to rigorously systemise plants and their properties. Instead, he largely drew upon personal experience

in his descriptions, making his work "more useful to readers" (61). In addition, finds Keiser,: "Daniel is asserting and indeed celebrating the fact that the natural world is filled with wonders surpassing logical comprehension; hence, arguments based on logic alone are not always trustworthy" (67). Whilst plants, herbs, and flowers served an integral role in maintaining the physical health of the human body, botanical objects were not viewed as subordinate to a holistic system of human deduction. Plants are not regarded by Daniel as uncomplicated entities with clearly demarcated loci that neatly distinguish them from their environments and sentient counterparts. In fact, given the implicitly ecological overlaps between human and vegetable anatomies from which botany drew its medical prescriptions, it seems more difficult for gardeners like Henry Daniel than for theologians to make clear distinctions between human and vegetable anatomies.

Plants were believed to also have supernatural properties. Aquinas's teacher, Albertus Magnus (d. 1280) produced compendious documentations of these supposed qualities. In one of the earliest English translations of his writings (which emerged in 1637, translated by T. Cotes), Magnus claims "The science of magick is not evil, for by the knowledge of it, evil may be eschewed" (3). While the church at this time had busily patented Aristotle's methods of deductive reasoning in order to verify the glory of God's creative power in Nature, supernatural forces were thought to remain at the fringes of the universe. "Nature" at this historical juncture does not denote the totality of what we now call the universe: it is the sphere of God's dominion, surrounded by a concentric layer of demonic, unnatural forces. This is perhaps most clearly depicted in the Hereford Map, which presents the world's civilisations centred around Jerusalem, with bizarre marvels and wonders such as cannibals and beings with faces on their torsos at the far edges of the globe. Science, under the stewardship of theological doctrine, could not exorcise the evils of supernatural practice entirely, but it could suppress them. In addition, despite the monumental influence of

Thomist models of the universe, it would be wrong to suppose that the concept of "Nature" that it espoused was believed to incorporate the entirety of the visible universe. "Nature" was a carefully balanced moral dominion that had to be enforced against the wicked elements in the world. Consequently, it was widely believed that certain plants and herbs could act as surrogates through sinister forces to operate.

As a skilled alchemist and botanist, Magnus was quite ready to document the supernatural qualities of plants, stones, and other substances in order for their dark capabilities to be better understood and suppressed. In one recipe, Magnus claims that a concoction of celery, juice from one pear, and gruel will make the bearer "gentle and gracious" (15). If celery is bound to a horse's neck "he will follow thee whether thou wilt goe" (16). In another example, flowers such as marigolds are said to be capable of exposing the actions of an adulterous wife. Magnus writes:

> "if the aforesaid herb (marigold) be put in any church where women be which have broken matrimony on their part, they shall never be able to forth of the church, except it (the marigold) be put away." (4)

However, Magnus does not venture to explore the details of how a flower could control the movement of an unfaithful bride. Like other herbs, plants, and vegetables in his catalogue, the magical properties are simply listed without scrutiny. In another example, the herb Calamintha is said to be capable of impregnating any animal. Magnus states:

> "Take this hearb and mixe it with the stone, found in the neast of the bird called a Lapwing, and rubbe the bellie of any beast and it shall be with birth." (9)

This herb—which, according to Aristotelean principles, consists solely of a vegetable soul and is therefore innately asexual— when combined with stone is able to substitute sperm and fertilise the ovary of any non-human sentient being. The superficial intrigue of this power would surely be dwarfed by the remarkable implication that reproductive systems are not exclusively a quality of sentient creatures. This recipe suggests that mammalian procreation does not operate in a closed circuit that is structurally incompatible with non-sentient entities (as stipulated by Aristotelean principles). Instead, beast, herb, and stone appear to be blurred as enmeshed participants of a shared reproductive cycle. Stephen Epstein notes that Magnus was among the few medieval writers to recognise a connection between animal hybridity and tree-grafting, in spite of the belief that plants reproduced asexually (24). In Magnus's recipes, reproduction itself is presented as not exclusively sexual or genital. Rather, Magnus seems to gesture at an understanding of organic regeneration as a driving, algorithmic force behind reproduction. In a similar vein to Daniel's celebration of the wonder of plants, Magnus makes no venture to parse these peculiar properties as part of a larger scheme in which the ecological reciprocity between sentient creatures, stones, and plants might be properly understood. It seems that doing so would necessarily raise troubling questions about how sexual mechanisms could be signified and directly influenced by supposedly non-sexual plants, or how sentient reproductive cycles could be commandeered by inanimate substances like herb and stone. Such questions would necessarily blur the clear distinctions between the principles of human and non-human bodies upon which the Church's moral view of Nature based itself, and profoundly reevaluate permissible degrees intimacy between humans, beasts, and plants.

Magnus's accounts of plants, herbs, and stone contrasts starkly with *Cosmographia* which describes plants and herbs primarily in terms of their aesthetic correlation with human senses. Through human interpretation and deductive power, types of trees are given a decisive place in the

cosmos. After describing God's creation of rivers throughout the firmament, an account of various trees and shrubs is given:

Texuntur musco fontes, et caespite ripae.
vestitur tellus gramine, fronde nemus.
Fronduit in plano platanus, convallibus alnus,
rupe rigens buxus, litore lenta salix,
monte cupressus olens, sacra vitis colle supino,
inque laborata Palladis arbor humo.
Populus albescens, lotus cognatior undis,
et viburna magis vimine lenta suo;
in nodos et lata rigens venabula cornus,
in validos arcus flexile robur, acer;
mobilibus tremulus et acutis forndibus ilex,
et mala Cecropias perdere taxus apes;
quercus alumna, gigas abies, pygmaea mirica.

(Springs are wreathed with moss and riverbanks with turf. The field is clad with grasses, the grove with leaves. The plane tree flourishes on level ground, the alder on the slope, the sturdy box tree on rocky cliffs, the supple willow on the shore, the scented cypress on the mountain, the sacred vine on the hillside, the tree of Pallas in cultivated vated soil. There are the silvered poplar; the lotos, lover of the stream; viburnum, suppler than its own shoots; the cornel, gnarled and bristling with long spears; the maple, hard and flexible, suited for strong bows; the holm oak, quivering with sharp and vibrant leaves; the yew, fell destroyer

of the Cecropian bees; the parent oak; the giant pine; the pigmy myrtle.) (Lines 265-76, Wetherbee)

The verb "Textunur" (wreathed/woven) again emphasises the significance of craft in the layout of the firmament. These are not accidents: every tree is given a uniquely designed appearance and texture, conveying the handiwork of God's plan. Fields are mercifully "clad" with grasses; the cypress tree on the mountain is "scented" with a natural perfume; the Maple is "hard and flexible". The meaning of each tree is in some way exegetical: their physical properties are aesthetically mediated through anthropogenic senses and interpreted in terms of their divinely prescribed positioning in the cosmos. In this listed form, non-human objects are presented as distinct units that are given meaning by their relationship to the composite whole. They are treated as physically separate but theologically bound together.

Silvestrus also touches upon the medicinal properties of certain plants, herbs, and vegetables. Their creation by Nature is described:

Dividit in species tunicata legumina tellus:
in cicer Italicum, Pictoniasque fabas,
et caecas lentes, et pisa moventia ventrem,
nigrantes vicias phaseolasque leves.
Macra siligo riget, frumentaque plena tumescunt;
surgit avena levis, ordea parva sedent.

(Earth divides the jacketed vegetables into species: Italian chickpea pea and French bean; eyeless lentil, and peas which aid digestion; dark vetch and smooth kidney bean. Sparse

winter grain grows hard, and ripe wheat swells; the slender oat grows tall, barley remains short-stalked.) (Lines 355-60, Wetherbee)

The verb “Dividit” gives a very clear sense of demarcation and division between vegetables, emphasising the distinctions of the interacting entities. When peas “moventia” the stomach of a sentient being, they are not overlapped with the host’s body: the two interact mechanically and predictably as intricate parts of a biological machine. In fact, any being that might consume or otherwise perceive these plants is hardly brought into the picture at all as a holistic entity. Instead, correlative body parts and senses are phased in and out of the verse when medicinal or dietary properties are identified:

Cum sensim reptantis aquae persensit odorem,
    Explicuit varias quas habet hortus opes.
Pectoris herba, cavas rupes insedit ysopus;
    plana soporatum terra papaver habet.
Purgatura caput tenet arva sinapis, et altos
    obsedit muros frigida barba Iovis.

(As it slowly wakens to the presence of trickling water, the garden spreads forth such wealth as it possesses. Hyssop, a remedy for the lungs, dwells in the hollows of rocks, while open ground bears the drowsy poppy. Mustard takes command of uncleared fields, and chill Jove's-beard besieges lofty walls.) (Lines 361-366, Wetherbee)

Et cum scariola surgit lactua sopora,
    portulaca iacens, intiba fixa solo,

caepa repleta notis, Liguris sapor allia dirus,

quodque relativo caespite gaudet olus;

latius aspirans mentaster, discolor iris,

cumque dialtea supplice, malva levis;

plena voluptatis eruca, libens satirea,

satyricon revocans ad juvenile senes

(camomile, bringing pleasant rest to the sleepless brain; dittany, to draw out embedded objects; panacea, known to bring the gift of healing to open wounds; anise hot to the taste, which congests the genital ducts and closes the broader canal to the flow of semen.) (Lines 369-376, Wetherbee)

The whole list seems to be framed by a human body, as if each distinct plant and vegetable is literally enveloped and internalised by the anthropogenic model of Nature that they signify. The herb hyssop is described as being "for" the lungs, as though its presence in the world were entirely contingent upon its human utility. Piquant garlic imparts a sharp taste and establishes its presence in the lines by way of the human tongue. Lustful rocket serves as an aphrodisiac, returning old men to youthful sexual exuberance. However, this sexual quality appears to be transactional, rather than interventionist in the way that Magnus's bunches of marigolds and sprigs of calamintha are. As suggested by the human-oriented structure of this list, rocket seems to act as a signal that is given meaning by its being channelled through human senses. It does not act as a potent agent in matters of sentient sexuality. Whereas the marigolds seem independently capable of affecting sexual and reproductive outcomes, Silvestrus's rocket merely catalyses the closed circuits of human procreation. These different treatments are due to the different objectives of the authors. For Silvestrus, the vibrant array of trees, plants, and herbs reflect an aesthetic manifestation of a divine

intellect, with each distinct scent, taste, texture, and stimulation appealing to the deductive power of humans and confirming the centrality of man's position in the world. The sensual property of each botanical object is fed through an exegetical superstructure designed to confirm the order and stability of the created universe. However, for Daniel and Magnus, plants and humans are found to ecologically overlap in ways that are beyond the narrow scope of human reason. Plants have complex lives that elude containment by a system of deductive reasoning. Thus, botanists are prone treat plants and herbs in terms of their unique and often disruptive properties, which in turn reveal the possible nonconformity of non-human objects in theological systems of meaning.

Michael George has highlighted the different theological inflections of "Nature" at play in Middle English literature, but Assisi and Aquinas's understandings are ultimately derived from the same theological agenda and ontological assumptions. Whilst Assisi's close interactions with non-humans present him as "someone precociously attuned to the natural environment" (Epstein, 35), his aim was to establish harmony between all of God's creatures, not to flatten the hierarchy of humans and non-humans. Nearly two centuries after Assisi's estimated death, Aquinas responded to the newly translated Aristotle corpus in a state of intellectual emergency for the Christian church. In his reconciling of deductive reasoning with the liturgies of faith, Aquinas reasserted mankind's unique closeness to God and rightful dominion above Nature. However, throughout this period, the mostly undocumented practice of botany continued to probe vegetable anatomies beneath the scholarly debates of the church. There seems to be no evidence that prominent individual botanists were engaged in a consciously heretical endeavour. 'Professional' botanists, who largely dwelled in the monasteries, were simply interested in curing ailments, appreciating the simple virtues of plants (this is especially true in the case of Daniel), and understanding, for the purposes of moral enforcement, the lore of plants' allegedly superstitious properties (in the case of Magnus)— they were not consciously participating in the wider theological conversation about Nature. However, the

botanists' discoveries and methods point towards something that we might now call "ecological": intimate reciprocity between the anatomies of humans and non-humans. Especially in the case of Magnus, ecological intimacy is revealed by the dissonance between why the text is written (to eschew the evils of magic by understanding it), and what is *not* said about plants— such as marigolds— and their influence on human behaviour. The reciprocity between a supposedly asexual flower and an eminently sexual female-human adulterer is left unexplained by Magnus, and this obscurity is perhaps more telling than the simple catalogue of superstitions about plants. Magnus's delving too deeply into this overlap might call for problematic contemplations about whether or not sexuality is uniquely animal in nature. If vegetables are thought of as sexual, it is not difficult to think about sexuality in terms of a blind execution of reproductive algorithms—much like a grafted tree branch— devoid of a moral kilter and enacted by bodies that lack a spiritual essence: a fixed role in the cosmos and a unique proximity to God in grace and intellect. If a plant can interpret the sentient coding of human sexuality, then a deep ecological intimacy between these supposedly separate bodies becomes apparent. It is this murky overlap into which Chaucer's female protagonist dips her toe when she expresses her "sore" desire for small green pears.

III Vegetable Sexuality in the Merchant's Tale

In the previous section, I examined church doctrines of Nature that were written, debated, and imposed by male scribes. These models of the cosmos prescribed theological networks of signification within Nature and demarcated boundaries between human and non-human bodies. In this section, I return to the *Merchant's Tale* in which Aquinas's model of Nature is reflected by January and the merchant-narrator's attempts to control May's body and sexual activity. However, at the precipice of the tale's climax, May's divergent sexual desire for "smale peres grene" plays out in the context of the ecological ambiguities uncovered by medieval botanists' probing of vegetable anatomies. May's desire not only disrupts the church-drawn lines between human sexuality and vegetable objects, but goes undetected by those who surround her: her husband January, the merchant-narrator, Damyan, and some *Merchant's Tale* scholars. I begin by examining how the merchant-narrator and January act in cahoots to realise Aquinas's hegemonic model of Nature in a vain attempt to monitor and exert control over May's sexual activity. In particular, I examine how the architecture of January's garden embodies Aquinas's rigid ontological assumptions, and the Christian moral axioms and patriarchal social institutions that were stipulated by these assumptions. Through this figuration, I hope to show that the frustrated dynamics of narrative control and masculine authority explored respectively by Chaucer critics Jacob McDonie, Elaine Tuttle Hansen, and Hollie A. Crocker share a common root in January's efforts to exert dominance over ecology through a failed praxis of "Nature". I then return to the tale's climax in the garden, where the site upon which January seeks to assert control through Nature ironically becomes the epicentre of a queer overlap between human and vegetable sexuality. This reading finds that the pears act as sexually agentic objects that affect rather than mirror May's bodily desire. Through this approach, I posit that the tale's climax is a representation of the covert tension

between the ecological blurs between human and non-human anatomies found in medieval botany and the rigid church doctrines of Nature. Finally, I argue that through this surreptitious encounter, Chaucer exhibits a nascent sensitivity to "queer ecology" to which both January and the merchant-narrator are blind.

At the beginning of the tale, the merchant-narrator promptly establishes the connection between church doctrines of Nature and marriage. The 'worthy knight' January is introduced as having foolishly spent his younger years in sexual revelry and "his bodily delyt" (1249). But rather than delving into the faults in character that might be exposed by such libidinous behaviour, the merchant-narrator diagnoses January's lusty exploits as the inevitable consequence of shunning the teachings of the church. The merchant-narrator declares:

> On wommen, ther was his appetyt
> As doon thise fooles that been seculeer (1250-51)

In the merchant's view, there is a direct connection between January's secular lifestyle and his bodily urges for women. When the narrator goes on to say:

> Were it for holynesse or for dotage
> I kan nat seye, but swich a greet corage
> Hadde this knyght to been a wedded man (1253-55)

It seems that despite the narrator's inability or refusal to reveal whether age or piety drives January to seek wedlock, January's wish to marry places him comfortably back under the fold of Church dogma. In fact, after decades spent as a lecherous bachelor, January is shown to view marriage so

enthusiastically and idealistically, we might wonder why it took him so long to initiate his seeking of a wife:

> "Noon oother lyf," seyde he, "is worth a bene,
> For wedlok is so esy and so clene
> That in this world it is a paradys (1263-64)

If this declaration reads as comically naive, it is because these words come from a man of older (if not wiser) years. Nevertheless, the words "clene" and "paradys" convey a view of marriage closely informed by church sentiments. These choice words reveal that it is the perceived purity and cleanliness of the "hooly bond" (1261) that informs January's wish to marry most deeply, whilst serving to accommodate the merchant-narrator's reminder that "Marriage is full greet a sacrement" (1319). January's (the old man) concern for an heir is belittled by January the christian subject's apparently sudden and sincere belief in the possibility of a pure, unadulterated human bond, in which he might realise "His paradys terrestre" (1332). The merchant, not wanting the religious aspect of January's wish to go unnoticed, concurs with the Knight that:

> …certeinly, as sooth as God is kyng
> To take a wyf it is a glorious thyng (1267-68)

Before lambasting the morally abhorrent lifestyles of bachelors, whom he asserts are filled with "peyne and wo" (1278), because:

> On brotel ground they buylde, and brotlenesse
> They fynde whan they wene sikernesse (1279-80)

The problem of a life lacking in “sikernesse” (security) speaks to the moral virtue of balance in Natural order that had been asserted by Aquinas. The supposedly “brotel” foundations upon which a bachelor lives is decried as unstable by the narrator, echoing the Thomist belief that balance and orderliness are virtues inherent to the moral fabric of Nature itself. After all, according to the narrator, “woman is for mannes helpe ywroght” (1324). Man and woman were designed distinctly so that “They moste nedes lyve in unitee” (1334). Married life is viewed as a “blisful and ordinaat” (1284) state, in which the complementing sexes perform divinely prescribed roles that serve as microcosmic components of the cosmos as a balanced, dynamic whole. The celebrated orderliness in married life enhances quality of life for a young man and signifies a fundamental virtue that is integral to the moral balance of the entire universe. By contrast, the unhinged bachelor is said to:

> …lyve but as a bryd or as a beest
> In libertee and under noon arreest (1281-82)

Therefore, according to the merchant-narrator, engaging in a life of lechery is to cease to be a human at all. By abdicating one’s divinely ordained role in the cosmos as a procreative spouse, one is relegated to the subordinate role of a beast under the domain of worthier humans. This reflects the belief that the nature of the body (as it was conceived by the Christian church) is not only linked with appearance, but also to moral behaviour. To establish an appropriate position in the Thomist view of Nature that shaped thought from the mid-thirteenth century onwards, a being must act in accordance with the divine purpose of its designated role.

In the prelude of the tale, the suddenness of January's conversion and the religiosity of his language shows he has discovered a basic belief in the church's teachings about moral balance in Nature. However, it seems that old habits die hard as January's contemplation about what his prospective bride might look like betrays his continued ardor for pleasures of the flesh. To his friends, January confides:

> For I wol be, certeyn, a wedded man,
> And that anoon in al the haste I kan
> Unto som mayd fair and tender of age (1405-07)

A reasonable enough criteria, his companions might think, for an older man wishing to sire an heir. A young bride would be particularly important since, as highlighted by Alcuin Blamires, "extinction of the bloodline" due to plague "remained a major problem throughout the Middle Ages even for the baronial families" and consequently, "For January, the prospect of marriage to May means an exclusive appropriation of her sexuality that will maximize his pleasure and guarantee his bloodline" (112). But January states:

> She shal nat passe twenty yeer, certayn;
> Oold fissh and young flesh wolde I have fayn.
> Bet is." quod he, "a pyk than a pykerel,
> And bet than old boef is the tendre veal (1417-1420)

This gaudy talk of meat and hedonistic appetite for "tendre veal" hardly seems aligned with the language of purity and chastity of the church. However, these crude similes act as potent symbols for patriarchal control in wedlock, and thus reflect the church doctrines about Nature that

underscored matrimony. Whilst January's lascivious talk momentarily conflates the flesh of non-human livestock and that of a young bride-to-be, the meat is reduced to a signifier of lusty human urges and sexual domination. The evocative sibilance of "Oold fissh and young flesh" (1418) places the counterpart foodstuffs (fish and flesh) in a binary generated by the adjectives "Oold" and "young", rather than the beasts whose namesake meats merely serve as surrogate symbols for old and young human bodies in a balanced and procreative marital bond. January's linguistic formation opens little space for contemplation about the sentient beings whose bodies upon which his male lust and dutiful desire to procreate are evoked. Non-humans are subordinated by the poetic structure of this image in the way that the young bride will be subordinated in marriage. This patriarchal intention becomes explicit with January's assertion that:

> But certynly, a yong thyng may men gye
> Right as men may warm wex with handes plye (1429-1430)

Whilst January clearly exercises little restraint over his life-long tendency towards concupiscence, his primary reason for seeking a bride of younger years is so he may exercise control and influence over her female body, reflecting the way that mankind should exert his rightful dominion above Nature. January is no puritan, but his plan cleaves to an anatomical hierarchy that reflects the hegemonic christian model of Nature (c. the mid-thirteenth century) that stipulated balance between man and woman as constituent (if not equal) partners in a carefully managed sacramental bond. After all, January is careful to remind, marital sex is primarily for "cause of leveful procreacioun" (1448) in the continuance on God's plan for the cosmos, not only for passion, pleasure, and love. Marriage, reflecting the idea of Nature, is shown by the knight to exist in a stringently moralised intellectual architecture that was articulated by the church and executed under the management of male authority.

The dynamics of control and authority have been among the most productive elements of *Merchant's Tale* criticism. Much discussion has centred on the friction between the merchant-narrator, January, and May. The merchant-narrator seeks to curtail the tale's vulgarity and January's occasionally lurid language. In marriage, January seeks to control May's sexual behaviour like "warm wex" to compensate for the shortcomings of his elderly limbs, while the narrator frantically attempts to censor the most graphic scenes (particularly when Damyan "throngs" at the tale's climax) for the sake of his audience members. In light of these dynamics, Jacob McDonie has argued that "narration is an embattled act that fails to bind sexual and linguistic desire and makes uncontrollable demands upon its narrator" (313). debunking previous so-called 'tyrannical narrator' readings of the *Merchant's Tale*, McDonie shows that the merchant-narrator's voice is fragmented by a struggle between his wish to control the events of the story through a coherent narration and the egregiously promiscuous behaviour of the characters. At the tale's climax when, after a delay of hundreds of lines, May and Damyan engage in the long anticipated act of adulterous intercourse in the pear-tree, the narrator "appears simultaneously eager both to narrate the sordid sexual act and to finish narrating it, as well as anxious about representing its vulgarities" (314). Given the merchant's signals of contradictory motives, McDonie asserts that the narrative voice is "far too divided to be ossified into a psychologically stable entity." (313). Paralleling this lack of narrative control, the gender dynamics that underscore January's dominance over his wife May have been shown to be equally unstable. Elaine Tuttle Hansen's study in *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender* (1992) notes that the tale's pervasive state of nervousness from which (according to E. Talbot Donaldson) "only the most resolutely unflappable reader can free himself" (246) is generated by its internal conflict with regard to female subjectivity. Hansen writes:

> "The Merchant's Tale is, I agree, brutal and bitter: brutal in its attitude towards domestic and narrative violence against women and bitter in its confrontation with the fact that even violence cannot guarantee masculine difference and dominance" (256)

A later study of the tale by Holly A. Crocker extends this claim by asserting that January's young bride's ostensible docility and subordination amounts to a pretension that reveals her covert agency and exposes the absurdity of her husband's desire for control. Crocker writes:

> "May's conduct demonstrates that the feminine passivity upon which masculine performances of agency depend is *of course* an act, and by playing out this act, May exposes the ridiculous nature of all claims to masculine authority, whether they are based on knowing rawness, ironic detachment, or blind naivete." (178)

May's performative passivity in fact betrays her manipulation of the fantasies of both her husband and Damyan. Crocker explains that:

> "her behaviour demonstrates that feminine passivity always requires agency. Whether she is working to endure January's sexual fantasy, or endeavouring to satisfy her desire for Damyan, May uses agency to maintain the appearance of passivity." (179)

Taking these positions together, there is critical consensus that conventional mechanisms of authority are frustrated, destabilised, and mocked over the course of the *Merchant's Tale*. But in addition to these readings, I would cite one of January's most conspicuous and futile attempts at displaying control: the garden. In this space, we encounter the conclusive fragmentation of the narrative voice as well as a climactic display of May's sexual agency. Underscoring both the tale's

slippery narrative handling and its irresolvable dilemma with respect to male authority is perhaps a common thread that manifests its disruptive apex within the stone walls of the garden. In the garden, Nature, which serves as the moral basis upon which other power relationships are established, is exposed as an ontologically brittle structure built upon seismic ground.

The garden, which is constructed by January shortly after his marriage to May, turns out to be an unworkable theological praxis of Nature that sets up a blinding illusion of power, control, and morality for January. The architecture of this enclosed green space embodies the Christian ideals of balance in Nature, and thus displays the ontological basis upon which other fragile modes of authority in the tale—patriarchal and textual— are precariously set up. At the same time as when signals of infidelity between May and Damian begin to manifest, we are told by the narrator that January

> In honest wyse, as longeth to a knyght
> Shoop hym to lyve ful deliciously
> His housynge, his array, as honestly
> To his degree was maked as a kynges.
> Amonges othere of his honeste thynges,
> He made a gardyn, walled al with stoon (2024-29)

The narrator wishes his audience to view the construction of a garden that is defensively "walled al with stoon" as merely one of many activities fitting and proper for a man of knightly standing. However, as well as the garden's being of exceptional beauty and taste ("so fair a gardyn woot I nowher noon"(2030)) the timing of its construction gives the sense that the stone walls correlate

with feelings of insecurity and anxiety on January's part. After all, we recall that one hundred lines previously, May secretly conveys to Damian that

> There laketh noght oonly but day and place
> Wher that she myghte unto his lust suffise (1998-1999)

As May's desires begin to percolate, a stone enclosure is quickly erected. We are told further by the narrator that January adores his garden so passionately that

> That he wol no wight suffren bere the keye
> Save he hymself; for of the smale wyket
> He baar alwey of silver a clyket (2044-46)

The garden is designed as a locked, carefully managed space in which January can enjoy sole authority. Clearly, the garden acts a locality in which his duties as a husband can be accomplished, and thus, the natural (as stipulated by church morality) balance of the monogamous bond can be secured. We are told euphemistically by the narrator that in the garden:

> thynges whiche that were nat doon abedde,
> He in the gardyn parfourned and spedde (2051-2052)

This notion of the garden acting as Nature in (perhaps a blue) pill form reflects January's anxious urge to control to degenerative effects of old-age for the sake of his disintegrating marriage. In this way, the effects that the garden have upon January's body reflect both the therapeutic potentialities

attributed to gardens by medieval botany, as well as the belief in management of the human body as a microcosm for balance in Nature as a whole. The lines

> Ne Priapus ne myghte nat suffise,
> Though he be god of gardyns, for to telle
> The beautee of the gardyn and the welle
> That stood under a laurer alwey grene. (2034-2037)

reflect Chaucer's own affinity for the beauty of carefully tended green spaces. Through its outstanding beauty and visual charm, the "alwey grene" space rejuvenates the old knight, who is said to enjoy "swich deyntee hath in it to walke and pleye" (2043). By restoring January's youthful physical exuberance and thus his ability to satisfy the sexual needs of his wife, the garden reflects an ideal model of the universe in which the elements of Nature exist in balanced harmony.

However, January's "many a murye day" are quickly seen to be numbered as his enclosed garden ironically becomes the space in which the marriage is betrayed and ultimately fails. In this way, Chaucer exposes the problem with assuming a coherent intellectual concept of Nature as a basis on which to establish stability or certitude. In fact, we see that the tighter the grasp on such a conception of Nature becomes, the quicker it deconstructs itself and slips away. Such problems are preempted by the narrator whilst January indulges in a personal illusion of health, sexual vitality, and his wife's fidelity. January's blindness and further loss of control over his supposedly manipulable wife are foreshadowed by the merchant-narrator's discussion of May's secret affair with Damyan, who as a servant, appears to be utterly dependable and servile:

> He dooth al that his lady lust and lyketh,

And eek to Januarie he gooth as lowe,

As evere dide a dogge for the bowe (2012-14)

Despite Damyan's veneer of innocence, we see that in two senses, natural order contradicts itself and becomes undone by its own conceptual rigidity. In fulfilling his duty, Damyan must serve the contrary wishes of both his lord and lady: the extramarital "lust and lyketh" of January's adulterous wife whilst attending "as lowe" to the wishes of his lord, who seems as blind now to his servant's treachery as he will be later in the text. Moreover, in adopting the bestial position of a "dogge for the bowe", Damyan assumes both his subordinate role whilst also being likened to the sexually unhinged life of a bachelor, who we recall the narrator disgustedly describes as unnaturally living as a "bryd or as a beast" in the prelude of the text. In this way, we see that Damyan is able to appear to fulfil his properly subordinate role whilst simultaneously engaging, in the merchant's view, in a decidedly unnatural extramarital affair akin to the contemptible life of a lusty bachelor. Damyan's servitude makes a mockery of the natural ordering and stability so valued by the narrator, who is only adept to express his disgust by calling Damyan a "dogge".

As noted by Jacob McDonie, the merchant throughout the tale desperately conveys his moral disgust at the stories events whilst being utterly helpless to prevent their course. By referring to Damyan as a "dogge for the bowe", the narrator at once attempts to assert order whilst showing his bitter distaste for the planned betrayal of that order. Despite his disdain however, the merchant momentarily and necessarily gives the appearance of having been convinced by Damyan's actions that all is well:

Thus lete I Damyan aboute his nede,

And in my tale forth I wol procede." (2019-20)

In asserting his supposed power to “procede” at will, the narrator indulges in the deceptive appearance of order and allows himself to “lete” his indignant eye away from the adulterous “lust and lyketh” of May. In order to exercise his rapidly dissipating narrative authority over what he possessively refers to as “my tale”, the merchant must suppress and differ the events which undo the marital institution he holds in such high regard. Like January, It is as if this illusion of order suffices for nature itself since it paradoxically allows the merchant to comfortably continue the tale of which he is rapidly losing control. By proceeding in this way and fulfilling his narrative role, the merchant must ultimately betray his own professed valuing of marriage as an illusion of the ‘natural’ moral order it represents.

It is when January has fully submerged himself in the illusion of stability and security that he becomes blind. Compelling explanations for his loss of sight have been proposed by James M. Palmer and Peter Brown who respectively posit psychological and dietary causes. Palmer reveals that Chaucer drew upon an extensive repertoire of optometrical and medical material, in particular the works of Benvenutus of Jerusalem, to attribute January’s blindness to his gluttony and hedonism. Brown on the other hand points to the fact that “January’s ability to see well is severely restricted by psychological impediments”. However, it is when January constructs his garden and tightens his grasp on an idealised conception of order and stability that he loses his sight and thus becomes literally insensible to the undoing of his marriage. Though the merchant bemoans “O sodeyn hap! O thou Fortune unstable!” (2057) as a pretext for sudden blindness, his scorpion analogy warns against the “deceyvable” (2058) sting of the “hewe of stidefastnesse” (2063). This linking of “hewe” (appearance) with a model of steadfast order suggests that January is in fact blinded by his own deluded perception of an orderly and “Natural” marriage. In the absence of a medical explanation, the merchant states

Amydde his lust and his prosperitee,

Is woxen blynd, and that al sodeynly. (2070-71)

Just as the narrator actively turned away from Damyan upon perceiving the deceptive "hewe" of his orderly servitude, January forfeits his sight amid the delusion of "his lust and prosperitee" (2070) that is literally fortified within the stone walls of his garden. In this way, the visual tranquility of the garden ceases to afford therapeutic rebalancing of his age and sexual vitality, and instead disables January's ability to perceive his world. In realising the intellectual ideal of an encapsulated and balanced concept of nature, one intended to restore his health and stabilise his marriage, January literally becomes blind.

Desperately afraid that without sight "his wyf should falle in som folye" (2074), the stone walls of January's marriage squeeze ever tighter and in turn catalyse his own loss of control. Greatly unnerved and paranoid, the ageing knight insists that:

He nolde suffre hire for to ryde or go,

But if that he had hand on hire alway (2090-91)

Yet his literal grasp of May only serves to augment her desire for Damyan and quicken the unravelling of their marriage:

For which ful ofte wepeth fresshe May

That loveth Damyan so benyngnely (2092-93)

The use again of "fresshe" to describe May no longer designates her youthful rejuvenation of January, but rather signals a sense of entrapment that intensifies her extramarital love to the extent that "she wayteth whan hir herte wolde breste" (2096). The reader is reminded that her uncontainable freshness persists independently of her stringently controlled wedlock and therapeutic service to January. The fact that she is said to love "benyngnley" (graciously) also betrays the merchant's further loss of narrative control, since he is forced to concede the graciousness of her desire and desist in his conveyance of moral disgust and use of derisory language. The frantic attempts made by January and the narrator to recuperate an ordered and moral marriage slip further away with every grasp.

It is precisely this grasping for a coherent understanding that problematises the very inception of Nature and chases away its conceptual stability. Such is the slipperiness of "nature" that Timothy Morton calls for contemporary critics to discard the term altogether since its rootedness in aesthetic phenomena inhibits genuinely ecological discourse. He notes that "Nature wavers in between the divine and the material. Far from being something "natural" itself, nature hovers over things like a ghost". In his later work *Hyperobjects* (2013), Morton suggests that "Thinking things as Nature is thinking them as a more or less static, or metastable, continuity bounded by time and space" (120). Thus, he finds "The aesthetics of Nature truly impedes ecology, and a good argument for why ecology must be without Nature" (128). January's blind hold upon his wife presents a chasing of this phantasmic ideal of a static and balanced intellectual principle that is designated by "nature". An ideal, which like patriarchy views nature with the perverse paradoxical gaze of "sadistic admiration". May presents to January's male stare an impressionable site on which to manipulate and mould his designs of stability, health, and moral duty. Like "warm wex" that he can "with hands plye", May's youth is likened to an inchoate substance which yields passively to her husband's sacramental expectations. However, it is this very same substance that is used by

Damyan and May to impress and replicate January's silver latch key and compromise the security of his enclosed garden:

> In warm wex hath emprented the clyket
> That Januarie bar of the smale wkyet," (2117-18)

By its malleability and susceptibility to influence, the wax upon which January's model of order constitutes itself is also the medium by which that order bends and collapses. Through January's overtly masculine desire to physically and aesthetically contain his supposedly manipulable wife and establish a morally balanced marriage that cures his old age and anxiety, we see that a tighter grip on a concept of "nature" serves only to reveal its porosity and hasten its dissolution.

At the climax of the tale, May's passionate desire for pears thwarts the ontological assumptions behind January's praxis of Nature. The majority of critics have variously interpreted the pears as inanimate bystanders, or as innocuous signifiers of human sexual desire: Samantha Katz Seal and Carol Falvo Heffernan examine the medical narratives surrounding May's cravings for pears in the context medieval patriarchy and male pathologising of female sexual appetites, but do not venture to entertain May's sexual desire for the fruit. Amy Kauffman calls readers to experience sexual bodily pleasure *as* May, but does not consider the sensual yearning for non-human contact expressed in the lines:

> I moste han of the peres that I see
> Or I moot dye, so soore longeth me
> To eten of the smale peres grene (Lines 2331-33).

Kauffman occludes the "smale peres grene" from the titillation that is plainly evoked in May's "soore" desire. The pears' stories as sexually enjoyable entities are apparently over as soon as the young bride begins to climb towards Damian. Yet the adjective "soore" is decidedly physical, extruding figuration as mere metaphor and designating May's longing for tangible bodily contact and stimulating friction with a non-human. This craving for physical contact is heeded by January, who tells May:

> …for Goddes sake
> The pyrie inwith your armes for to take (2341-42)

The old knight's order for May to literally hug the pear tree affirms her explicit desire for bodily engagement with the fruit. Furthermore, shortly after May embraces the tree, we are told by the narrator that it is "*this* Damyan [emphasis added]"(2352) who penetrates her. The relative pronoun suggests that it is a close at hand but differential 'Damyan'—i.e., not necessarily the squire with whom we have been acquainted throughout the tale—who copulates with the young bride. More than being a metrically appropriate phrasing in the line, does the peculiar ambiguity generated by "*this* Damyan" not leave room for the pears to continue their part in the tale? Given May's intense attention to the juicy green pears, it is possible that the pears—in May's view— temporarily supplant the position of the male human body in order to satisfy May's "soore" desire. If, as we are called upon to do by Kaufman, we are to read this scene *as* May, then we cannot allow an exclusionary, heteronormative, and anthropocentric ethics of sex to overwrite the young bride's plainly expressed desire to experience physical engagement with a non-human object. May asserts her sexual agency by desiring contact with an entity that falls outside the moral jurisdiction of her husband and the narrator, while the pears display animacy by supplanting Damian's body. In doing so, the two exhibit the anatomical overlaps between humans and vegetables found in medieval

botany. This intimacy dismantles the basis of the Church's anthropocentric model of Nature and therefore January's patriarchal authority.

According to object-oriented studies, inanimate objects, including pears, do not "throng" of their own volition in temporal frames visible to humans, but they do move: objects have animated lives that operate beneath the shallow radar of human aesthetics. Objects possess degrees of viscosity and complexity that indicate pervasive overlaps with human bodies. Timothy Morton has coined that we are "enmeshed", which is to say we exist adjacently to other objects in a vast, ever-receding, and de-centred web of being that stretches across bodily demarcations:

> A mesh consists of relationships between crisscrossing strands of metal and gaps between the strands. Meshes are potent metaphors for the strange interconnectedness of things, an interconnectedness that does not allow for perfect, lossless transmission of information, but is instead full of gaps and absences. When an object is born it is instantly enmeshed into a relationship with other objects in the mesh. (1471-1474)

According to this metaphor, ecological existence acknowledges the radical uniqueness and inaccessibility of things that we are interconnected with. Objects are not holistic and therefore cannot be reduced to their correlation with human perception. Uncannily, we are deeply entangled with and yet distanced by irreducible degrees from other objects, hence the "gaps between the strands" in the mesh; Graham Harman in *Guerrilla Metaphysics* has similarly argued that because objects withdraw irreducibly from scrutiny, we cannot get closer to them (86). Thus, the terms of intimate relationships with a non-human object need not be sexual as they are in the case of May and the pears: genital intercourse is not necessary to confirm the deep, uncanny intimacy with non-human objects that is suggested by medieval botanists. But such a relationship need not be non-

sexual. Once distinctions between animate and inanimate are poked (or transgressed), ideologies that segregate objects on the grounds of supposedly categorical differences in anatomy—as stipulated by early Christian models of Nature— no longer holds water. Sexuality itself is defamiliarised and stripped of its status as the exclusive domain of heterosexual, sentient, and procreative animals. Thus, what May demonstrates when she declares that she "so soore longeth" for pears is much more profound than a genital-oriented urge to receive gratification from a fetishised vegetable. Instead, her desire serves as a prism through which a panoramic view of an enmeshed, radically interconnected ecological relationality and a queer juxtaposition with anatomical otherness (pears with humans) becomes apparent. A view that is by contrast invisible to January, Damian, and the merchant-narrator, who all cleave to a cosmological model in which the dimensions of visibility, action, and desire are set by human, God-centred morals: fidelity versus adultery, chastity versus promiscuity etc. Sexual intimacy with the pears is categorically invisible to these men. Meanwhile, the experience of May's titillation in the *Merchant's Tale* serves as a dramatic lens through which a much more fundamental challenge to hierarchical models of Nature plays out: Chaucer's nascent, botany-oriented sensitivity to "the ecological thought" becomes apparent.

IV Conclusion

The brittle lens of Nature affords January and the merchant-narrator with narrow fields of vision. The more tightly that control is grasped at by the elderly knight, the more quickly his authority shatters, and reveals an ecological landscape that blurs through human and vegetable bodies by way of May's transgressive sexual desire. Like Thomas Aquinas's model of the cosmos, January's desire to literalise the control and balance of Nature as an aesthetic phenomenon in the form of a garden comes during a time of anxiety and crisis: The Aristotle corpus compelled Aquinas in the mid-thirteenth century to reconcile deductive reasoning with liturgies of faith, while May's secret infidelity compels the knight to throw up stone-walls and compensate for his bodily shortcomings with home-grown aphrodisiacs. Both acts emerge hurriedly during times of insecurity: they are both defensive. Both are fundamentally acts of retreat, as both hone their scopes to fit God-centred narratives that leave in the dark a much more expansive, unfocused, and inscrutable image of ecological reality. Figures like Francis of Assisi— who have been upheld by modern eco-theorists as exceptions to this theological agenda—do not radically diverge from the basic assumption that mankind exists in a divinely ordered cosmos in which God is the centre. Assisi's mostly undocumented teachings primarily encouraged empathy with non-human creatures in order that the work of Creation, and through it Christ's sacrifice for the earth, might understood and worshipped at a more profound, visceral level. Such postulations, as shown by Roger D. Sorrell, exhibit a continuation of a much older eremitic tradition that was intended to strengthen, not break with Church teachings on Nature. Yet, in the field of botany, which seems to have enjoyed (as much as could be permitted) reprieve from the frantic moralising of the Church, a dark, withdrawn space is opened in which human anatomy is shown to share in the existence of vegetables. According to the botanist Henry Daniel, human bodies can be physically balanced and maintained simply by viewing, smelling, or otherwise consuming the green pleasantries of the garden. The

proper humeral stasis of human anatomy is ironically achieved by its intimate confluence with something categorically (at least according to the Church) distinct. Albertus Magnus in earlier texts catalogued the bizarre properties attributed to inanimate objects and leaves the reader with peculiar images of marigolds resting in adulteress-free zones. This power, which is not disenchanted with an explanation, leaves the vague impression that the flower must posses the capacity for active recognition of human sexuality. An inanimate vegetable entity, at some obscure level, must possess powers of perception of a bodily function that it supposedly lacks itself. There is a dark, unseen, and unexplained relationship at work between human and plant that has the visible effect of keeping the adulteress and the marigold at an irreducible distance. These meditations contemplate deep empathy with non-humans at a level where people and plants become entangled in a shared ontological reality that shatters the elevated position of man in Aquinas's model of "Nature". Rather than drawing a sharper understanding of the irreducible aesthetic gap between humans and non-humans, botany drags the lordly status of a human body (as an object) to share an obscure state of being with mysterious plants. Human sexuality is therefore uncannily defamiliarised by May's encounter with pears as something not exclusively human: she exhibits queer ecology.

At the very least, Chaucer, Daniel, and Magnus recognise that there is a dissonance between the aesthetics of Nature and something resembling the dark realm of the ecological mesh. Whilst the secret lives of non-human objects are necessarily obscure, the uncanny awareness that things such as pears are not all that they seem begins an important (though implicit) challenge to Church models of Nature. To conclude, given the strange uncanniness of plants, vegetables, and herbs in medieval botanical texts, and the ways in which these strange qualities can be seen to play out in a poem such as the *Merchant's Tale*, excluding the ecological thought from premodern texts not only perpetuates the ahistorical fallacy that there was only one medieval view of "Nature", it also reinforces the theological models underscoring January and the merchant-narrator's delusions of control: we grant

an authority that is patently dysfunctional and broken by the tale's closing lines. In this error, we are also inhibited from meaningfully apprehending the profundity of the tale's climax. Chaucer exhibits much more than a comic extramarital copulation before the eyes of an insecure husband and an appalled narrator: he exhibits the fact that 'ecological consciousness' (or awareness of what Morton calls the "mesh") *preceded* the Thomist models of "Nature" that would come to accentuate non-human otherness and inhibit genuinely ecological discourse in the proceeding centuries.

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