Book Reviews

Kellie Robertson

Nature Speaks: Medieval Literature and Aristotelian Philosophy (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), pp. 456, 10 illus., \$69.95 (cloth), ISBN 978 0 8122 4865 4.

When Nature speaks, what does she say? To whom does she lecture or lament? And, given that the authors of many of the late medieval texts in which Nature speaks were learned male clerics and courtiers, who was actually doing the talking? These are the questions that Kellie Robertson takes up in her significant and wide-ranging book, *Nature Speaks: Medieval Literature and Aristotelian Philosophy*. Building creatively on the work of Barbara Newman and George Economou, Robertson argues skillfully that Nature's voice in late medieval literary texts produced in northern France and England expresses different possibilities for considering the ethics of creation, and different answers to the question of whether or not humanity is a part of nature, or stands separate from it. Between the middle of the thirteenth and the middle of the fifteenth century Nature appears in allegorical poetry in Latin, Old French, Anglo-Norman, and Middle English. Sometimes she wields an ax or proffers a book, and she often addresses the audience directly, a figure who "excites intentional ethical engagement on the part of the audience" (p. 19). Adopting (or appropriating) Nature's voice allowed the male clerics who wrote this poetry to argue against textual authorities, or to pose thought experiments about the category of 'the natural.'

The introduction over the thirteenth century of Aristotelian texts on natural philosophy (including texts by Aristotle, commentaries by scholars writing in Arabic and Hebrew, and *spuria*) to the northern European intellectual milieu and university arts curriculum, especially at Paris and Oxford, provided new paradigms for thinking about human love, as well as physics. According to Aristotelian teaching, the nature of Nature is teleological, and thus it can be used to convey moral precepts. The Aristotelian doctrines of inclination and disposition, which apparently covered all natural matter, were "of equal

concern to scholastic writers and to vernacular poets" (p. 9). This 'physics for poets' allowed the poets to grapple with the idea that human love occurred because of one body's natural inclination toward another body, or toward the highest good. But if natural laws of inclination govern the mysteries of desire, then what becomes of free will?

Nature Speaks opens with an extended discussion of the terms of the debate about nature and natural philosophy in the thirteenth century. Existing Neoplatonism, found in the schools of Chartres and St. Victor, viewed nature as remote and transcendent; the introduction of the Aristotelian view of nature as instructive of God and of humankind led to ideological clashes in university towns and at ecclesiastical courts, most famously culminating in the condemnations of Aristotle in 1277 by Étienne Tempier, Bishop of Paris. The death of Aristotle, encountered in scholastic disputations as well as in vernacular texts (such as *De pomo sive de morte Aristotilis*) in the thirteenth century, figured as a way to dwell on the role of human intellect in understanding the natural world, and which also preoccupied the 'Augustinian' and 'Aristotelian' factions in the schools. The third chapter in *Nature Speaks* is an extended close reading of Jean de Meun's continuation of *Le Roman de la Rose* in the context of the 1277 condemnations. De Meun uses Nature to examine how inclination and disposition work on natural beings, including humans, and more broadly, to address the question of how (or if) poetry can help humankind conquer its inclination toward sin. In chapter four, Robertson turns to a later allegory, based on *Le Roman de la Rose*, *Pèlerinage de vie humaine* (ca. 1320) by Guillaume de Deguileville, in which Nature voices concerns about the question of how to understand divine power. Later in the fourteenth century, in England, Chaucer used Nature to pose thought experiments about her authority, and the role of 'kynde' or inclination. In Chaucer's hands, poetry became a laboratory of conjecture, a place to imagine the consequences when human behavior was somehow 'unnatural.' Just a few years later, John Lydgate considered what Nature might have to say when natural philosophy was taken up with exactitude and utility; her voice could be one against determinism. Finally, Robertson takes up the issue of how Nature fell silent in the sixteenth century, as Aristotelian doctrines like that of inclination were abandoned, eventually in favor of Baconian empiricism.

Given the centrality of Aristotelian natural philosophy to the argument of *Nature Speaks*, anyone interested in its cultural expression during the final centuries of the medieval Latin West will find the book of interest. Robertson's reading of debates concerning Aristotelian *libri naturales* alongside vernacular texts, including allegorical poetry and encyclopedias, is compelling, and sheds light on how vernacular writers understood the philosophical and theological

debates of late medieval scholasticism, and how they used those arguments to advance their own views on love, on morality, and on free will. Yet *Nature Speaks* omits to take into account (or engages only very superficially with) the role of philosophers writing in Arabic and Hebrew in synthesizing, systematizing, and clarifying Aristotelian ideas, even when writers like Chaucer explicitly engaged with translations of Arabic texts in natural philosophy. Moreover, natural philosophical explanations for celestial influence that raised the same questions regarding the limits of nature and the role of free will taken up by poets drew on Arabic texts in translation. Yet in spite of this omission, *Nature Speaks* is a rich, nuanced, and deeply grounded study of the interrelationship between Aristotelian natural philosophy and vernacular poetry in the late medieval Latin West.

E.R. Truitt

Bryn Mawr College

etruitt@brynmawr.edu