
La nature comme source de la morale au Moyen Âge edited by Maaïke van der Lugt

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Since 1993, Società Internazionale per lo Studio del Medioevo Latino has been publishing the vital journal *Micrologus* and the related series Micrologus' Library, bringing critically important work on all aspects of scientific and intellectual culture of the Latin Middle Ages into productive interdisciplinary conversation. *La nature comme source de la morale au Moyen Âge*, edited by Maaïke van der Lugt, is of a piece with the series' high standard of scholarship. This volume can be taken as a follow-up to *The Moral Authority of Nature*, edited by Lorraine Daston and Fernando Vidal [2004], which posited that 'nature' and 'the natural' are terms that consistently stand in for ordered, self-evident processes and values, even as the essays in that volume demonstrate the myriad and often conflicting ways in which the moral authority of nature has been constituted, evoked, and undermined across time and space. That volume spanned the ancient world to modernity, and across Eurasia from Japan to Germany. *La nature comme source de la morale au Moyen Âge*, as its title suggests, takes many of the questions that animated Daston and Vidal's edited collection and applies them to the Latin Middle Ages in areas of philosophy, political theory, ethnography, art, medicine, poetry, astral science, and legal writing.

As this breadth of fields, methods, and texts suggests, the 13 essays in this volume reveal that the meaning and moral authority of nature was unfixed, polyvalent, and context-dependent in medieval Latin culture.

Les médiévaux mettent sur un piédestal la Nature – parfois représentée comme une reine qui juge, ordonne, arbitre, ou gouverne –, mais ils parlent aussi de la nature d'une espèce, d'un sexe, d'un peuple, d'une personne. [5]

Medieval people placed Nature on a pedestal—often represented as a queen who judges, organizes, arbitrates, or governs—but they referred also to the nature of a species, of a sex, of a people, of an individual. [my trans.]

As van der Lugt articulates in her essay, nature was often invoked to confirm religious, legal, and social norms; but could also be a profoundly disruptive force that exposed the inherent inconsistencies and failings of those norms. Nature could be appealed to as a fundamental rule or as something to be overcome or suppressed *via* discipline and habit, and habits could become so internalized as to become 'second nature' [33]. Latin texts reveal these two incommensurate ways of thinking about nature as they stressed the sharp distinction and easily breached barrier between nature and culture (or civilization) and also the adaptability of animals and humans to their environment. 'Natural' differences between genders could be grounds for subjugation [20] in some areas and in others could be seen as necessary to form a perfect union between man and woman, as Franceso Sarti demonstrates in his essay about Hugh of St Victor's position on same-sex marriage. Danielle Jacquart touches on similar themes from a different angle in exploring medical writings on generation and the role of female orgasm in human reproduction. Yet, as Jacquart notes, anatomist Mondino de' Liuzzi discussed female pleasure in vivid and sometimes coarse detail when lecturing to his students; but with his female patients he treated the subject matter with considerably more circumspection: the nature of his audience shaped his message.

Several of the essays take up different aspects of Scholastic philosophy and the relationship between nature and theology. Roberto Lambertini explores commentaries on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard that focus on the question of whether a state of nature can exist in a postlapsarian world. Is nature alone the cause of coercive power or does the enormous change wrought by original sin make it impossible to determine if domination is natural? Likewise, Alain Boureau takes up the question of evil and its effect on nature in commentaries on the *Sentences*. According to Albert the Great, Bonaventure, and Thomas Aquinas, original sin fundamentally changed the nature of the elements, although each articulated different kinds of change in his commentaries.

The sinful nature of humanity is also taken up by Benoît Grévin in his exploration of the relationship between civil and canon law and rhetoric in the late 12th and 13th centuries. The emergence of the field of rhetorical study known as *ars dictaminis* in conjunction with renewed and expanded interest in legal studies takes on new urgency in Grévin's essay as he teases out the underlying connection between the two areas: rhetoric could be a

tool for redressing—or perfecting—natural language, just as the law could be a tool for the rehabilitation of humankind. However, in late medieval ethnography and ethno-geography, nature was invoked as a way to describe the particular characteristics of different groups of people (the Welsh, the Mongols) but rarely as a way of assessing the morality of their behavior. According to Joan-Pau Rubiés,

cultural diversity had its own descriptive language of usages and customs, concerning ways of living and ways of doing practical things, and any strange behaviour—the marvels of the human world—could often be rationalized. [230]

Yet in the fictionalized *itinerarium*, *The Book of John Mandeville*, which, as Rubiés notes, ‘introduced to vernacular geography many of the notions of natural philosophy and scholastic theology’, nature figured as a way to assert Christian morality [231]. Rubiés identifies a critical difference between descriptive works such as those of Gerald of Wales and Marco Polo, based on first-person observation, and those, like *Mandeville*, based on other texts: the latter use nature to propose and uphold universal moral norms, while the former invoke nature as the cause of diversity in natural phenomena as well as human behavior and belief.

Echoing van der Lugt’s assertion that many medieval texts present nature as a powerful force that is potentially destructive to human society, Christian Kiening explores how in short literary narratives—*Mären* and *fabliaux* alike—nature exerts pressure from within, barely checked by courtly conventions. People are often at the mercy of their basest impulses and desires, and courtly morals—however fragile—are articulated in response to these internal forces. However, at the same time, in a different mimetic art form—drawing—nature became a model for artists, as drawing directly from nature re-emerged as an artistic practice. Jean Wirth explores the particular resonances of this practice with regard to concepts that had both technical and philosophical resonances, like *imitatio naturae*, and with especial focus on the sketchbook of Villard de Honnecourt (ca 1230s).

Despite the wide range of these essays, *La nature comme source de la morale au Moyen Âge*, can—and should—be read as a single book. Themes and ideas about nature in the Latin Middle Ages develop across essays, as though the authors have honed their work in colloquy with one another. Medievalists—and early modernists—working in a number of fields and sub-

fields will find in this volume an erudite collection of essays that is greater than the sum of its parts.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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