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Medieval Weathers: An Introduction

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Weather

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Michael J. Warren

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Medieval Weathers: An Introduction

Michael J. Warren

1047. And after Candlemas in this same year came the severe winter with frost and with snow and with all bad weather, such that there was no man alive who could remember so severe a winter as that was.

Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (E)

February, 1247. This earthquake was followed by a protracted inclemency of the atmosphere, and by an unseasonable and winterly roughness, disturbed, cold, and rainy, so that the husbandmen and farmers complained that the spring by a backward movement was changed to winter, and entertained great fears that they would be deceived in their hopes of their crops, plants, fruit-trees, and corn.

Matthew of Paris, *Chronica Maiora*

May, 1341. The first week was as warm as spring. The second week was as warm as spring for three days; on the fourth there was light rain mixed with a little snow. On the fifth, sixth and seventh, slight frost.

William Merle, *Consideraciones Temperiei Pro 7 Annis*¹

IN ALL ITS FORMS, forces and effects, weather is a pervasive, often afflicting, presence in medieval writings. In poetry and riddles, chronicles, prose narratives and encyclopedias, in treatises, diaries, and texts dealing with *computus* and prognostics, weather is variously depicted and reported as concept, topos, trope, allegory, divine intervention or retribution, dire omen, and real meteorological event. It was marvelous, remarkable, and not infrequently devastating. There are

¹ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, ed. and trans. by Michael Swanton (London: Phoenix Press, 2000); Matthew of Paris, *Matthew Paris's English History*, vol. 2 of 3, ed. and trans. J. A. Giles (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1853), 211; William Merle, *Consideraciones Temperiei Pro 7 Annis*, ed. and trans. G. J. Symons (London: Edward Stanford, 1891), 7 and 9.

tempests and dark mists over Grendel's mere in *Beowulf*, winds as terrible as anyone can remember and weather as oppressive as taxes in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*. Spring weather, warm and welcome, occurs predictably in countless love lyrics and dream visions; winter weather lasts for years in Snorri Sturluson's *Gylfaginning* (*Edda*), besets Sir Gawain's arduous journey to Bertilak's abode, or has frozen shepherds in northern England lament their wretched lot: "Lord, what thyse weders are cold! (57)"² Thunder, lightning, wind and rain are calculated and interpreted in almanacs and prognostic rhymes, and, as the epigraph above illustrates, specific weather events in particular years and on particular days were recorded with empirical observation.

I dwell on this point at some length—that medieval people experienced and responded to weather³—to emphasize the rich possibilities meteorological subjects offer to environmentally-orientated scholarship in medieval studies. Curiously, in comparison to more concrete instances of the natural world (animals, birds, plants, landscapes, etc), weather has yet to receive substantial attention. Perhaps this is because weather is so vast in scale—highly localized, and yet part of much bigger climate-created and -driven, atmospheric totalities and events—that it somehow escapes our categorizations of nonhuman forms. It is, as Heide Estes recognizes in her essay for this issue, an example of Timothy Morton's concept of the "hyperobject;" everything and nothing, everywhere and nowhere.⁴ Whatever the reasons, there is no doubting that the weather was profoundly important in medieval life and culture, and that it turns up frequently in various genres of text.

There are obvious exceptions to the relative paucity of weather studies. Marilina Cesario, most notably, has produced much significant

² *The Second Shepherds' Play*, in *English Mystery Plays*, ed. Peter Happé (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975).

³ For the most recent survey and discussion of climate and weather in Britain's medieval past, see John Kingston, *Climate and Weather* (London: HarperCollins, 2010), 193–244. These pages offer a decade by decade and year by year chronology from the Roman period to the end of the fifteenth century, which is a useful source to compare against records of weather in medieval chronicles. The 1047 record in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (E), for instance, is corroborated by other evidence.

⁴ See p. 18.

work on medieval English prognostics,⁵ and as recently as 2020 Anne Lawrence-Mathers published the first comprehensive historical study of medieval meteorology.⁶ Both writers are aware of post-medieval traditions and beliefs that downplay nature's materiality (in contrast to its figurative potential) in the Middle Ages, so overlooking the full and complex relevance of weather in pre-modern life and literature. In response, Lawrence-Mathers's book "is an attempt to fill in the missing history."⁷ Cesario cites Barbara Obrist to make the point: "Historians of science have rarely looked into conceptions of the physical world ... [T]hey have limited their research almost exclusively to the related topics of astronomy and reckoning of time."⁸ Ecocritical scholars have spent decades now arguing against the long-lived assumption that, to quote Obrist again, the "physical world no longer held interest as a subject of study [in medieval thought] and was invested solely with spiritual meaning."⁹

Research by the likes of Cesario and Lawrence-Mathers is vital to any current understanding of the ways in which weather was conceived, interpreted, and confronted in the medieval world, and is especially welcome in this regard. By and large, though, ecological perspectives are outside the scope of their work, and there yet remains much to be said about human-weather relations in the Middle Ages: how it featured as a real, experiential force; how it appears in cultural responses and representations; how it resonated physically, emotionally and imaginatively. The environmental humanities, of course, are

⁵ See, e.g., Marilina Cesario, "Knowledge of the Weather in the Middle Ages: *Libellus de dispositione totius anni future*," in *Aspects of Knowledge: Preserving and Re-Inventing Traditions of Learning in the Middle Ages*, ed. Marilina Cesario and Hugh Magennis (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), 53–78. Cesario's monograph *The Signs of the Weather in Anglo-Saxon England* is forthcoming.

⁶ Anne Lawrence-Mathers, *Medieval Meteorology: Forecasting the Weather from Aristotle to the Almanac* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

⁷ Lawrence-Mathers, *Medieval Meteorology*, 1.

⁸ Marilina Cesario, "Romancing the Wind: The Role of Gales in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*," *Filologia Germanica – Germanic Philology* 5 (2013): 1–26 at 4.

⁹ Cesario, "Romancing the Wind," 4.

especially well placed to redress this situation.¹⁰ It is the aim of the essays in this inaugural and special-themed issue of *Medieval Ecocriticisms* that they help “fill in the missing history.”

There is, it should be said, some justification for characterizing medieval interests in weather according to traditional scholarly perceptions. Like all other aspects of the natural world, it was allegorized in bestiary sources: the North Wind, for instance, “represents the weight of temptation; the breath of the wind is the first intimation of temptation; its coldness, the numbing effect of moral negligence.”¹¹ The most familiar literary depictions of weathers are usually constructed to demonstrate Godly power (as in Riddles 1–3 in the Exeter Book), or the miraculous capabilities of saints (as in Bede’s *Life of Cuthbert*). In representations like these—according to typical interpretations which tend to separate the material and figurative in the medieval mindset—the writers show “little appreciation” of real weather; its manifestations are not interesting “in themselves but as types illustrative of humanity [or God],” to adapt Beryl Rowland’s well-known description of animal portraits in Chaucerian texts.¹²

¹⁰ There are a few who have begun this effort, and this issue of *Medieval Ecocriticisms* seeks to build on this important preliminary work. Most recently James Paz has examined weather in the Exeter Book Riddles from a materialist perspective, in “Mind, Mood, and Meteorology in *Þrymful Þeow* (R.1–3),” in *Riddles at Work in the Early Medieval Tradition: Words, Ideas, Interactions*, ed. Jennifer Neville and Megan Cavell (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), 193–209. The most substantial study on weather in medieval literature is Bernadine McCreesh’s *The Weather in the Icelandic Sagas: The Enemy Without* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018), which provides an extensive survey of weather references in a range of Icelandic writings, but is not especially ecocritical. For earlier studies, see Albrecht Classen, “Consequences of Bad Weather in Medieval Literature: from Apollonius of Tyre to Marguerite de Navarre’s *Heptaméron*,” *Arcadia* 45:1 (2010): 3–20; Michael W. George, “Adversarial Relationships between Humans and Weather in Medieval English Literature,” *Essays in Medieval Studies* 30 (2014): 67–81; and Gillian Rudd, “Why Does it Always Rain on Me? Rain and Self-Centredness in Medieval Poetry,” *Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism* 11 (2009): 70–82. Of the three, only Rudd’s essay would be considered particularly “ecological” in outlook.

¹¹ See Aberdeen University Library MS 24 (the *Aberdeen Bestiary*), <https://www.abdn.ac.uk/bestiary/ms24/f29v>.

¹² Beryl Rowland, *Blind Beasts: Chaucer’s Animal World* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1971), 21.

The discourses in which weather appears most frequently and seriously throughout the Middle Ages are those connected with the all-important *computus* tasks of time-reckoning, and in the associated, highly influential field of prognostics. In these cases, again, we could reasonably argue that weather in itself—as something actually experienced in local, day-to-day circumstances—is less important than the liturgical and astrological concerns that frame intellectual discussions about the weather, and which take their cue less from weather itself than from classical and ecclesiastic legacies.

But the popularity and influence of prognostic discourses in various cultural milieux also highlight to us how seriously medieval people treated the weather, and the fundamental role weather played in determining the lives and deaths of those who, quite simply, had less protection from its effects than many of us do in the modern world. On the one hand, the art of prognostication, “based on the supposition that nature in all its manifestations is imbued with [divine] significance,”¹³ portends important future events that might impact the human world and does not, therefore, involve meteorological observations or forecasts that are concerned with preparing for or attending to the weather itself. On the other, it should remind us that weather, even when at a remove and indirectly, genuinely and very tangibly *affects* human lives. As Cesario points out, prognostications were “firmly connected to the economy of a country, and could be consulted as a guide to the nation’s or an individual’s prospects,” and understanding the weather “was, in fact, believed to be of importance in everyday life.”¹⁴ So it is we find prognostic materials not only in institutional texts, but in the almanacs of physicians making decisions about their patients and medicines on the basis of thunder occurring in this or that month; in the girdle books of haywards charged with supervisory tasks in the manorial communities (Chaucer’s Reeve “wel wiste ... by the droghte and by the reyn / The yeldynge of his seed”

¹³ R. Bremmer and S. L. Chardonens, “Old English Prognostics: Between the Moon and the Monstrous,” in *Monsters and the Monstrous in Medieval Northwest Europe*, ed. K. E. Olsen and L. A. J. R. Houwen (Leuven: Peeters, 2001), 153–65.

¹⁴ Marilina Cesario, “Weather Prognostics in Anglo-Saxon England,” *English Studies* 93:4 (2012): 391–426 at 393; and Cesario, “Romancing the Wind,” 4, respectively.

[597–98]);¹⁵ in mnemonic rhymes and in the margins of lay calendars, both of which suggest that these practices existed in vernacular, agrarian contexts too, and could serve more immediate, down-to-earth purposes in cases where weather events on the ground really mattered. In all this we sense that, as Richard Jones puts it, “there were no more structuring forces in the lives of the medieval majority than the weather and the seasons.”¹⁶

The cosmological schemata underpinning these beliefs and practices simultaneously suggests a detachment from real weather events (the interest was fixed on the signification, not the thing itself), and a markedly integrated relationship between human and nonhuman worlds. The Zodiac’s movements and alignments performed upon the earthly world in very real and physical ways. Fundamentally, it literally determined and transformed the human body. The weather in all of this, intricately meshed with the spheres’ calibrations—the cardinal winds with the seasons and elements—contributed a profound influence upon psychosomatic wellness. These interactions are most famously and obviously portrayed in late medieval diagrams of the Zodiac Man or Vein Man, which respectively map out cosmic interconnectivities with the human organs, or associate lunar phases and seasons with blood-letting on different parts of the body. As Alexandra Harris remarks of William Merle (often credited as the first “modern” diarist of day-to-day weather; see my epigraph), his observations of weather hindering laborers’ tasks in the late 1330s could not be disassociated from contemporary humoral beliefs: “as he walked across to Driby church in the snow, he believed that the snow was connected with the stars, with the ordering of society, with the make-up of his own body, and with the purposes of God.”¹⁷ These connections do not reduce weather’s power, but heighten it, in fact, because they redouble its profound impacts in all spheres.

Viewed as such, the workings and influences of real weather in these contexts may give us cause to reconsider weather in literary texts—the type of texts most germane to the essays in this issue, and

¹⁵ Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Reeve’s Tale*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. by Larry D. Benson et al, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

¹⁶ Richard Jones, *The Medieval Natural World* (Harlow: Pearson, 2013), 47.

¹⁷ Alexandra Harris, *Weatherland: Writers and Artists Under English Skies* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2016), 75.

in which depictions of nonhuman creatures, forces and elements are most likely to be treated in non-literal, non-physical terms. In the earliest surviving notated song in English (ca. early thirteenth century), weather is dramatically present in a melancholic complaint about the hardships of winter and the plight of the world:

Miri it is while sumer i-last
 With fugheles son
 Oc nu neheth windes blast
 And weder strong.
 Ei, ei! What this nicht is long
 And ich with wel michel wrong
 Soregh and murne and fast.¹⁸

The lyric is typical in many respects, not least in that what seems to really matter here is the speaker's melancholy over sinfulness which must be repented and compensated through privation. Weather is clearly present and active here, but we might say that it exists not in itself but to prompt contemplation and contrition; it is a poetic trope (akin to the vernal topos in the love-lyric tradition) that provides the suitable backdrop to a bout of *contemptus mundi* pitying. Indeed, this speaker is arguably not even so much concerned with themselves as with universal suffering in the Christian paradigm—the inevitable and miserable understanding that humankind is afflicted with “wel michel wrong” and must necessarily atone through the series of pious actions listed in the final line. Winter “weder” in this scheme provides the appropriate conditions for the feelings and the religious themes, or is figuratively linked to sin and Godly judgement.

Despite all this—the undeniably religious perspective, universalized fallibility, an allegorized “wintering out” of earthly existence—it is difficult to shake the distinct sense that the lyric's situation is located in something more concrete. There is a particular night (“this”) which exists in the present (“is”), so although the final lines generalize and point towards an implied eschatology, the lyric's power is in part due to the image of a speaker in the present business of mourning and fasting—it is a real, immediate act. The weather, then, is also real and immediate (it happens “nu”). The speaker internalizes the weather in the second half of the lyric, but, as we have seen, the highly influential discourses of humoral theory and prognostics can suggest other ways

¹⁸ Thomas G. Duncan, ed., *Medieval English Lyrics and Carols* (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2013).

in which to understand this correlation of natural phenomena with feelings or events in the human world. Considering “Miri it is” in an astrological scheme (the seasons, and their weathers, are intimately part of heavenly working, as is signaled in the poem) suggests a palpable, affective relation between emotion and weather which goes well beyond mere symbolic association or some sort of objective correlative: weather literally happens and causes humoral responses. There is an ecology of body, mind and environment impelling the speaker’s complaint which the numinous register of the lyric’s end does not dispel. Suffering and fasting are, respectively, reaction and measure, poetically associated with the “windes blast” and “weder strong,” but also impelled by their sensory, unavoidable forces.

All six contributors to this inaugural issue have a common aim: to explore the ways in which weather’s effects and affects are depicted in their chosen texts as real meteorological phenomena, or resonate as literal aspects of figurative representations. The essays are not all “ecocritical” in the strict theoretical sense, but, rather, their range of ecologically-inspired perspectives on weather foreground and demonstrate the remit and ambition of *Medieval Ecocriticisms*. The plurality of this title signals our mission: to provide the first peer-reviewed journal devoted specifically to environmental approaches to any aspect of the medieval world. “Environmental” and “ecocritical” are thus broadly construed, encompassing the full spectrum of intersecting disciplines, fields and theories that address their subjects from “ecological” perspectives. That is, perspectives which value and explore the ways in which the human is enmeshed with and dependent upon nonhuman lives, elements, forces and phenomena, and/or which examine and challenge traditions of exceptionalism or dualism in our cultural perceptions and treatments of others, nonhuman or otherwise.¹⁹

The essays here are the outcome of a symposium in 2018 on weather in medieval literature.²⁰ The issue’s focus, predictably, is on textual representations of weather, but the range of texts and genres span at least seven centuries, including Norse as well as Old and Middle English, and cover topics from medicine, a candle-clock, beached whales, storm-riddles, to weather-kennings and -metaphors. The sequence of the contributions, too, intends to convey something of the

¹⁹ For more on ecocritical aims and beginnings, see Heide Estes’s essay “Weather and the Creation of the Human in the Exeter Book Riddles” in this issue (11–27).

²⁰ I owe a debt of gratitude to Corinne Dale, my co-organizer for this event and without whom this project would never have got started.

breadth and variety on offer, opening with the most technically “ecocritical” essay, but then proceeding broadly chronologically, while alternating between treatments of Norse and English texts so as to suggest the interlinking and interdisciplinary character of ecocriticism as a theoretical approach. It is our hope, as well, that the contributions here point towards the varied possibilities for further research. What, for instance, might landscape archaeology be able to offer about the ways in which weather shaped our relationships with built and natural environments; or art history reveal about weather in visual representations, or its influence on the technologies and media available to *scriptorium* industries? How can interdisciplinary work on material cultures be informed by the latest knowledge on medieval climates and meteorological conditions? What do continental or non-European texts have to say about weather and its roles in human lives? The following essays are a small, though we hope inspiring and illuminating, contribution to a promising future for medieval weather studies.

* * *

Matthew of Paris’s record of threatening weather cited in the epigraph will not sound at all far-fetched or unfamiliar to present readers. (Appropriately enough, I began this introduction in the first week of February 2021, when the UK was beset by a sudden spell of arctic cold following a very mild January, which brought heavy snow and—in *Chronicle* fashion—such cold that huge icicles hung from roofs and formed helixes down drainpipes.) Indeed, many of Paris’s records uncannily resonate with the sorts of weathers that have increasingly troubled the first decades of the twenty-first century. Even the few years between the conception of this project and final publication have felt like a steady worsening: alarmingly hot summers with drought conditions; severe annual flooding; frequent storms (which are named in an effort to connect people to the weather events affecting their lives). In the twenty-first century, of course, erratic or unexpected weathers are so newsworthy and worrying because we humans—beyond doubt in most people’s view—have caused, or at least contributed to, current climactic trends ourselves. It is, surely, the aspect of the natural world that most clearly manifests for us all the urgency and stark truth of our climate crisis.

Weather, in this respect, stands apart from other aspects of the natural world. It is the super-agent and -narrative in our lives, radically determining and altering our earthly business. It is impossible *not* to

be affected by weather; impossible for it *not* to impinge on our daily lives to a greater or lesser degree with immediate and apparent force. Medieval people understood this very well. Indeed, they must have felt it with greater intensity in an age when most lived by subsistence farming heavily dependent on favorable, predictable weather, and before the luxuries of modern insulation and central heating. Our medieval predecessors understood that seasons and their accompanying weathers have serious psychosomatic effects. The interplay of ocean and air currents (identified well enough in medieval theory) in global circulations create and drive localized weathers thousands of miles away, dramatically and determinably acting upon our local existences. We, too, have our forecasts (a prognostics for our own times), and we must learn to pay them equally serious attention, mindful of inauspicious futures.