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The Seasons

European climates have been characterised as divisible into four seasons since at least the fifth century BC, when Nonnus' Greek poem Dionysiaca identified four seasons instead of the older traditional three. The same four-part model may have emerged several centuries earlier in China.[1] The structure seems to reflect somewhat accurately the annual patterns of European weather, so the convention of four seasons of spring, summer, autumn, and winter has stuck. The seasons are one of the most prevalent means by which literary texts and other artworks engage with and represent climate, and have been consistently used as motif, metaphor, and structuring device. This chapter explores the implications of this seasonal perspective of climate, and particularly literary texts' use of the seasons as a domain for interrogating the interface between nature and culture.

Seasons are caused by the tilt in Earth's axis, which means that the sun's rays shine either more or less directly on each hemisphere as the planet completes its orbit. Seasons are also cultural constructs. They emerge, as Nick Groom puts it, as 'a rough compromise between nature and culture: between those things that happen independently of human engagement, such as the annual summer solstice, and those things that are dependent on that engagement – naming, recognizing, and celebrating the solstice as being somehow significant.'[2] There are two 'official' dating systems for the seasons: the mid-twentieth-century meteorological calendar, and the older astronomical calendar based on the solstices and equinoxes. However, for most people across history the seasons have been recorded with what Jan Golinski describes as 'a flexible attitude to temporal measurement, a way of handling time that was integrated with the seasonal routines of

[1] See William Edward Soothill, The Hall of Light: A Study of Early Chinese Kingship (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 1951, reprinted 2002), p. 58.
[2] Nick Groom, The Seasons: An Elegy for the Passing of the Year (London: Atlantic Books, 2013), p. 32.

rural life and adaptable to the agricultural circumstances of particular locales.'[3] A season could be defined by trends in the weather, observed behaviours of animals or plants, human activities, or even human emotions and states of mind. These different features are both the effects and the occasions of seasons.

The various nuanced interactions between these different seasonal features form the material of seasons literature from antiquity to the present. This chapter uses examples from canonical and influential texts to draw out some of the varied ways in which literature has engaged with the seasons and utilised them as tools for interrogating the relationship between humans and their environment. It argues that, whether exploring the ethical and aesthetic implications of a cyclically changing climate (the subject of the first half of this chapter), or the emotional and psychological associations that have accumulated around particular seasons (the subject of the second half), seasons literature asks important questions about the human perspective of climate. Is an individual's perspective shaped predominantly by the influence of the natural world, cultural custom, or their own feelings? Do we project ethical and aesthetic judgements onto the seasons, or do these values inhere in the seasons themselves? The richest literary engagements with the seasons not only ask these questions, but question whether we can make such distinctions between nature and culture at all.

THE CYCLE OF THE SEASONS

As Chapter 1 of this volume has shown, there is already a temporal dimension to the concept of climate. The seasonal structure further supplements the various timescales of

[3] Jan Golinski, British Weather and the Climate of Enlightenment (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 93.

climate with a specifically cyclical (rather than linear) model of time. If climate is, in Mike Hulme's words, 'an idea that helps stabilise the human experience of weather and allows humans to live culturally with their weather', the seasons are a version of this idea that explicitly incorporates change into its version of stability.[4] The seasonal perspective is one of change-within-constancy. The implications of this perspective for our understanding of and attitude towards climate are revealed and explored in literature.

The most influential classical literary texts depict the changeableness of the seasons as a product and sign of human sin. In Metamorphoses 1 (c. 8 AD) Ovid describes a past Golden Age in which 'ver erat aeternum', 'Spring was everlasting'.[5] This is followed by the Silver Age, in which Jove, to make life harder for this Age's inferior race of men, 'shortened the bounds of the old-time spring, and through winter, summer, variable autumn, and brief spring completed the year in four seasons.'[6] As a result, natural produce was no longer available all year round, and man had to work the earth in order to survive. The notion that the qualities of the climate might be attributable to the bad behaviour of humans might not look so strange in an era of manmade climate change. The idea that seasonal change is a punishment, however, might be harder to grasp in modern societies which frequently cultivate a nostalgia for seasonality, even as they develop technology and infrastructure to drastically limit its effects.

Later, this classical vision of eternal spring would be adopted into Christian accounts of prelapsarian nature. In Dante's Purgatorio (1472), Matelda explains that the classical poets who sang of the Golden Age perhaps dreamed of Eden: 'Here was man guiltless; here / Perpetual spring, and every fruit'.[7] Milton's Eden is also one of 'Eternal Spring' and perpetual harvest: 'All Autumn pil'd, though Spring and Autumn here /

[4] Mike Hulme, Weathered: Cultures of Climate (London: Sage, 2017), xv.
[5] Ovid, Metamorphoses, Volume I: Books 1-8, trans. Frank Justus Miller, ed. G. P. Goold. Loeb Classical Library, 42 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1916), pp. 9-10.
[6] Ovid, Metamorphoses, p. 11.
[7] Dante Alighieri, The Divine Comedy, trans. Henry Francis Cary (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 2009), p. 272, XXVIII.147-48.

Danc'd hand in hand.'[8] Milton's American contemporary, Anne Bradstreet, presumably under the influence of the famous New England fall, argued for autumn as the season of Paradise, 'For then in Eden was not only seen, / Boughs full of leaves, or fruits unripe or green… But trees with goodly fruits replenished'.[9] But the trope of Paradise as a perpetual spring, only embellished with the happier qualities of autumn, was the more persistent. For Milton as for Ovid, the cycle in which each season is separated only comes about after a transition to a new and lesser Age. In Paradise Lost after the Fall the sun is instructed to move in order to bring in 'change / Of Seasons to each Clime; else had the Spring / Perpetual smiled on Earth' (X.677-79). Seasonal change represents imbalance, disorder, and uncomfortable extremes, and serves as a reminder of its cause, which was our sin.

However, there are multiple inconsistencies in Milton's account of the seasons, including references to seasons existing before the Fall.[10] The reason for these contradictions is Milton's conflicting sources. He, along with other Renaissance humanists, was influenced by the classical myths of the seasonless Golden Age, but in Genesis the seasons are part of God's design from the beginning. On the fourth day of creation 'God said, Let there be lights in the firmament of the heaven to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days, and years'.[11] (Milton paraphrases this in his account of the creation in Book VII.) The Hebrew word translated as 'seasons', moadim, might mean 'appointed times' or 'festivals' rather than the four seasons, but the Bible gives no account of the seasons being created at a later time. As a result, many early Christian texts interpreted the seasonal cycle as a part of

[8] John Milton, Paradise Lost, ed. Barbara K. Lewalski (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), p. 99, IV.268, p. 133, V.394-5. Subsequent references are to this edition.
[9] Anne Bradstreet, 'The Four Seasons', in The Works of Anne Bradstreet, ed. Jeannine Hensley (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknapp Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 75.
[10] See S. Viswanathan, 'Milton and the Seasons' Difference', Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900 13.1 (1973), 127-33.
[11] The Bible: Authorized King James Version with Apocrypha (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, reissued 2008), Genesis 1:14, p. 1.

God's benign creation.[12] Later, medieval seasons literature continued to celebrate the seasonal cycle, and is characterised, according to Rosemond Tuve, by a basic belief 'in a good Nature.'[13] The constancy of the seasons, Tuve writes, 'is in itself the refutation of that all-devouring Mutability of which the seasons were the sign and synonym.'[14] The orderly repetitiveness of the seasons troubled the claim that they represented the disorderliness or corruption of nature.

It is possible, therefore, to trace a vague narrative of portrayals of the seasonal cycle, from classical (negative), through early Christian and medieval (positive), Renaissance humanist (negative), and then a return in the Enlightenment to the positive portrayal. But this is too simplistic, because in every period there are examples of seasons literature – such as Virgil's Georgics, Chaucer's 'Franklin's Tale', and Milton's Paradise Lost – that mediate between the two perspectives: that of the reassuring constancy of the seasons, and that of their disturbing mutability. Whether they interpret it as something positive or negative, what is consistent is writers' use of the seasonal cycle to represent and express broader cultural judgements of nature.

The combined variability and familiarity of the seasons has made them a useful tool for writers who draw comparisons and distinctions across places and times. The appeal of the four seasons model can be seen in its enduring use to describe climates which do not clearly follow such a cycle. Foreign climates were frequently described by Western writers in terms of static, perpetual seasons: not the eternally pleasant springs or autumns of Paradise, but interminably hot summers (in Africa and India) or cold winters.

[12] See Clarence J. Glacken, Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), pp. 177-79.

[13] Rosemond Tuve, Seasons and Months: Studies in a Tradition of Middle English Poetry (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1933), p. 44.
[14] Ibid., p. 45.

In the Arctic circle, for example, 'WINTER holds his unrejoicing Court' all year long.[15] In these instances, seasonal change is inferred as a marker not of human sin and nature's hostility, but of a moderated, fertile, and desirable climate. Alternatively, of course, Western colonialists have simply imported the four-season model and applied it to climates for which it is inappropriate, such as Australia.[16] Defining a foreign climate in terms of the European seasons might insist upon the foreign place's likeness to 'home', or it might define its difference in terms that are nevertheless familiar and Euro-centric.

As a tool for comparing different places, the seasonal cycle has its clear limitations as well as its utilities. Its effectiveness as a tool for comparing the same place across time, however, has made it a favourite structuring device for artists, who have used it to organise themes and narratives. The seasons invite the mental division of time into yearly rounds, not measured necessarily from January to December but from, say, the start of spring to the end of winter, and divided into four roughly equal parts. Many narratives have been structured in this way, from Roman mosaics to paintings such as Nicolas Poussin's The Four Seasons (1660-64), from poems like Pope's Pastorals (1709) to musical concerti like Vivaldi's Four Seasons (1725), from novels like Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye (1970) to Hollywood movies like La La Land (2016) (despite the climate of Los Angeles appearing almost uniform across the film's four seasonal chapters).

Just as frequently, however, a season invites closer association with previous iterations of that same season than with the different seasons surrounding it. This perspective of seasonal time forges narratives that overleap much of the time that has actually passed. Examples of works of literature that employ this perspective of seasonal time include Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, the action of which takes place over two

[15] James Thomson, The Seasons, ed. James Sambrook (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), p. 244, 'Winter', 895. All subsequent references are to this edition.
[16] Chris O'Brien, 'Rethinking seasons: changing climate, changing time' in T. Bristow and T. H. Ford (eds.), A Cultural History of Climate Change (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 38-54.

Christmas periods, and William Wordsworth's poem 'The Two April Mornings', in which one spring day invites reminiscence of a similar one thirty years before.

There is, then, flexibility in the perception of time offered by the seasonal cycle. One seeming consistency is the seasons' association with a sense of the ongoing flow of time. This is the principle underlying Shakespeare's use of seasons imagery in his sonnets about ageing: 'For never-resting time leads summer on / To hideous winter'.[17] But the idea of the seasons also gives rise to concepts of abstracted individual seasons which, in their perpetual recurrence, come to appear timeless or eternal even though they sporadically manifest within that flow of time. The abstraction by which each season is understood as timeless must be distinguished from the 'eternal spring' of the Golden Age or the endless winters of the Arctic regions. One of the timeless qualities of each abstracted season is, paradoxically, its transitoriness. This tension is often registered in seasons literature.

Thus, the autumn in Keats's ode 'To Autumn' is characterised by both movement and stillness.[18] The 'Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness' in this poem is both the specific autumn of 1819 and an abstraction that outlasts this iteration of the season. Personified Autumn is depicted sitting, sleeping, 'steady', and 'patient', untroubled by passing time and history. 'Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?' the poet asks, invoking the season's presence and availability across years and generations; but that 'oft' inscribes the alternative temporal perspective of occasionality. 'Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find thee': those some-times are the moments when autumn appears to human perception, in the form of the various signs in nature (fruits, animal behaviours, wind) and culture (ploughed furrows, oozing cider presses) by which we recognise the season. In the final line, gathering swallows prepare to migrate for winter.

[17] William Shakespeare, The Complete Works of William Shakespeare, ed. Peter Alexander (London: Collins, 2006, reprinted 2010), p. 1363, Sonnet 5. Subsequent references are to this edition.
[18] John Keats, The Major Works, ed. Elizabeth Cook (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990, reissued 2008), pp. 324-35.

Keats is building upon a longer tradition of seasons poetry, most overtly James Thomson's four-part poem The Seasons (1726-30). Thomson's poem offers the most sustained engagement with the implications of viewing nature and climate through the lens of the seasonal cycle. The seasons are, he writes,

> A simple Train,
> Yet so delightful mix'd, with such kind Art,
> Such Beauty and Beneficence combin'd;
> Shade, unperceiv'd, so softening into Shade;
> And all so forming an harmonious Whole;
> That, as they still succeed, they ravish still. ('Hymn', 21-26)

The seasons form a 'Train', an ongoing movement through time, each one leading inexorably to the next. The continuousness of the train, however, results in an impression of stillness: 'as they still succeed, they ravish still.' Thomson's seasons are always in motion, 'coming', 'flowing', 'turning'. But even though each iteration of the season must come and go it is nevertheless continuous with past and future iterations. In 'Winter', for example, it is emphatically the same season that presides over young Thomson wandering in the snow in his 'chearful Morn of Life' (7), the adult Thomson sitting reading in his study 'To chear the Gloom' (431), Sir Hugh Willoughby and 'his hapless Crew' freezing to death in 1554 (932), and every hypothetical swain who ever got lost in a cold night.

For Thomson, it is this combination of constancy and change that renders the 'Beauty and Beneficence' of the 'harmonious Whole' that is the seasonal cycle. This is despite the fact that Thomson, like Milton and Ovid, frames the seasons as a punishment for man's sin. Whereas 'great Spring, before, / Green'd all the Year' ('Spring', 320-21), after the Flood 'The Seasons since have… Oppress'd a broken World' (317-18). By the

Hymn at the end of the poem, however, this 'inward-eating Change' ('Spring', 333) has transformed into a glorious sign of 'the varied God' ('Hymn', 2), whose 'Skill' and 'Force' (21) are evidenced in his control, like a conductor, over the harmony of the 'simple Train'.

Used as an artistic structure, the seasonal cycle becomes something to be judged aesthetically (like a musical harmony) as well as morally. In this way, art influences as well as reflects a culture's perception of the seasonal cycle as not only good or bad, but as a pattern with aesthetic merits or demerits. Our narratives have been shaped by our seasonal climate, but they have also shaped our perspective of that climate. One might argue that Milton's nostalgia for an eternal spring is related to the cold climate of the so-called Little Ice Age in which he wrote, but it has as much to do with his education and reading. Thomson in turn constructed his 'delightful' seasonal cycle out of various sources including Milton, and then this rendering affected subsequent perspectives. 'The reader of the Seasons,' as Samuel Johnson puts it, 'wonders that he never saw before what Thomson shews him, and that he never yet has felt what Thomson impresses.'[19]

TO EVERYTHING THERE IS A SEASON

The seasonal cycle has been freighted with cultural, moral, and aesthetic value since its earliest appearance in literature. But each individual season, elevated through abstraction to the status of eternal type (and often personified divinity), has also accumulated its own various associations.

[19] Samuel Johnson, The Lives of the Poets, ed. John H. Middendorf et al (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), in Robert De Maria (ed.) The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, 23 vols (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958-), vol. XXIII, p. 1292.

‘To every thing there is a season,’ states the Book of Ecclesiastes; ‘and a time to every purpose under the heaven… a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted’.[20] The English word ‘season’, as well as the equivalents in many other European languages, derives from the Latin sationem, meaning the act of sowing seeds. Accordingly, in classical seasons literature and art the seasons are most often invoked in order to delineate different works of human agricultural labour. The archetypal examples are Hesiod’s Greek Works and Days (c. 700 BC), and its Latin counterpart, Virgil’s Georgics (29 BC). ‘[A]s mighty Zeus sends the autumn rain,’ writes Hesiod, ‘So at that time be mindful and cut wood, a seasonable work’.[21]

But the seasons do not only set the times to plant and reap. Ecclesiastes continues: ‘…A time to weep, and a time to laugh… A time to love, and a time to hate.’[22] Seasons are associated not only with particular activities, but with particular emotional or psychic states. Here the term ‘affect’ is useful, because it incorporates a wider range of states than are usually compassed under ‘emotions’ (e.g. arousal, reflectiveness, trauma), and because it invokes the bodily, prediscursive dimension to emotion that so much seasons literature insists upon. The modern affliction, ‘seasonal affective disorder’ (SAD) testifies to its aptness. These associations between seasons and affects have produced notions of seasonal determinism at least as old as theories of geographical climate determinism. Spring is the season in which to fall in love; summer is a season of leisure and perhaps licentiousness; autumn is the season of maturity, memory, and calm melancholy; winter is the season in which to retreat, fear, and lament, but also to be merry and cosy.

In Ecclesiastes, it is God who sets these seasons and their corresponding ‘purposes’. In other discourses, it is less clear who, or what, makes the contract. The seasonal climate dictates the times to plant and harvest. But does the climate dictate the

[20] The Bible, Ecclesiastes 3:1-2, p. 753.
[21] Hesiod, Works and Days, in Theogony. Works and Days. Testimonia, ed. and trans. Glenn W. Most, Loeb Classical Library, 57 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 121.
[22] The Bible, Ecclesiastes 3:4-8.

seasons to weep and laugh, or do humans? Often the most interesting usages of these seasonal mood motifs are those which interrogate them: texts that explore the processes by which seasons produce affects; characters who recognise that their moods might be out of sync with seasonal expectations; and instances when writers consider the possibility that culture as well as nature has shaped our emotional responses to, or expectations for, particular seasons.

The perceived correlation between seasons and affects has led understandably to associations between seasons and genres of literature. This effect can be seen emerging across various cultures in the medieval period: in northern Europe, for example, the dark nights of winter became associated with the ghost story;[23] in Japan, only mild spring and autumn were deemed fit subjects for high court poetry.[24] In France and Italy, and later England, the most notable case is that of spring, particularly the later spring months of April and May. Spring's aphrodisiacal effects made it the season of choice for romance and love lyric.

Medieval writers were keen to emphasise that this association between spring and love or lust was not only a literary convention, but had its basis in nature, to which humans were as susceptible as plants and animals. The Roman de la Rose (c. 1230), which, Tuve writes, 'crystallized… the phraseology in which the seasons were to appear for a long time to come, in many contexts and in many languages,' opens with a dream of springtime:[25]

> I dreamed that I was filled with joy in May, the amorous month, when everything rejoices… The birds, silent while they were cold and the weather hard and bitter, become so gay in May, in the serene weather, that their hearts are filled with joy

[23] P. S. Langeslag, Seasons in the Literatures of the Medieval North (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2015).
[24] Haruo Shirane, Japan and the Culture of the Four Seasons: Nature, Literature, and the Arts (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).
[25] Tuve, Seasons and Months, p. 111.

> until they must sing or burst. It is then that the nightingale is constrained to sing and make his noise… and that young men must become gay and amorous in the sweet, lovely weather. He has a very hard heart who does not love in May, when he hears the birds on the branches, singing their heart-sweet songs. And so I dreamed one night that I was in that delicious season when everything is stirred by love[.][26]

The passivity of both humans and birds is stressed. The bird 'must sing' ('chanter par force') in response to spring, and young men are equally constrained to love. The affective response seems to be based at once in the body's biological reaction to the weather and the mind's aesthetic judgement; the 'heart' is a convenient catch-all organ for either type of response. The young man becomes amorous because he feels the 'sweet, lovely weather' and hears the birds' 'heart-sweet songs'. By conflating the aesthetic and bodily responses, Guillaume de Lorris passes over any question of competition or tension between nature and culture in the production of affect: art is nature, and vice versa, and a love poem is as natural a response to the season as birdsong. This kind of seasonal-deterministic thinking poses a potential challenge to anthropocentrism, emphasising as it does the entanglements between humans and nonhuman nature.

Some later writers who took up these traditional seasonal-affective-generic correlations expressed less confidence about their neatness. Spenser's The Shepheardes Calender (1579) appears, at first glance, to reiterate the same conventions. The poem's mysterious commentator 'E.K.' (who may be Spenser himself) observes that the poet deliberately blurs the distinction between the characters' bodies and their surroundings. He describes the lines in 'Februarie' on 'the breme winter with hamfred browes, / Full of wrinckles and frostie furrowes' as 'A verye excellent and liuely description of Winter, so

[26] Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, The Romance of the Rose, trans. Charles Dahlberg (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971, reprinted Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1986), pp. 31-32.

as may bee indifferently taken, eyther for old Age, or for Winter season.'[27] Good seasons literature, for E.K., is that which naturalises the correspondences between seasonal weather and human conditions. E.K.'s note, however, draws attention to Spenser's conscious aestheticisation of the seasons. The emphasis in the Calender on the craft of the poet – both Spenser and his various narrators – and the poet's role in interpreting and depicting the seasons, raises questions about the possible artificiality of such seasonal-affective correlations. In 'Januarye', for example, Colin Clout 'compareth his carefull case to the sadde season of the yeare, to the frostie ground, to the frosen trees, and to his owne winterbeaten flocke.' ('Argvment') 'Thou barrein ground,' sings Colin, 'whome winters wrath hath wasted, / Art made a myrrhour, to behold my plight' (19-20). But precisely who or what has 'made' nature a mirror? Is it God, a responsive and empathetic Nature, Colin's own mind, or Spenser's imagination?

Later in the Shepheardes Calender characters who find neat correlations between their feelings and the season are joined by those for whom the season is out of joint. The harmony between season and affect falters. 'Is not thilke the mery moneth of May,' asks Palinode, 'When loue ladds masken in fresh aray? / How falles it then, we no merrier bene, / Ylike as others, girt in gawdy greene?' (1-4) The seasonal-affective correlation is invoked as received wisdom, but the influence of the season cannot necessarily overcome pre-existing emotional states. Alison A. Chapman has shown that the poem explores contemporary debates around the competing Julian and Gregorian calendars; it appears that the seasonal-affective cycle is another calendar that Spenser wants to hint is open to reform.[28]

Frequently, it is awareness of individuals' varying levels of susceptibility to seasonal determinism that leads to reflection on the nature of the correlation between

[27] Edmund Spenser, The Shorter Poems, ed. Richard A. McCabe (London: Penguin, 1999), pp. 42 (ll.43-44), 48. Subsequent references are to this edition.
[28] Alison A. Chapman, 'The Politics of Time in Edmund Spenser's English Calendar', Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900, 42.1 (2002), 1-24.

season and affect. Even de Lorris acknowledges that a ‘very hard heart’ may resist the influence of the season. The narrator of Shakespeare’s sonnets finds that the moving cycle of seasons accords with his sense of time passing, but the individual seasons do not always match his emotions. ‘How like a winter hath my absence been / From thee,’ he laments in sonnet 97, ‘What freezings have I felt, what dark days seen!’ But this winter is a state of mind, not nature: ‘And yet this time removed was summer’s time’. The autumn which followed was ‘big with rich increase… Yet this abundant issue seemed to me / But hope of orphans, and unfathered fruit’. His response to each season is shaped by his sorrow.

> For summer and his pleasures wait on thee,
> And, thou away, the very birds are mute:
> Or, if they sing, ‘tis with so dull a cheer,
> That leaves look pale, dreading the winter’s near.

Here the sonnet corrects its claim that the narrator’s sorrow can prevent the very birds from singing. The natural signs of the seasons persist in spite of the observer’s feelings. What is altered is their affective significance. The narrator is able to reinterpret the seasonal imagery, although he is aware that he is going against custom.

Both Spenser and Shakespeare accept that the seasonal-affective-generic conventions which they resist are the norm. In Spenser’s ‘Nouember’, Thenot requests a love song and is scolded, ‘now nis the time of merimake… The mornefull Muse in myrth now list ne mask, / As shee was wont in youngth and sommer dayes.’ (9-20) Shakespeare’s narrator laments in Sonnet 98 that ‘nor the lays of birds, nor the sweet smell / Of different flowers… Could make me any summer’s story tell.’ He knows what a ‘summer’s story’ should ordinarily be. However, references to the Muse and to the particular genres associated with each season emphasise the artistry of seasons literature,

which so often depicts itself as a spontaneous response to nature in which the poet is 'constrained to sing' like de Lorris' nightingale. When the poet is out of tune with the seasons in the sonnets and Shepheardes Calender, it is not clear whether the fault lies in the individual whose perception has been distorted, or in the ubiquity and inflexibility of tradition.

For poets in the eighteenth century who wanted to be good empiricists, discovering and cultivating harmony between seasonal nonhuman nature and one's affective and aesthetic response became an ethical imperative. An improper response to birds and flowers like that in Shakespeare's sonnets signified the personal failure of allowing one's circumstances to cloud perception. In 'On Winter' (1748), Mary Leapor argues that weather's effects on human and nonhuman bodies gives natural rise to a season's aesthetic dimension. She describes the suffering of humans, animals, and trees, and asks whether poetry itself is appropriate to the season.

> Say gentle Muses, say, is this a Time
> To sport with Poesy and laugh in Rhyme;
> While the chill'd Blood, that hath forgot to glide,
> Steals through its Channels in a lazy Tide:
> And how can Ph*œ*bus, who the Muse refines,
> Smooth the dull Numbers when he seldom shines.[29]

Leapor's insistence upon natural realities is not a rejection of cultural seasonal associations, only a critique of improper ones. She advocates a particular aesthetic response to the season, albeit one that cannot, or should not, find expression in the refined and florid lines of Augustan poetry. Leapor's own response, framed as an honest empirical

[29] Mary Leapor, Poems Upon Several Occasions (London: J. Roberts, 1748), pp. 257-58.

reaction to 'shiv'ring Nature', is of course shaped by social factors too: she is a labouring-class writer criticising literary culture's detachment from working people's realities.

Many Romantic-period writers would share Leapor's doubt about poetry's capacity to respond appropriately to nature or human suffering. Wordsworth's solution was not to disclaim poetry altogether, but to theorise a supposedly 'new' poetics that stayed closer to its 'natural' roots, and which would be 'the image of man and nature' (my emphasis).[30] Since so much Romantic writing is interested in exploring the 'dim sympathies' between the mind and the external world, the seasons remain a pertinent theme in this period.[31] Taking cues from those eighteenth-century poets they deemed to have been most successful as nature writers (notably Thomson, Gray, and Cowper), Romantic writers on the seasons aimed to produce a form of culture that did not necessarily corrupt the perception; as natural and instinctive as the birdsong in the Roman de la Rose, it could similarly lead its readers/listeners to a proper response to and appreciation of the season.

A quintessential example is the poetry of John Clare, whose Shepherd's Calendar (1827) reworks the self-conscious and often tense aestheticism of Spenser's calendar by blending the natural, cultural, and affective qualities of each month and season into one Thomsonian 'harmonious Whole'. Clare makes no distinction between each category of seasonal attribute. Within 'October', for example, the 'lone bards mellancholy way' appears alongside close natural observation ('the sear leaves on the blackning lea'), reference to humans' local traditions ('the peasants christmass keeping cheer'), and indeed aesthetic judgements ('Like to a map the landscape lies') and allusions to earlier literature.[32] The effect is that culture, both high and low, comes to look like nature, and

[30] William Wordsworth, 'Preface to Lyrical Ballads', in The Major Works, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984, reissued 2008), pp. 595-615, p. 605.
[31] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'Frost at Midnight', in The Major Works, ed. H. J. Jackson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985, reissued 2008), p. 87.
[32] John Clare, *The Shepherd's Calendar*, eds. Eric Robinson, Geoffrey Summerfield, and David Powell, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 111-15.

nature like culture. The human 'nutters rustling in the yellow woods' are hardly distinguishable from the squirrels 'Picking the brown nuts from the yellow leams' a few lines later.[33] Both are seemingly instinctive creatures preparing for the change to winter, and they assume a kind of mutual solidarity which, again, resists anthropocentrism. Yet their activities are also romanticised by the poet's cultured perspective as 'secret toils oer winter dreams'.[34]

Romantic writers frequently idealised the interactions between nature, rural culture, and literature, harking back to the medieval romance tradition for which 'Romanticism' was named. But expressions of uncertainty over the proper or desirable balance of these different factors in our perception of the seasons did not cease in the Romantic period. In Jane Austen's Persuasion (1817), for example, Anne Elliot longs for 'the influence so sweet and so sad of the autumnal months in the country' which accord with her temperament.[35] But her enjoyment of the season, and we might surmise her interpretation of it as sweet and sad, is mediated by literature:

> Her pleasure in the walk must arise from the exercise and the day, from the view of the last smiles of the year upon the tawny leaves, and withered hedges, and from repeating to herself some few of the thousand poetical descriptions extant of autumn, that season of peculiar and inexhaustible influence on the mind of taste and tenderness, that season which had drawn from every poet, worthy of being read, some attempt at description, or some lines of feeling.[36]

Invoking 'poetical descriptions' in almost the same breath as 'tawny leaves' implies an equivalence between the natural and the cultural factors at work in seasonal determinism.

[33] Ibid., p. 112.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Jane Austen, Persuasion, ed. James Kinsley and Deirdre Shauna Lynch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 32.
[36] Ibid., p. 71.

But this is not Clare's seamless simultaneity of nature and culture; Austen does raise the question of which has 'drawn' the other. The season exerts its influence, but only upon the 'mind of taste', which has presumably been formed by education as well as by natural aptitude. Autumn draws out 'lines of feeling' from the poets, but those lines in turn shape – not only reflect – the feelings of subsequent readers. There is an undertone of cynicism in the reference to 'the thousand poetical descriptions' which implies that our 'view' of the seasons has become trite. Austen mocks her own clichéd use of autumn as well as Anne's predictable tendency to identify with a season associated with fading beauty.

For Austen, like Spenser and Shakespeare, the aestheticisation of the seasons draws attention to the processes by which nature is 'made a mirror' of human affects, and the result is a faint trace of scepticism about the naturalness of the correlation. For other writers, like de Lorris, Thomson, and Clare, the fact that we cannot find a clear root for seasonal-affective correlations in either nature or culture is not an indictment of man's thralldom to convention, but a reason to celebrate the interconnectedness of the universe. Attitudes towards the seasons and our relationship with them fluctuate with changes in other areas of culture and changes in the climate itself. However, the continuities and trends in seasons literature across different periods and genres are as striking as the differences.

Today, many humans' lives are barely affected by seasonal temperature change or agricultural cycles. But seasons literature from earlier periods asks many questions that are pertinent to our relationship with the seasons and climate today. Does human behaviour determine climate as much as climate determines human behaviour? What are the cultural and personal circumstances that might make us more or less susceptible to different interpretations of our environment? Is culture, particularly art, necessarily removed from nature? Of all our conceptions and measurements of climate, the seasons invite these

questions most overtly and insistently, because they have from their earliest theorisation been closely bound up with human thoughts, actions, and feelings.