

Seasons in the Literatures of the Medieval North

P.S. Langeslag



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D. S. BREWER

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First published 2015
D. S. Brewer, Cambridge

ISBN 978 1 84384 425 9

D. S. Brewer is an imprint of Boydell & Brewer Ltd
PO Box 9, Woodbridge, Suffolk IP12 3DF, UK
and of Boydell & Brewer Inc.
668 Mount Hope Ave, Rochester, NY 14620-2731, USA
website: www.boydellandbrewer.com

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library

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This publication is printed on acid-free paper

Typeset by Word and Page, Chester, UK

Acknowledgements

This book was written in conditions of great privilege. Throughout the processes of research, drafting, and revision, I received guidance from some of the most accomplished scholars in the field. I am deeply grateful to Andy Orchard, Richard North, Ian McDougall, William Robins, and David Klausner for their invaluable recommendations, to Terry Gunnell and Torfi Tulinius for guiding my early thought on literary representations of the seasons, and to Daniel Jamison and Jeroen Nieboer for offering their expertise in areas in which I felt out of my depth. My research environment, too, has been stellar. I have made extensive use of the library resources of the universities of Toronto, Iceland, and Göttingen, whose richness is reflected in my footnotes and bibliography. In particular, I would like to mention the Dictionary of Old English Project and the Jackman Humanities Institute, the two towers I was permitted to make my home by the generosity of Hal Jackman and the kindness of Antonette diPaolo Healey. By way of the Dictionary, I had access not only to a unique set of library resources, but also to the friendship and immense learning of Ian and David McDougall. Their places at the Dictionary have since been taken by Robert Getz and Stephen Pelle, the only scholars of my acquaintance able to fill Dave and Ian's shoes. Though Rob and Stephen have not contributed to this book in any direct way, I think of our Old Germanic reading sessions across the landscapes and seasons of Toronto's Saint George campus as the heart of the intellectual culture that fostered my work during the drafting stage. More generally, I owe much of my academic profile to Karin Olsen, who first introduced me to the languages and literatures of medieval north-western Europe, and Alaric Hall, who mentored me with great patience. Alasdair MacDonald, too, has been a great mentor and friend. Winfried Rudolf, head of Medieval Studies at the University of Göttingen's Department of English Philology, deserves a solemn acknowledgement for his untiring work to safeguard my private research time in the final stages of the book's preparation.

Countless volunteers have contributed to the software environments that have made much of my workflow so pleasant. I would like to single out the maintainers of XMonad, VIM, and biblatex for providing the invisible framework behind this book.

My final word of thanks must go to my students, who are the point.

Abbreviations and Citation Practice

CV	<i>An Icelandic-English Dictionary</i> , ed. Cleasby and Vigfusson
DOE	<i>Dictionary of Old English: A to G</i> , ed. Cameron, Amos, Healey, <i>et al.</i>
EETS	Early English Text Society
ES, OS, SS	Extra Series, Original Series, Supplementary Series
Fritzner	<i>Ordbog over det gamle norske Sprog</i> , ed. Fritzner
KLNM	<i>Kulturhistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder</i>

Biblical references use abbreviations as found in Weber's edition of the Vulgate.¹ I use *DOE* short titles for otherwise untitled manuscript scribbles (*Notes*). In reprinting from text editions, I have silently altered punctuation and capitalization to meet the requirements of syntax and style, and removed such editorial cues as italics and brackets. Occasionally, I have altered word spacing to reflect my reading of the text. Translations are my own.

¹ Robert Weber, ed., *Biblia sacra iuxta vulgatam versionem*, 5th ed., rev. Roger Gryson (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2007).

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Introduction

A Monster of Our Making

Our understanding of the seasonal cycle at higher latitudes, with its annual oscillation in temperature and sun hours, owes a great deal to the development of controlled fire. It was a knowledge of this technology, along with advances in body insulation, that permitted early hominids to push into new territories where temperatures varied greatly between the seasons, and where the cold of winter would have precluded human survival had it not been for artificial heating and heat preservation. By moving away from the equator, our ancestors effectively created a new enemy for themselves in the shape of the winter season. At this time of year more than any other, their survival in moderate and subarctic zones depended on technology, a shared and therefore social acquisition that has left a more profound mark on the genus of homo than anything else has. With it, humankind learned to shut out the world outside and create a space of its own.¹

Energy infrastructure has undergone dramatic developments since the taming of fire. Consequently, developed societies today enjoy the most seasonally uniform lifestyle in the history of human life outside the tropics. Architectural developments, the exploitation of new sources of heat, and ever-improving insulation technologies are only a few facets of this feat. In some of our cities with their year-round climate control, heated parking garages, and seamless underground transportation infrastructure – winter cities, as Adam Gopnik calls them² – it is now possible to avoid direct contact with the elements altogether if one so chooses. Meanwhile, the airlifting of produce has done away with seasonal limitations on the availability of virtually any food while vastly expanding the dietary range available to us. On an existential level, therefore, the cycle of the seasons has lost much of its immediacy for those with access to advanced infrastructure. What remains of our susceptibility to the seasons largely belongs to such domains as mood and leisure: cultural and psychological responses to a material reality.

¹ C. O. Sauer, 'Fire and Early Man', *Paideuma* 7, no. 8 (November 1961): 404–5; Juli G. Pausas and Jon E. Keeley, 'A Burning Story: The Role of Fire in the History of Life', *BioScience* 59, no. 7 (July–August 2009): 597; Bent Sørensen, *A History of Energy: Northern Europe from the Stone Age to the Present Day* (Abingdon and New York: Earthscan, 2012), 20–77; cf. Leland M. Roth, *Understanding Architecture: Its Elements, History, and Meaning*, 2nd ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2007), 161–2.

² Adam Gopnik, *Winter: Five Windows on the Season*, CBC Massey Lectures (Toronto: Anansi, 2011), 185.

This book concerns such responses to the seasons, but it looks for them in the medieval literatures of England and Scandinavia, whose authors could not so easily dismiss seasonal variation as a matter of November gloom and February skiing. Even after coal heating and the chimney became more widely used in the thirteenth century,³ the seasonal experience remained one of considerably greater exposure than is typical of post-industrial societies. Moreover, these technological improvements coincided with the start of a gradual climatic cooling that was to become substantial, and particularly erratic, by the fourteenth century.⁴ Accordingly, life throughout the period involved regular exposure to seasonal extremes through their tactile representatives, heat and, above all, cold. Morbidity was likewise affected by the seasons, as winter is conducive to respiratory infections while summer favours insect-borne diseases.⁵ More than anything, however, the seasons mattered because they dictated food supplies and the labour calendar for most economic sectors. Yields of crops and animal products alike were strongly seasonal.⁶ Though long-term nutritional deficiencies seem to have had no statistically discernible effect on mortality in pre-industrial Europe,⁷ the local nature of the food economy did leave the population vulnerable to crop failures and the year-by-year seasonal fluctuations that gave rise to them.⁸ Even at the best of times, the seasonal nature of agricultural production imposed restrictions on the diets of the poorer classes in particular while structuring the day-to-day lives of many.⁹

Although hard evidence for the effects of this cycle on the daily lives of medieval individuals is hard to come by, the combined efforts of social historians, archaeologists, palaeopathologists, and others are beginning to add up to some profound insights. Alongside material finds, these scholars make use of documentary evidence by which to quantify variables in

³ LeRoy Dresbeck, 'Winter Climate and Society in the Northern Middle Ages: The Technological Impact', in *On Pre-Modern Technology and Science: A Volume of Studies in Honour of Lynn White, Jr.*, ed. Bert S. Hall and Delno C. West (Malibu: Undena, 1976), 182–6; LeRoy Dresbeck, 'Techne, labor et natura: Ideas and Active Life in the Medieval Winter', *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History*, s.s. 2 (1979): 103–11.

⁴ Jean M. Grove, 'The Initiation of the "Little Ice Age" in Regions round the North Atlantic', *Climatic Change* 48 (1999): 53–82; Jean M. Grove, *Little Ice Ages: Ancient and Modern*, 2nd ed., 2 vols (London and New York: Routledge, 2008).

⁵ John Landers, *The Field and the Forge: Population, Production, and Power in the Pre-Industrial West* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 29–30.

⁶ Debby Banham and Rosamond Faith, *Anglo-Saxon Farms and Farming*, *Medieval History and Archaeology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 50–8, 113, 118.

⁷ Stephen J. Kunitz, 'Speculations on the European Mortality Decline', *The Economic History Review*, n.s., 36, no. 3 (July 1983): 349–64.

⁸ Edward Miller and John Hatcher, *Medieval England: Rural Society and Economic Change 1086–1348* (London: Longman, 1978), vii–viii.

⁹ Kathy L. Pearson, 'Nutrition and the Early-Medieval Diet', *Speculum* 72, no. 1 (January 1997): 1–32; C. C. Dyer, 'Seasonal Patterns in Food Consumption in the Later Middle Ages', in *Food in Medieval England: Diet and Nutrition*, ed. C. M. Woolgar, D. Serjeantson, and T. Waldron (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 201–14.

matters of diet, death, disease, and weather extremes. Especially in the study of climate history, narrative texts are either discarded or subjected to a critical vetting before their testimony is admitted as evidence,¹⁰ and with good reason. Not only are documents of this kind especially likely to be invested with authorial purpose beyond the strict registration of facts, they are also occasional compositions, regularly of obscure origin, contrasting with the better-defined and more methodical annalistic sources that offer some limited statistical validity.

Narrative and lyric texts can nevertheless contribute to our understanding of medieval seasonal experience on a more subjective level. In the absence of medieval treatises on environmental psychology, these works provide the best available access to medieval cognitive and emotive responses to the seasonal cycle. By cataloguing the literary functions of seasonal motifs across genres and corpora, moreover, it is possible to identify seasonal associations of some cultural validity.

This book identifies and interprets seasonal devices in medieval English and Scandinavian literature as evidenced primarily in Old English poetry from the eighth century to the eleventh, Old Icelandic writings from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and Middle English poetry principally from the second half of the fourteenth century. Through these sources, it offers an insight into attitudes to season and environment in medieval north-western Europe. As will be seen, the conceptual integration of time and space is of critical importance to the investigation, since the seasons commonly manifest themselves in literature as associative overlays onto geographic space.

Medieval north-western Europe is an appropriate test case for the study of seasonal associations in literature because a number of relevant conditions converge here. To begin with, it is a higher-latitude region, ensuring considerable contrasts between the seasons. Such contrasts are a necessary condition for a study of this sort, but they also translate into cultural concepts worth exploring in this context. For instance, there is a tendency in the narrative and lyric literature of this region to divide the year into two seasons, while four were used in astronomical and some administrative taxonomies. Since sets of two differ greatly in their figurative associations from sets of four, there is an opportunity here to compare figurative uses of both divisions.

A second advantage to the study of these particular traditions is that they were productive at a time when climate and season penetrated deeply into the lives of people, ensuring the material relevance of these phenomena

¹⁰ For example A. E. J. Ogilvie, 'Climate and Society in Iceland From the Medieval Period to the Late Eighteenth Century' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of East Anglia, 1981); A. E. J. Ogilvie, 'Climatic Changes in Iceland AD c. 865 to 1598', *Acta Archaeologica* 61 (1990): 233–51; A. E. J. Ogilvie and Graham Farmer, 'Documenting the Medieval Climate', in *Climates of the British Isles: Present, Past and Future*, ed. Mike Hulme (London: Routledge, 1997), 112–33.

for authors and the general population alike. This seasonal susceptibility ultimately follows from the energy infrastructure of the time, as medieval economies were supported in the first instance by organic matter as opposed to fossil fuels. This dependence severely limited societies' defence against seasonal extremes not only in terms of fuel for heating, but also because the manpower required to feed the population severely curtailed investment opportunities for diverse technological improvements that might have served that defence.¹¹ Conclusions here reached concerning the literary functions of the seasons will therefore be a useful point of comparison to set against later traditions. In addition, the timespan between *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* witnessed the onset of a notable climate deterioration, so that Old English poetry was composed in a period of milder and more stable mean conditions than the Middle English material. Some cautious comparative work may therefore be carried out within the investigated period as well.

Finally, medieval north-western Europe is an appropriate field of focus because it constitutes a loose cultural sphere with sufficient shared material to permit the detailed comparison of its constituent parts, yet enough that sets these apart to be able to discuss them as individual cultures. The Old English, Middle English, and Old Norse corpora each engage extensively with their seasonal environments, and they do so in distinct yet overlapping ways. The resulting field is one that allows for the discussion of a range of seasonal themes while retaining a unified focus. Following a thematic tendency found in all three corpora, that focus concerns the seasons as environments associated with the unfamiliar and uncanny aspects of extra-societal space.

Measuring Time

There is an inevitable discrepancy between the science that informs our conceptual understanding of the world around us and the phenomenological intuition that guides our everyday experience. When we speak of the seasons of the year, for instance, the discussion may be coloured at some level by their astronomical definition, reflecting an uneven and variable distribution of sunlight caused by the angle between the earth's spin and solar orbit. In casual conversation, however, we slip almost imperceptibly back and forth between that definition and the related but more relatable concepts of heat and cold, light and dark, sun and rain. A quantified set of observations of this sort in turn feeds into a second formal definition known as the meteorological year, whose function is not to measure time but to track local weather patterns along an annual mean. These statistics

¹¹ Landers, *The Field and the Forge*, 1–122.

as reported by mass media have a considerable presence in our reflection on the weather, if primarily to confirm our subjective experience: *that was a really hot day*.

However, the acknowledgement of extreme weather events has a distinctly linear character: *this has been the hottest spring since records began*. When it comes to the cyclical experience of weather patterns, statistics fade into the background and we are guided rather by our own experience and memories, which are necessarily less refined. In medium and high latitudes, we associate summer with heat and long days, winter with cold and dark. 18 and 22 December do not feel like different seasons to us, and we base our expectations of Christmas weather rather on our own experiences than on the longitudinal data kept by meteorologists.

These observations demonstrate that the seasons of the year are subject to a plurality of definitions. Some of these are rooted in astronomical constants, but others are more subjective. One cannot assert that this or that system is culturally dominant without specifying the cultural domain one has in mind. The knowledge that spring begins around 20 March by astronomical reckoning is of no value to the gardener, who knows that nocturnal frosts typically do not occur beyond a certain point in the season, whose connection with the vernal equinox is of limited practical relevance to the survival of her crops. On the other hand, keeping astronomical time is the safest way to ensure she visits her client on the appointed day.

Just as a book on gardening will reference the meteorological rather than the astronomical year, a book on medieval culture may reference a different seasonal reality depending on its thematic domain. A book on seasonal themes above all must begin by defining its terms. This is the more pressing in a book on the seasons in medieval north-western Europe, because the definitions used by the relevant cultures differed from today's.

To begin with, it is worth recalling the calendrical tradition that has dominated Western Europe in the Common Era. Its premodern form is known as the Julian calendar, itself a modified version of an older Roman calendar. Instituted by Julius Caesar in 45 BCE, it spread across Europe as an administrative tool of the Roman Empire. As a solar calendar containing twelve months and 365.25 days, it differed little from today's construct. Officially, even the start of the year was the same that is observed today, although in practice there was a good deal of local variation. In ecclesiastical and most administrative circles, the Julian calendar was used throughout the Middle Ages, and the start of the year remained variable. In England, for instance, 25 December was widely observed during the Anglo-Saxon period. Following an Anglo-Norman interlude at 1 January, 25 March gained traction in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and remained in use until 1752.¹² By the thirteenth

¹² Bede, *De temporum ratione*, ch. 15; Charles W. Jones, ed., *Opera didascalica II: De temporum*

century, 25 March seems to have enjoyed some popularity in mainland Scandinavia as well.¹³

Today's Gregorian calendar differs from its Julian predecessor only in a slight reduction in the frequency of leap years. Instituted by Pope Gregory XIII in 1582 and not adopted in England until 1752, its main motivation was to call a halt to the backwards march of Easter that had been observed since the Nicaean Council definitively fixed its timing to the solar year in 325 CE. By the time of the reform, this difference amounted to ten days, which were accordingly excised from the year 1582; by the time England adopted it in 1752, eleven days had to be omitted.¹⁴

From a Roman perspective, then, no significant calendrical change has taken place since the days of the Republic. Of course, the perspective to which this book aspires is more peripheral, as it concerns cultures that adopted Roman ways late and not equally into all domains. It is in this adoption that notable change seems to have taken place.

Two descriptive types of source provide evidence on calendrical systems in use by early Germanic speakers: the peoples' own observations and those of foreign observers. The latter type has the longer history, as it begins with the Roman historiographer Tacitus, who in the closing years of the first century CE remarked of the Germanic peoples:

Arva per annos mutant, et superest ager. Nec enim cum ubertate et amplitudine soli labore contendunt, ut pomaria conserant, ut prata separent, ut hortos rigent; sola terrae seges imperatur. Unde annum quoque ipsum non in totidem digerunt species: hiems et ver et aestas intellectum ac vocabula habent, autumnus perinde nomen ac bona ignorantur. (*Germania*, ch. 26)¹⁵

They vary their fields year by year, and there is land to spare. For with the fertility and abundance of soil they do not strive in labour to plant orchards, divide up their pastures, or irrigate gardens; only the land's grain harvest is claimed. Accordingly, they do not divide the year itself into as many constituent parts: winter, spring, and summer have both concept and name, but they know neither the name nor the products of autumn.

ratione liber, Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina, 123B: Bedae venerabilis opera, 6 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1977), 330; H. Grotefend, *Zeitrechnung des deutschen Mittelalters und der Neuzeit*, 2 vols (Hannover: Hahn, 1891–8), 1:s.vv. 'Annunciationsstil', 'Circumcisionsstil', 'Jahresanfang', 'Julianisches Jahr', 'Weihnachtsanfang'; Sacha Stern, *Calendars in Antiquity: Empires, States, and Societies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 204–27.

¹³ Finn Hødnebo, 'Juleskrå', in *Kulturhistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder*, ed. John Danstrup et al. (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde / Bagger, 1963–78; hereafter cited as *KLNM*), 8 (1963): 19–20; Sam Owen Jansson, 'Nyår', *KLNM* 12 (1967): 410–11; Árni Björnsson, *Saga daganna*, 2nd ed. (Reykjavik: Mál og menning, 2000), 393–4.

¹⁴ Grotefend, *Zeitrechnung*, 1:s.v. 'Neuer Stil'.

¹⁵ Allan A. Lund, ed., *P. Cornelius Tacitus: 'Germania'* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1988), 90; for the dating, see 17, n. 3.

This passage provides a first indication that the premodern seasons were not always identical to our own. It is, however, doubtful whether Tacitus's account can be taken at face value. In his day, northern Europe was home to a smaller population than the Mediterranean, and it had supported that population for a shorter period of time. Accordingly, the soil had been used less intensively but more extensively (using crop rotation and fallow, as Tacitus makes clear), and it had not suffered the salinization through irrigation that had turned much of the southern Mediterranean into desert, nor quite as much deforestation leading to erosion.¹⁶ As such, much of the land in the north was indeed more fertile, but its yield was surely less than it could have been in the hands of intensive Mediterranean farmers. Its exploitation would thus have looked primitive from the agro-economic viewpoint one expects from the economic elite of a powerful society supported by advanced agricultural technology.¹⁷ Tacitus's decision to emphasize the quality of the soil rather than the primitive character of its exploitation must have been conscious as well as unconventional. As such, it is characteristic of his political designs, which involved a critical assessment of Roman society by comparison with its tribal neighbours.¹⁸ Read in the context of the wider passage, the observation regarding the absence of autumn fits into this depiction of the noble savage so well provided for by nature that he is unfamiliar with the unnecessary toils of horticulture, much less its conceptual field. Seasonal taxonomy here seems to be used as supporting evidence for the ease of the Germanic agricultural life.

Tacitus's claim is best read in the light of observations made by members of Germanic societies themselves. Although such writings do not appear until the early Middle Ages, they suggest that Tacitus's account may be rooted in a real and notable difference between Roman and Germanic time-reckoning. Bede puts it succinctly:

Quotiescumque communis esset annus ternos menses lunares singulis anni temporibus dabant [antiqui Anglorum populi]. [. . .] Item principaliter annum totum in duo tempora, hiemis uidelicet et aestatis, dispertiebant – sex illos menses quibus longiores sunt noctibus dies aestati tribuendo, sex reliquos hiemi. (*De temporum ratione*, ch. 15)¹⁹

¹⁶ Jared Diamond, 'Ecological Collapses of Past Civilizations', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 138, no. 3 (1994): 369; J. Donald Hughes, *The Mediterranean: An Environmental History, Nature and Human Societies* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2005), passim, esp. 17–44, 194–5, and cf. 71; Roger Sands, *Forestry in a Global Context* (Cambridge, MA: CABI, 2005), 1–31; Uriel N. Safriel, 'Dryland Development, Desertification and Security in the Mediterranean', in *Desertification in the Mediterranean Region: A Security Issue*, ed. William G. Kepner *et al.*, NATO Security through Science Series, C: Environmental Security (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006), and other papers in the same volume.

¹⁷ Lund, *Germania*, 67.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 56–69, esp. 67.

¹⁹ Jones, *De temporum ratione*, 330–1.

Whenever it was a common year, they [the ancient English people] gave each season of the year three lunar months. [. . .] Furthermore, they originally divided the full year into two seasons, namely winter and summer, assigning the six months whose days are longer than the nights to summer, the other six to winter.

Whereas no external source confirms Tacitus's ternary claim, support for Bede's binary division of the year is extensive. The overwhelming majority of such evidence hails from the Old Norse cultural sphere, where legal and computistical works are among the earliest texts asserting the existence of a bipartite year.²⁰ The notion of a six-month unit *misseri* finds ample support in the sagas, and remained in use in Iceland well into the modern period.²¹ Evidence of the existence of the cognate term *missere* and its usage in Anglo-Saxon England survives in three poetic sources conventionally dated 'early'.²² These attestations lend credence to the inference that a calendrical division of the year into two parts was prevalent before Germanic culture branched off into North and West Germanic subgroups, and remained influential at least until the Julian year took over most of its official functions.

The exact relationship between the system practised in medieval Europe and that described by Tacitus is uncertain. Early scholars in particular have attempted to give Tacitus's three seasons a place in early Germanic history,²³ but a diachronic perspective suggests rather that the account is based on a misunderstanding, a misrepresentation, or the customs of an unrepresentative tribe.²⁴

²⁰ Grágás, ch. 19: Vilhjálmur Finsen, ed., *Grágás: Islændernes lovbog i fristatens tid* (Copenhagen: Berling, 1852; reprinted in one volume Odense: Odense universitetsforlag, 1974), 1:37; *Bókarbót*: N. Beckman and Kr. Kálund, eds, *Alfræði islenzk II: Rímtöl* (Copenhagen: Møller, 1914–18), 78.

²¹ Árni Björnsson, *Saga daganna*, 31–47, 261–9.

²² *Genesis A* 1168, 1743: A. N. Doane, ed., *Genesis A: A New Edition*, rev. ed. (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2013); *Exodus* 49: J. R. R. Tolkien and Joan Turville-Petre, eds, *The Old English 'Exodus': Text, Translation, and Commentary* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981); *Beowulf* 153, 1498, 1769, 2620: R. D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork, and John D. Niles, eds, *Klaeber's "Beowulf" and "The Fight at Finnsburg"* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008). Although many scholars now approach the dating of these poems with great caution, the strongest linguistic and metrical studies place them firmly in the same, comparatively early period. The eighth century is still most commonly mentioned for all three. See Peter J. Lucas, ed., *Exodus* (London: Methuen, 1977), 69–71; Doane, *Genesis A*, 42–55; Leonard Neidorf, ed., *The Dating of 'Beowulf': A Reassessment* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2014).

²³ Alexander Tille, *Yule and Christmas: Their Place in the Germanic Year* (London: Nutt, 1899); Martin P. Nilsson, *Primitive Time-Reckoning: A Study in the Origins and First Development of the Art of Counting Time Among the Primitive and Early Culture Peoples* (Lund: Berling, 1920), 71–7; Nils Erik Enkvist, *The Seasons of the Year: Chapters on a Motif from 'Beowulf' to 'The Shepherd's Calendar'* (Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica, 1957), 4; Andreas Fischer, 'Sumer is icumen in: The Seasons of the Year in Middle English and Early Modern English', in *Studies in Early Modern English*, ed. Dieter Kastovsky, *Topics in English Linguistics* 13 (Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1994), 90; cf. Earl R. Anderson, 'The Seasons of the Year in Old English', *Anglo-Saxon England* 26 (1997): 242–4.

²⁴ Jacob Grimm, *Deutsche Mythologie*, 4th ed., ed. Elard Hugo Meyer, 3 vols (Berlin: Dümmler, 1875–8), 717–18; Enkvist, *The Seasons of the Year*, 4.

The lexical field of seasonal terms likewise supports the bipartite year, not the tripartite. Words for winter (*wintrus*, *winter*, *vetr*) and summer (*sumer*, *sumar*) are cognates across the Germanic languages, but spring (*lencten*, *vár*) has no such stable presence.²⁵ Although autumn is uniformly attested by *hærfest* and its cognates across the West and North Germanic languages, the persistent ambiguity of that term between the season and its chief agricultural labour of harvest, to which the word originally referred, makes it difficult to determine its age as a seasonal-taxonomical concept. The fact that no word for autumn or spring survives in Gothic may also be taken to suggest that an older calendar had only two parts, winter and summer,²⁶ but the modest size of the Gothic corpus beckons caution in that regard.

The Associative Year

Bede's account makes clear that the English administrative year in his day had four parts, and this has been the case ever since. Nevertheless, scholars have observed that the bipartite year was not so promptly abandoned by poets. Both the Old English poem *The Seafarer* and the Middle English lyric *Sumer is icumen in* have the cuckoo herald summer, for instance, an inaccuracy in a carefully referenced Julian system, since today's cuckoo migrates to England by April.²⁷ Earl Anderson is right to point out that this difficulty is easily resolved if it is understood that the authors had the bipartite year in mind, a folk-taxonomy that survived in common usage alongside the quadripartite year.²⁸ However, it would be misguided to reduce poetic references of this sort to remnants of a disappearing administrative system. Even if medieval authors thought of summer as starting in April, for instance, this does not explain why the birds in Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls* welcome summer on Valentine's Day:

Now welcome, somer, with thy sonne softe,
That hast thes wintres wedres overshake,
And driven away the longe nyghtes blake!²⁹ (lines 680–2)

²⁵ Although Old Norse *vár* has cognates with seasonal reference in other Indo-European languages (notably Latin *ver* and Old Frisian *wars*), the variance in seasonal terms between the Germanic languages suggests a lesser degree of conceptual prominence for this season in the early Germanic cultures.

²⁶ Earl R. Anderson, *Folk-Taxonomies in Early English* (Cranbury, NJ, London, and Mississauga, ON: Associated University Presses, 2003), 219–34.

²⁷ Janet Bately, 'Time and the Passing of Time in *The Wanderer* and Related OE Texts', *Essays & Studies*, n.s., no. 37 (1984): 5–6; Fischer, 'Sumer is icumen in', 79; Marguerite-Marie Dubois, 'Le rondeau du coucou', in *La ronde des saisons: Les saisons dans la littérature et la société anglaises au Moyen Âge*, ed. Leo Carruthers, *Cultures et Civilisations Médiévales* 16 (Paris: Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1998), 18–19.

²⁸ Anderson, *Folk-Taxonomies*, 262–4.

²⁹ Larry Dean Benson, ed., *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 385–94.

Indeed, examples can be found in modern literature where summer is understood to commence with the warmer weather of spring. The authors of these texts are unlikely to have known of a formal start to a six-month summer as observed in either medieval England or modern Iceland. When Shakespeare writes

Shall I compare thee to a Summers day?
Thou art more louely and more temperate:
Rough windes do shake the darling buds of Maie,
And Sommers lease hath all too short a date (Sonnet 18, lines 1–4)³⁰

his summer includes May and the process of budding, yet it has a short lease. Clearly, he is not perpetuating an ancient Germanic administrative calendar last attested in English literature 900 years before his own day. Instead, the cycle he is referencing is associative, not chronological: it is the warm and sunny days of the English year that have ‘too short a date’, more so than the three months labelled ‘summer’ by men and women of numbers.

Shakespeare’s summer illustrates that the division of the solar year is not a monolithic convention but an elastic taxonomy, whose resolution and constitution adapt to the speaker’s needs. In daily life, we alternate between Bede’s astronomical understanding of the year (for example to make a dentist appointment) and Shakespeare’s associative set of seasons (for example when we witness the annual return of birdsong), but we use no lexical markers to distinguish between the two; only context may reveal what we mean by ‘summer’. To avoid perpetuating the scholarly confusion between the two systems, I will here attempt to shed some light on the cognitive processes underlying the variation in seasonal taxonomy.

Cognitive representations of reality are bounded by limited knowledge, time, and processing power;³¹ they are thus necessarily reductive.³² Indeed, recent models assume that compression is one of the central functions of the cognitive apparatus.³³ At both intuitive and deliberative levels of processing, the brain makes extensive use of heuristics, shortcuts employed with the objective of striking the optimal balance between accuracy and economy in judgement and decision-making. Heuristics bypass the majority of relevant computational processes, relying instead on simple cues that

³⁰ Paul Hammond, ed., *Shakespeare’s Sonnets: An Original-Spelling Text* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 145.

³¹ Gerd Gigerenzer and Peter M. Todd, ‘Fast and Frugal Heuristics: The Adaptive Toolbox’, in *Simple Heuristics that Make us Smart*, ed. Gerd Gigerenzer and Peter M. Todd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 5.

³² Cf. Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (London: Prentice-Hall, 1945; Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), 59–61.

³³ Nick Chater and Paul Vitányi, ‘Simplicity: A Unifying Principle in Cognitive Science?’, *TRENDS in Cognitive Sciences* 7, no. 1 (January 2003): 19–20.

we associate with accurate prediction, though actual success rates vary greatly according to the heuristic used and the context of employment.³⁴

Heuristic strategies have mostly been studied in preferential choice settings, but they have also been used to model categorization. To maximize successful categorization, one has to compare all relevant features of an object against the criteria of the available categories. However, someone who finds herself face to face with a potentially dangerous predator cannot afford to run through the complete checklist of hooves, teeth, and stripes, but will rather rely on a small number of potent cues.³⁵ She also cannot afford to come to a systematic ranking of features in descending order of predictive value (known as cue validity), as this takes time and processing power, both of which the heuristic process seeks to minimize. In intuitive processes, it is therefore more appropriate to speak of a feature's salience, or ability to attract the subject's attention. The salience of a feature may be learned or evolved to match its cue validity, but this relationship cannot be taken for granted.

Researchers stress the adaptive nature of the heuristic toolkit: test subjects apply different simplification strategies in different settings.³⁶ The salience of any one feature may thus depend on the task at hand. In deliberative tasks, of course, the mind does more processing in absolute measures, though its proportional reliance on heuristics seems to be no less than in low-level tasks.³⁷ The production of literature and learning belongs firmly in the deliberative realm, but many conceptual sets relayed in these traditions have been canonized through both deliberative and intuitive heuristic processes.

The earth's spin (the day) and solar orbit (the year) are high-resolution cycles with measurable effects on sun hours, meteorology, flora, and fauna at higher latitudes. In these parts of the world, communities rely on a detailed understanding of the solar year for a viable food economy. However, it would be an inefficient use of computational resources to bring an overly high resolution of the year to bear on operations that require less planning.

Our intuition, evolved before the days of agricultural planning, responds to immediate environmental stimuli. The most salient stimuli effected by

³⁴ Gerd Gigerenzer, 'Fast and Frugal Heuristics: The Tools of Bounded Rationality', in *Blackwell Handbook of Judgment and Decision Making*, ed. Derek J. Koehler and Nigel Harvey (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 63–4; Benjamin E. Hilbig, Sabine G. Scholl, and Rüdiger F. Pohl, 'Think or Blink: Is the Recognition Heuristic an "Intuitive" Strategy?', *Judgment and Decision Making* 5, no. 4 (July 2010): 300–9; Jean Czerlinski, Gerd Gigerenzer, and Daniel G. Goldstein, 'How Good are Simple Heuristics?' In Gigerenzer and Todd, *Simple Heuristics*, 97–118.

³⁵ Patricia M. Berretty, Peter M. Todd, and Laura Martignon, 'Categorization by Elimination: Using Few Cues to Choose', in Gigerenzer and Todd, *Simple Heuristics*, 235–54.

³⁶ John W. Payne, James R. Bettman, and Eric J. Johnson, *The Adaptive Decision Maker* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1993).

³⁷ Hilbig, Scholl, and Pohl, 'Think or Blink'.