

The Medieval Green Age: Environmentalism and English Literature in the Middle Ages

By

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Ann Marie Martinez

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## Abstract

In my dissertation I challenge standing views of the Middle Ages by forging a connection between current ecocritical theory and the representation of the environment in Medieval literature. Grounding my argument with historical texts on wildlife and land management, I explore perspectives toward property, man's role as God's designated guardian over nature in former ages, and the relationships pre-modern writers constructed between society and nature. My project takes a broad view: beginning with the earliest documented English concerns about land in *Beowulf*, and then focusing on *The Canterbury Tales*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, I trace the extent to which medieval attitudes toward land use, landscape beautification, and woodland delineation developed within the emerging English nation. I conclude the project by arguing that these medieval perspectives shaped modern views on nature. Such a transhistorical framework allows me to challenge the still-dominant assumption that environmental awareness is a relatively recent development. I argue instead that medieval attitudes constitute a crucially important pre-history to our modern views regarding the use, exploitation, and sustainability of the environment.

## Acknowledgements

A dissertation is not the product of a lone individual's work. The image of the recluse-scholar scribbling (or typing) away furiously in the dark and secluded bowels of a library, while romanticized by our society, is not accurate. This dissertation is the offspring of countless conversations with a bevy of mentors, colleagues, and friends. Their suggestions, their opinions, their voices are embedded in the pages that follow, and for that I am ever thankful.

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Dr. Mary Klayder has been invaluable; her famous phrase, “It’ll be fine” was a constant motivation and inspiration whenever I felt that the obstacles ahead were larger than I could handle. I am also thankful for the Department’s secret weapon, someone who knows all regarding the minutia of the dissertation. Because of her, the pain of the final stages (from defense, to formatting, and, finally, submission) is lessened. Thank you, Lydia Ash, for the constant sage advice. I am particularly grateful to the members of my writing group, Jana Tigchelaar, Ali Brox, Gaywyn Moore, Lauren Harmsen Kiehna, and Lance Turner, whose feedback and laughter carried me forward. To the “Monday Group,” comprised of Lindsey Jo Waugh, Tiffany Creegan Miller, and Michael Wade Smith, who provided weekly verbal support. Similarly, to Colin Christopher, Mary Beth Woodson, and Sahana Mukherjee, who were always ready to listen and talk about the project at hand; and to Will Hickox, who took the time to read and comment on my chapters, providing me with a new perspective. In my time at the Center for Teaching Excellence I found Judy Eddy’s understanding and words of encouragement to be always perfectly timed. And even though she currently lives almost 2,000 miles away, Shelley Stonebrook’s feedback, via email or late-night phone calls, was always welcome regarding troubled chapters and troubled times.

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## Introduction

*Naturam ipsam definire difficile est.*<sup>1</sup>

~ Cicero

To think of *nature* presently is to think of the flora, fauna, and the myriad elements that constitute the physical world. But, in truth, it is not that easy or straightforward. As Cicero said, “Nature itself is difficult to define.” If it was difficult to do so in the Classical period, it is much more so in the modern age. Part of the difficulty stems from the vast range of definitions that are available, and which include, among others, physical phenomena, personality, and bodily senses. As vast as they are, these definitions do not resolve other complexities that arise when discussing the term, such as: How is *nature* different from *environment*? Does *nature* have to be wild? Can it be domesticated? Should humans be counted in nature, or do they belong solely to culture? Where does *nature* end and *culture* begin? As Ursula K. Heise explains,

Most of the natural environments Westerners encounter in their own societies, at any rate, are anything but “wild” or untouched by man—even though they may continue to strike the observer as irreducibly nonhuman and other. Since the advent of deconstruction, New Historicism, and Cultural Studies, literary critics are justifiably wary of drawing precise boundaries between such concepts as “nature” and “culture” that seem to exclude each other but turn out upon closer

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<sup>1</sup> “Nature itself is difficult to define.”

analysis to be entangled with each other in multiple ways, whether these entanglements be semantic, historical, or power political.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, Western society's fixation with nature as a wild space is no longer viable, as human presence has spread to almost every natural space; this, in turn, has also problematized the binary of nature/culture as these are too intertwined to possibly separate.

In trying to find answers to some of the questions that arise in relation to nature, scholars turn to ecocritical theory. Ecocriticism involves not only looking at representations of nature in literature, but, as Rebecca Douglass states, it "... is reading with attention to treatments of nature, land, and place informed by a desire to understand past and present connections between literature and human attitudes regarding the earth."<sup>3</sup> For Douglass, and for me, understanding the connections that authors have drawn between literature and human views on nature is critical. Through an ecocritical lens, critics are able to delineate how much the "enveloping natural world is a part of the subject on the printed page before us [and] even when it is not, it remains as a given, a part of the interpretive context."<sup>4</sup> In other words, the outdoor world and the textual world are inextricably connected. Literature reflects the natural world of its time period through the author's depiction of the environment—a key point when examining pre-modern literature in order to ascertain societal views regarding nature. Such a sentiment is reminiscent of Heise's reflections: "This tension between realist and constructivist approaches crucially involves questions about how our perception of the environment is culturally shaped and how that

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<sup>2</sup> Ursula K. Heise, "Science and Ecocriticism," *The American Book Review* 18.5 (1997): 4.

<sup>3</sup> Rebecca Douglass, "Ecocriticism and Medieval Literature," *Studies in Medievalism* 10 (1998): 138.

<sup>4</sup> Glen Love, qtd. in Gillian Rudd, *Greenery: Ecocritical Readings of Late Medieval English Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 5.

perception is mediated through language and literature.”<sup>5</sup> For Heise, culture determines views on nature, and, in turn, literature’s depictions of the environment play a key role in that conceptualization.

In my work I am cognizant of the gulf created by time between the texts I study and the current critical moment. Yet this same distance has enabled the emergence of new theoretical frameworks that reveal previously unexplored questions, new interpretations, and fresh evidence of continuities across the traditional divides of literary history. A formalist methodology regarding textual analysis, a historicist approach to literature’s and to society’s attitudes about nature, and an ecocritical lens are central to my research and help me challenge the periodization that sets the Middle Ages against other eras. This allows me to consider authors’ ongoing engagement with nature without a “birth” period or an “end” period for environmental awareness. We find ourselves living through an ecocritical awakening in various aspects of daily life, yet its relevance to literature, although at times viewed as a reactionary voice to current environmental issues, is crucial in allowing a deeper understanding of our relationship with the environment. Indeed, ecocriticism is not a “new trend.” It has been a voice in critical discourse for a number of generations, and it has been present in literature for much, much longer—a pivotal point revealed by my analysis.

The scope of my study is another challenge that I face; covering either 400 or 600 years, between the Anglo-Saxon period and the late Middle Ages, the literary works that I analyze are from two distinct historical and cultural periods that, while sharing a geographical location, had

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<sup>5</sup> Ursula K. Heise, “The Hitchhiker’s Guide to Ecocriticism,” *PMLA* 121.2 (2006): 511.

differing values, mores, and outlooks.<sup>6</sup> And yet, this separation between the texts allows me to pose ecologically based questions that help compare and contrast the periods and render key information regarding shifting views on the environment. Precisely by using an ecocritical lens on medieval history, culture, and literature my study challenges temporal paradigms that otherwise limit our understanding of the past. There are many layered connections between medieval literature and ecocriticism that speak to the authors' environmental awareness, and in turn allows us to speak of a pre-history to our current views regarding the exploitation and sustainable use of the environment.<sup>7</sup> While there are dangers in simply superimposing modern theoretical frameworks onto older texts and past periods, I have conscientiously avoided this pitfall by carefully attending to the historical and cultural context of the works. A broader examination of the literature that includes its socio-historical setting has allowed me to present more detailed studies of environmental consciousness during the Middle Ages in England.

In my dissertation, I am particularly interested in exploring views on land delineation, land ownership and beautification, and stewardship over the land. As I do so, I also trace the shifting views on nature that range from seeing it as a hostile threat, to a safe yet commodified space, and finally to its intricate relationship with those in power and those who lack it. Yet my study has also required an examination of the presence of monsters on the land during the Anglo-Saxon period, and the treatment and categorization of women as well as the preferred hunting practices during the late Middle Ages. I begin by looking into some of the earliest documented

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<sup>6</sup> Scholars continue to debate the date for *Beowulf*: Kevin Kiernan, in *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript* (1981; rpt. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), proposes the eleventh century based on paleographical, linguistic, and manuscript studies. Michael Lapidge, in "The Archetype of *Beowulf*," from *Anglo Saxon England* 29 (2000): 5-41, suggests an eighth century origin based on paleographical analysis.

<sup>7</sup> Throughout this work I use the phrase *environmental awareness* as it is customarily used in environmentalism, referring to the cognizance of human effects on nature.

concerns with land by researching Anglo-Saxon land boundaries alongside views of landscape in *Beowulf*. My work then focuses its attention on texts from the late fourteenth century: Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, where, I argue, the author's concerns with controlling nature come to the surface; and the anonymous *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, where a model of proper stewardship is presented to the nobility.

The medieval authors of this study exhibit a sense of environmental awareness at times familiar to present-day readers, but there were still some key differences in their outlook regarding nature. While the OED currently lists a plethora of definitions for the word *nature*, for the Anglo-Saxons there was no single word that included everything we presently associate with the word. Instead, they had various terms that referred to different aspects of nature. When speaking of the “essence” of things, some common words used were: *cynd* (“character,” “origin,” “kind”), *cynde* (“natural, native, innate”), *cyn* (“family, generation,” “race, people”), *adelo* (“nobility, family, descent, origin”).<sup>8</sup> Although the language did not have an exact term for it, the concept of *nature* (closer to our definition that includes the physical world of flora and fauna) was indeed present and, in some ways, broader than current definitions, as it included both human elements and the supernatural.<sup>9</sup> Even monsters were seen as part of the natural world and not counted as “separate entities.”<sup>10</sup> By the Middle English period, the term *nature* had entered the language through the influence of Latin and French. It could refer to very broad concepts in

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<sup>8</sup> All Anglo-Saxon definitions in the introduction are from the Bosworth-Toller Anglo-Saxon Dictionary, hosted through Charles University in Prague [www.bosworth.ff.cuni.cz]. In some cases, as noted, J.R. Clark Hall, *A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, (1894; rpt. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1960), is used, subsequently referred to as CASD. For an in-depth discussion of vocabulary associated with *nature* in Old English, see Jennifer Neville, *Representations of the Natural World in Old English Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 1-7.

<sup>9</sup> Neville, *Representations*, 2.

<sup>10</sup> Neville, *Representations*, 72.

the world, like the Creation and the universe made by God; the embodiment of moral and political principals, and natural law; it could refer to individual characteristics, like someone's temperament and personality, type or species, family, race, as well as physical needs or appetites; and it could also refer specifically to the goddess Natura.<sup>11</sup> The vocabulary and terminology may shift—it is almost expected for these periods—but the concept remains.

I selected the texts for this project very carefully, but considered them separately—initially, as distinct entities unrelated to each other but each representative of a particular time and place. In all likelihood, Chaucer and the *Pearl*-poet were not aware of *Beowulf*, but that does not diminish the importance of examining the cultural and historical moment that produced each one of the texts and exploring environmental connections.<sup>12</sup> The heart of my argument is located in the late fourteenth century, but I needed an anchor that would show how the Middle English period differed from the past. That is where *Beowulf* comes in. The thematic and temporal distance between *Beowulf* and the works of the Ricardian poets was enough to bring up engaging distinctions and commonalities: Both the *Beowulf*-poet and Chaucer deal with the creation/enforcement/permeability of boundaries on the land and in nature; both the *Beowulf*-poet and the *Pearl*-poet introduce hybrid figures with the eponymous hero and the Green Knight; both Chaucer and the *Pearl*-poet include a didactic element to their work; and all three texts touch on the non-human creatures/*othered* figures (i.e., monsters, faeries, green man). But it is

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<sup>11</sup> MED s.v. *nature* (n.) def. 1.a., 2.a., 3.a., 4, 5, 6, and 7, respectively. All Middle English definitions are from the Middle English Dictionary, hosted through the University of Michigan [<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/>].

<sup>12</sup> Nothing is known regarding the history of the single *Beowulf* manuscript before Sir Robert Cotton (1571-1631) acquired it. See *Klaeber's Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, ed. R.D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork, and John D. Niles, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), xxvi.

the differences that more clearly show the shifting view regarding nature that occurs in the Middle Ages—that is precisely what I capture with the following chapters.

Chapter 1, “*Ælwihta Eard: Monstrous Dwelling Places and Broken Boundaries in Beowulf’s Anglo-Saxon Landscape*,” brings Anglo-Saxon studies of monstrosity into conversation with recent ecocritical views to argue that the *Beowulf*-poet presents a complex view of Anglo-Saxon nature: in placing monsters and monstrous dwelling places as boundary markers on the Anglo-Saxon landscape, the poet justifies the colonization of the land/nature by humans. However, he problematizes it by suggesting that only a beastly man (a hybrid) can control natural creatures effectively. I reexamine Beowulf as one who precisely manifests characteristics of the hybrid, and I show how the poet represents him in an uncomfortable light as both conquering hero and monstrously masculine fighter. Effectively, this tenth century poet reveals that man must himself *be* monstrous to commandeer nature. However, in the fourteenth century some poets change their depictions of nature: rather than a threatening space it becomes a space of (potential) safety and domestication that also highlights questions of human interaction with nature.

Chapter 2, “*For to Walken in the Wodes Wilde: The Patriarchal World and the Green Realm of Femenye in Chaucer’s Tales*,” examines Chaucer’s critique of men’s control over nature through an examination of women’s relationship to green spaces. Although current ecocritical thought has moved past the dualistic association of nature with women, I choose to revisit this point because in order to obtain a deeper understanding of medieval views regarding the environment, societal views toward various marginalized groups/entities must be reexamined. The chapter focuses on *The Knight’s Tale*, *The Merchant’s Tale*, and *The Wife of Bath’s Tale*. While the former two feature enclosed garden settings and analogize women and

nature as beautiful and objectified entities, the third further complicates the relationship between humans and nature by introducing the question of mastery, both between humans (through marriage) and between humans and the land. Chaucer's depiction of the patriarchal treatment toward one marginalized group (women) is a vehicle to further understand medieval society's conceptualization and treatment of another marginalized entity, that of nature.

Chapter 3, "Green Knight, Green Steward: Environmental Sustainability in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," argues that the *Pearl*-poet shows the politically and geographically marginalized Green Knight implementing a program of conservation that cannot be explained by the cliché that he is "closer to nature." Rather, the author contrasts the Green Knight's environmental approaches (e.g., how Bertilak monitors the wildlife on his land) to the frivolous behavior of Arthur's knights who, in other Arthurian texts, would represent social ideals. Through this juxtaposition, the poet sets forth a new model of environmental guardianship for his aristocratic readers regarding the treatment of outdoor spaces and wildlife.

These are canonical texts and a number of scholars have examined them from various critical perspectives.<sup>13</sup> My particular contribution to these ongoing discussions is in weaving together the different critical strands: for *Beowulf* I bring Monster Theory into conversation with views on Anglo-Saxon landscape; for Chaucer I join feminist criticism with visual and archeological representations of gardens; and for the *Pearl*-poet I set up the historical categorization of the land with the hunting practices of the aristocracy—all of these, of course, are further discussed under the canopy of ecocritical theory.

I consider these works to be representative of the socio-cultural moment that produced them and to provide the earliest evidence in canonical texts of people's thoughts regarding the

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<sup>13</sup> I discuss the major critical conversations on these texts at the beginning of each chapter.

environment. These works allow me to trace a genealogy of environmental awareness that reaches back to the pre-modern period. The Middle Ages, which were for long called derisively the “Dark Ages,” were not the simplistic, rustic, thoughtless period between ages of reason many scholars once assume it to be. In his seminal work, *The Idea of Nature*, English historian R.G. Collingwood discusses views on nature from the Classical period through the nineteenth century; however, in his extensive study, his chapters go from “Greek Cosmology” immediately to “The Renaissance View of Nature.”<sup>14</sup> Skipping over more than one thousand years of history does not even warrant a justification from Collingwood. While much has changed regarding general views on the Middle Ages since 1945, prominent scholars continue to bypass the period. Recently, in *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern* (2011) Stephen Greenblatt argues that the fifteenth century discovery of Lucretius’ works inaugurated modernity after a long period of medieval darkness. It is precisely such views on the medieval period that I challenge by underscoring the critical contribution to modern sensibilities that stem from a medieval pre-history. As Lisa Lampert-Weissig explains, “[t]he ways in which the Middle Ages is often bracketed off or oversimplified in order to create or justify a particular view of modernity can end up distorting understandings of both the medieval and the modern.”<sup>15</sup> In the chapters that follow, I hope to show the complex, rather than simplistic, views regarding society and nature that some medieval authors held.

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<sup>14</sup> R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of Nature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1945).

<sup>15</sup> Lisa Lampert-Weissig, *Medieval Literature and Postcolonial Studies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 15.

## Chapter 1

### *Ælwihta Eard: Monstrous Dwelling Places and Broken Boundaries in Beowulf's Anglo-Saxon Landscape*

Boundaries are one of the most permanent and ancient features in the English landscape.  
~ W.G. Hoskins<sup>1</sup>

Traveling through the countryside in present-day England, one cannot fail to see the abundance of boundaries on the landscape that are evocative of older styles of land demarcation. Whether these are stonewalls, hedgerows, or even living-tree fences, dividing markers on the land similar to those used in the Middle Ages are still a prominent part of the country. For example, the earliest recorded hedgerow is from the Anglo-Saxon period, in Wiltshire, and credited to Ælfric in AD 940.<sup>2</sup> But other medieval boundary markers (like the shifting and permeable conceptual boundaries surrounding human communities), were more particular to the period, and reflected the laws, mores, religious views, and geographical habitats of the Anglo-Saxons. It is precisely these boundaries that warrant a reexamination; with new theoretical avenues such as ecocriticism and monster theory applied retroactively to *Beowulf*, we can challenge preconceived notions of our contemporary thinking regarding a medieval understanding of the environment.

In *Beowulf*, one of the dynamics that I focus on pertains to the relationship between nature and culture as seen through representations of the monstrous and the delineation of

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<sup>1</sup> *English Landscapes* (London: BBC, 1974), 37.

<sup>2</sup> Oliver Rackham, *The Illustrated History of the Countryside* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1994), 74.

territorial boundaries. Habitually for modern scholars, the relationship between nature and culture is considered oppositional, but, as ecocritic William Howarth affirms, the two constantly mingle “like water and soil in a flowing stream” due to their inherent closeness.<sup>3</sup> Howarth’s association is a reminder that the science of ecology precisely studies the interconnection between living organisms (including humans) and their habitats. Accordingly, for the Anglo-Saxons there would indeed have been a high level of mingling between their culture and nature due to the physical conditions of their habitat; however, for them it was a negative mingling. Because they were not very proficient at strengthening their living quarters against weather conditions, it was at times difficult to keep the outdoor world (e.g., coldness, dampness) from coming indoors.<sup>4</sup> Climatologically speaking, the Anglo-Saxon period (through the 10<sup>th</sup> century) was characterized by oppressive weather: colder and stormier than earlier centuries, with record snowfalls and icy rivers.<sup>5</sup> The people’s exposure to these conditions made them prone to diseases and joint ailments.<sup>6</sup> For the Anglo-Saxons, the natural world around them was antagonistic.

Although they could not battle the climate, the Anglo-Saxons confronted nature by focusing on wild, non-human creatures as foes. While the primary animals that threatened people’s safety were bears, wolves, and wild boars, it was monstrous creatures that captured the

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<sup>3</sup> William Howarth, “Some Principles of Ecocriticism,” in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ed. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens/London: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 69.

<sup>4</sup> Jennifer Neville, *Representations of the Natural World in Old English Poetry* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 4. For further discussion on the design and construction of Anglo-Saxon living quarters, see Rosemary Cramp, “The Hall in *Beowulf* and in Archeology,” in *Heroic Poetry in the Anglo-Saxon Period*, ed. Helen Damico and John Leyerle (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1993), 331-46.

<sup>5</sup> Hubert H. Lamb in *Climate, History and the Modern World* (1982; rpt. London: Routledge, 1995), 157.

<sup>6</sup> Malcolm L. Cameron in *Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England: Anglo-Saxon Medicine* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 5.

imagination of the population, as we see through the works of Old English poets.<sup>7</sup> Jennifer Neville explains that for the Anglo-Saxons,

... clear distinctions between the human and the non-human were sought and asserted, even though the very existence of the monstrous races raised the question of intermediaries between them. The monstrous races rarely mix with humans; they tend to either eat them or flee. ... In Anglo-Saxon literature, however, the distinction between humanity and the natural world involved not so much the assertion of human superiority ... but rather the recognition of human inferiority to nature's power.<sup>8</sup>

I agree with Neville's views and wish to elaborate on what she refers to as the "intermediaries" between the monstrous and the human. Since the Anglo-Saxons saw humans as powerless against the forces of nature, in order to combat these forces (which included the imagined monstrous races) I argue that what was required was a human who possessed monstrous characteristics—in other words, a hybrid figure that bridged the gap between the human and the monstrous in order to conquer nature.

Monstrosity is a fluid concept in general, ever changing with the passage of time within the culture that creates it; for example, during the Middle Ages, monsters for the Anglo-Saxons were more clearly defined regarding shape (commonly beast-like creatures), behavior, and

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<sup>7</sup> Neville, *Representations*, 6-9.

<sup>8</sup> Neville, *Representations*, 35.

habitat, than the present-day monsters that captivate our collective imagination.<sup>9</sup> Landscape can also be monstrous in *Beowulf*, as it becomes a manifestation of the cultural moment for Anglo-Saxon society representing that society's fears and apprehensions of nature. In this chapter I argue that monstrous dwelling places in *Beowulf* function as boundary markers on the landscape demarcating what places humans may/should not enter and determining the layout of the land. These monstrous dwelling places are permeable for those who possess monstrous characteristics and indicate a fluid conceptualization of the *other* and the *other's* interconnection with marginalized locations. In the examination that follows, I use *Beowulf* as a foundational text in my study of nature/environment in the Middle Ages because of the antagonistic relationship between nature and culture exemplified through the layered presence of monstrous figures (creatures from nature): over a broad geographical and temporal span, two communities must engage with three different monsters battled by the same hero in three different lands. My analysis shows that by presenting a nature often inhabited by monstrous creatures, the *Beowulf*-poet justifies the colonization of the land/nature by humans, but in creating a hybrid Beowulf, a beastly man, he problematizes the relationship of human/nature by suggesting that only a beastly man can control natural creatures completely.

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<sup>9</sup> Recent trends in monstrosity depict a gamut of monsters, from cute cartoon characters, to human villains. Monsters today have also become "mainstream," welcomed into society by an eager audience interested in understanding the reason behind the character's monstrosity. Such is the case with the figure of the vampire and its burgeoning popularity, both in young adult fiction and in contemporary film. For more on the cultural ramifications regarding the popularity and acceptance of monsters, see Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1996), 3-25.

*Beowulf*, from ca. the eight or eleventh century, focuses on three groups of humans, the Danes, the Geats, and the Swedes; one hero; and various monsters.<sup>10</sup> Beowulf, a Geat, travels across the sea to aid the Danes in their plight against Grendel, a monstrous figure who has been attacking the Danish mead hall, Heorot, for 12 years. Beowulf easily defeats Grendel in the hall, but after Grendel's mother attacks Heorot in retaliation, killing the king's beloved adviser, Beowulf must travel to the mere (a body of standing water) inhabited by various monsters to face Grendel's mother. Even though the battle takes place in treacherous and hostile territory, Beowulf manages to defeat her as well. Some time after returning to his homeland, Beowulf begins a 50-year reign over the Geats. In the end, he faces one last foe—a dragon awakened after a thief has trespassed into its barrow, leading the dragon to attack the Geat community. While the dragon perishes in the fight, so does Beowulf, and his people are left leaderless at the mercy of other warring tribes who are likely to take over Geatland.

*Beowulf* becomes a cautionary tale that warns of the dangers found in wild nature and of the territorial limits by which humans should live. For the Danes in *Beowulf*, the open sea, the mere, and the moors are occupied by threatening creatures over which common humans have no control; for the Geats, it is the barrows that are dangerous, first occupied by the dragon and later by the dead Beowulf, because these burial mounds potentially house monsters and undead beings who threaten the living. The world of the Danes and the Geats is dichotomized between the civilized world within prescribed bounds and the natural world occupied by the monstrous,

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<sup>10</sup> When it comes to establishing a date for *Beowulf*, scholars have continuously debated the issue. There is evidence for a late dating in the eleventh century, according to Kevin Kiernan, in *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript* (1981; rpt. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), who argues for the poem's later date based on paleographical, linguistic, and manuscript studies. Michael Lapidge, in "The Archetype of *Beowulf*," from *Anglo Saxon England* 29 (2000): 5-41, proposes an eighth century origin based on paleographical analysis. For further discussion, on earlier and later dates of origin, also see Colin Chase, ed., *The Dating of Beowulf* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981).

where the continuation of this territorial division can even be found in the nuances of the poem's language. For example, different sea-creatures, but no humans, inhabit the mere of the Grendel-kin, which is located beyond the moors and through a treacherous path.<sup>11</sup> It is particularly associated with Grendel's mother, as she is said to *hold* it:<sup>12</sup>

Sona þæt onfunde      se ðe floda begong  
 heorogifre *beheold*      hund missera,  
 grim ond grædig,      þæt þær gumena sum  
 ælwihta eard      ufan cunnode. (ll. 1497-1500)

At once she discovered, she who the flood's expanse  
 fiercely-ravenous guarded, for a hundred half-years,  
 grim and greedy, that there some man  
 the monstrous dwelling place from above explored.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Scholars have long referred to Grendel and Grendel's mother as the "Grendel-kin." As the OED indicates, *kin* (n.) def. I.1.a, refers to "a group of persons descended from a common ancestor, and so connected by blood-relationship; a family, stock, clan." The term *cyn*, the etymological root of our modern *kin*, shared the same meaning for the Anglo-Saxons.

<sup>12</sup> Because my study of *Beowulf* is focused on spaces humans may inhabit or traverse, the den of Grendel's Mother is not central to my argument. For this reason, she is excluded from this work.

<sup>13</sup> All quotations in Old English are from *Klaeber's Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, ed. R.D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork, and John D. Niles, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008). All translations are my own; my primary focus in these translations has been the literal meaning, with an occasional word added in brackets for clarity; I have thus not focused on maintaining the poetic quality of the text. All Anglo-Saxon definitions in this chapter are from the Bosworth-Toller Anglo-Saxon Dictionary, hosted through Charles University in Prague [www.bosworth.ff.cuni.cz]. In some cases, as noted, J.R. Clark Hall, *A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, (1894; rpt. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1960), is used, subsequently referred to as CASD.

*Healdan* means to “guard, preserve.”<sup>14</sup> Grendel’s mother has held or guarded this region for fifty years; however, of great importance is what the *Beowulf*-poet calls this particular place: *ælwihtra eard*. While *eard* refers to a dwelling, the Anglo-Saxon noun *ælwihtra* means “strange creature, monster.”<sup>15</sup> The prefix *ælw* is derived from the word *ælf*, meaning “elf, sprite, fairy, goblin, incubus,” and elves and fairies were occasionally looked upon unfavorably during the Middle Ages.<sup>16</sup> Therefore the adjectival form indicates that this particular region is tied to monsters rather than humans. Beowulf’s presence in this *ælwihtra eard* breaks the boundaries of separation between the human and the monster and underscores the permeability of the boundary; his incursion indicates that a “beastly man” has easier access to different spaces in nature.

In studying *Beowulf* and considering how medieval concepts of the monstrous manifested in literature and everyday life, medievalists can shed light on modern views that use the past as a foundation. One vein of critical scholarship has examined *Beowulf*’s monsters (mainly the three principal foes that challenge the hero).<sup>17</sup> Such scholarship adds an integral element to any study of the poem, since the relationship between a society and its monsters is a layered one, in which monsters allow us a view into a society’s communal fears. In situating my work on *Beowulf* within a broader scope of scholarship, my examination is guided by the work of Andy Orchard,

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<sup>14</sup> CASD, s.vv. *healdan* (v.) def. 1b.

<sup>15</sup> Bosworth-Toller, s.v. *ælwihtra* (n.) def. 1.

<sup>16</sup> CASD, s.v. *ælf* (n.) def. 1a. In *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, Bede provides “cures” for *ælfadde*, “elf-disease” or nightmares, caused by elvish poisoned arrows. From *Bede’s Ecclesiastical History of England: A Revised Translation With Introduction, Life, and Notes*, ed. A. M. Sellar (London: George Bell and Sons, 1907). However, Alaric Hall, in *Elves in Anglo-Saxon England: Matters of Belief, Health, Gender and Identity* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2009), explains that antagonistic elves proceeded from West Germanic traditions, while medieval Scandinavian materials rarely depict elves as causing illness (98, and 119-56).

<sup>17</sup> Beginning in 1936, with J.R.R. Tolkien’s seminal lecture, “*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*,” *The Monsters and The Critics and Other Essays* (1936; rpt. New York: Harper Collins, 2006), in which he argued for the poetic importance of the monsters.

particularly his extensive study on the monstrous elements in *Beowulf*, as well as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's cultural overview of the monstrous in its particular relevancy to medieval monsters. My study is also framed by Nicholas Howe's classification of landscape, and Clare Lees and Gillian Overing's discussion of the relationship between medieval religious culture and the Anglo-Saxon landscape, since understanding the division of the land at the time is central to my analysis of what I deem to be monstrous landscapes. John D. Niles, in "Locating *Beowulf* in Literary History," looks upon Anglo-Saxon heroic poetry as a form of discourse between the poet and the audience, and determines that, even with its fantastical elements, "*Beowulf* was a vehicle for political work in a time when the various peoples south of Hadrian's Wall were being assimilated into an emergent English nation."<sup>18</sup> Such findings have implications for the conclusion of my study, since any examination of land possession, constructions of the *other*, and the intervention of the hybrid must consider the "political" in the sense that these issues affect the relationships between various communities and the lands they occupy.

In this work I explore the relationship between monstrous figures and the land, particularly how this relationship helped determine the limits society imposed on itself. My discussion of *Beowulf* will further examine the Anglo-Saxon view of the monster within cultural, historical, and religious contexts; I will conclude by examining *Beowulf* as a hybrid (a human with monstrous abilities), a figure who can challenge the limits imposed by the monstrous elements in nature, and by discussing the implications such a characterization by a medieval poet could have had on society's views of nature.

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<sup>18</sup> John D. Niles, "Locating *Beowulf* in Literary History," *The Postmodern Beowulf: A Critical Casebook*, ed. Eileen A. Joy and Mary K. Ramsey (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2006), 153.

### *I. Beyond the Boundaries: Anglo-Saxon Conceptions of the Monstrous*

Although we consider *Beowulf* a fantastical tale by modern standards, the Anglo-Saxons had a very different view of the monstrous. For the majority of the population, monsters were real and a viable threat in everyday life. Warnings of their presence abound, from medieval bestiaries with details of their appearance and behavior, to medieval maps specifying their location.<sup>19</sup> Yet even in visual representations like bestiaries and maps separation between human and monster is present by differentiating between the known and the unknown. In Anglo-Saxon society, the unknown *other* was monstrous in the literal sense, and these monstrous *others* were invariably found *elsewhere*, outside the bounds of society.<sup>20</sup> Some of the knowledge about monsters came from the Bible: “The converted Anglo-Saxons considered holy Scripture to be the most reliable source of information, accurate in all of its details. Beginning with Genesis, the book of the Old Testament most often reproduced in Anglo-Saxon England, we read that ‘giants were on the earth in those days.’”<sup>21</sup> If the Bible told the Anglo-Saxons of the existence of giants, the unexplained ruins left behind by the Romans served as ocular “proof,” a tangible reminder that the land had once been occupied by *others*; it is the *enta geweorc*, the work of giants, spoken of in “The Ruin” (l. 2) and “The Wanderer” (l. 87). As relatively new occupants of England, the Anglo-Saxons inhabited an inherited landscape replete with “visible reminders of those who came before: burial mounds, pathways, earthen ditches and embankments around fields and woodlots, paved roads, remnants of daily use found on the ground such as pottery shards or

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<sup>19</sup> For more on visual representations of medieval monstrous figures, see Asa Simon Mittman, *Maps and Monsters in Medieval England* (New York: Routledge, 2006), and, authored with Susan Kim, *Inconceivable Beasts: The Wonders of the East in the Beowulf Manuscript* (Tempe, AZ: ACMRS, 2012).

<sup>20</sup> Asa Simon Mittman, “Headless Men and Hungry Monsters: The Anglo-Saxons and their ‘Others,’” *The Sarum Seminar* (Stanford University, March 2003. Web. 9 Sept. 2012), 1.

<sup>21</sup> Mittman, “Headless Men and Hungry Monsters,” 1.

projectile points, as well as the monumental remains of those who built in stone and left Latin inscriptions on the land.”<sup>22</sup> These monumental remains reinforced the view regarding the past existence of giants, but also underscored the awareness that others had lived on these lands. Howe argues that the Anglo-Saxons considered Britain to be their “promised land,” deeming those who had come before them as unworthy of its possession, in which case, for the Anglo-Saxons any creature deemed monstrous still found on the land could be driven out for the benefit of human kind.<sup>23</sup>

Monsters, however, are not spontaneous manifestations of frightful things, nor are they signifiers of people’s arbitrary fears. Monsters have a particular cultural function in literary representations. For Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, monsters are mirrors to society, reflecting very particular images that exhibit the strong interconnections between the monstrous and the cultural. He writes,

The monster is born ... at this metaphoric crossroads, as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment—of a time, a feeling, and a place. The monster’s body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy ... giving them life and an uncanny independence. The monstrous body is pure culture. A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read: the *monstrum* is etymologically ‘that which reveals,’ ‘that which warns’ ...<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Nicholas Howe, “The Landscape of Anglo-Saxon England,” *Inventing Medieval Landscapes: Sense of Place in Western Europe*, ed. John Howe and Michael Wolfe (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002), 93.

<sup>23</sup> Howe, “The Landscape of Anglo-Saxon England,” 92-3.

<sup>24</sup> Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1996), 4.

As Cohen posits, one of the reasons why society creates a monstrous figure is society's propensity to gather elements that oppose its widely held values and beliefs, and to pour these elements into a shape that can easily be *othered*. The monster then serves to highlight these distinctions while also warning society if/when it oversteps its bounds. In *Beowulf*, the first major monsters, the Grendel-kin, are associated with darkness, with underwater caves, with a human-flesh diet, and with godlessness—the opposite of the Danes, whose community flourishes around a gold-adorned hall seen from a distance,

oþþæt hy sæl timbred,  
 geatolic ond goldfah,      ongyton mihton;  
 þæt wæs foremærost      foldbuendum  
 receda under roderum,      on þæm se rica bad (ll. 308b-11)

until they the timbered hall,  
 splendid and gold-adorned, might be able to see;  
 that was most famous—for dwellers on earth—  
 for buildings under heaven, in it the mighty dwelt.

This is a place where, initially, people *dreamum lifdon*, live in joy (l. 99), and *eadiglice*, blessedly (l. 100), and the inhabitants are referred to as the *Beorht-Dena*, Bright Danes (ll. 427, 609). The Grendel-kin reveal the deep-seated fears of a society at odds with the dark unknown world beyond the edge of their community—a society that sees danger in the nature outside its walls. Conversely, the poem is a prime example of a poet's use of terrorizing elements in nature as a means to examine and influence a society's views. In *Beowulf*, the function of the various monsters is to limit the expanse occupied by society. To borrow from Cohen's general discussion on monsters, "The monster prevents mobility ... delimiting the social spaces through which

private bodies may move. To step outside this official geography is to risk attack by some monstrous border patrol....”<sup>25</sup> Cohen labels these figures “monsters of prohibition” due to their function, and sees the monster as a “kind of herdsman.”<sup>26</sup> By delimiting space and enforcing hierarchies, monsters in general can help establish some order in society. In *Beowulf*, I argue that the monsters affect societal order as well; they are not forcing the Danes or the Geats to remain locked within certain bounds, but instead work at keeping people *out* of certain places and limiting human control over the landscape.

## ***II. The Beginnings of Boundaries: Landscapes and Christianity***

The term *landscape* was not in wide use during the early Middle Ages.<sup>27</sup> It nevertheless remains applicable to this study because, as John Howe and Michael Wolfe argue, “[b]y examining ‘landscape’ rather than ‘nature,’ it assumes an environment subject to the human gaze and potentially subject to human modification.”<sup>28</sup> In other words, humans can attempt to change what they see. In *Beowulf*, the Danes and Geats repeatedly modify the landscape even though some of these lands may be originally monstrous by building communities for the living and barrows for the dead. As Howe explains, “the Anglo-Saxons viewed landscape through the material accumulation of the past, through its encrustations,” in the sense that the environment around them had a layered historical past in which remnants of former inhabitants could still be

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<sup>25</sup> Cohen, “Monster Culture,” 12.

<sup>26</sup> Cohen, “Monster Culture,” 13.

<sup>27</sup> The Anglo-Saxon *landscape* refers to “a tract of land, region” (Bosworth-Toller), and appears only once in the corpus of extant Old English texts in *Genesis B*, referring to the region of Hell Satan is chained. When speaking to the other demons, he says, “I have not seen a more loathsome landscape,” *Ic a ne geseah / laðran landscape* (ll. 375b-76a).

<sup>28</sup> John Howe and Michael Wolfe, ed. *Inventing Medieval Landscapes: Senses of Place in Western Europe* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002), 2.

found, tainting views of the land held by later occupants.<sup>29</sup> Howe classifies landscape into three categories: inherited, invented, and imagined. Inherited landscape is what Anglo-Saxon England acquired after the departure of the Romans—remnants and ruins, traces of a past way of life, the *enta geweorc* from “The Ruin” and “The Wanderer.” Invented landscape pertains to the establishment of land charters indicating ownership and boundaries. Finally, imagined landscape is the matter of literature, yet, as Howe cautions,

[t]here is little or nothing in these scenes that alters one’s sense of what a landscape might potentially be or that strains one’s sense of what it is customarily. To the contrary, these Anglo-Saxon landscapes are fixed in terms of conventional features. They are “imagined,” instead, in that their vividness ... reveals much about characters that the poet cannot or will not say directly.<sup>30</sup>

Howe’s sense of imagined landscape speaks to the literary reproduction of real-life environments that can be used to further our understanding of the interior turmoil a character may be experiencing. In the case of *Beowulf*, imagined landscapes populated by the monstrous serve to showcase the relationship between society and nature by expressing society’s turmoil, fears, and apprehensions of the “world out there,” and by expressing the human desire to gain control over nature.

However, views on the land were not limited to *land* only. During the Anglo-Saxon period the presence of *waterscapes* in the physical environment was as common as dry land because of the rising sea levels at the time. From roughly AD 400 to 1100 there was a steady worldwide rise in sea levels due to the melting of ice caps and glaciers, resulting from a general

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<sup>29</sup> Nicholas Howe, “The Landscape of Anglo-Saxon England,” 95.

<sup>30</sup> Nicholas Howe, “The Landscape of Anglo-Saxon England,” 105.

rise in temperatures.<sup>31</sup> Whether one accepts Kevin Kiernan's dating of *Beowulf*'s composition to the eleventh century, or if one aligns oneself with proponents of an earlier date ca. 800, the poem originated during a time of high sea levels, both in Scandinavia and in England. As Kelley Wickham-Crowley posits, for the Anglo-Saxons the perception of *landscape* included all bodies of water, so that both land and water help create "interpenetrating and mutable boundaries that influenced habits of mind."<sup>32</sup> Thus, the presence of water was influential in shaping how the Anglo-Saxons saw their place in the environment and how they responded to this same environment—an environment that extended beyond dry land and also established limits for humans. In *Beowulf* waterscapes are not only a backdrop to the story but also play an integral role in the categorization of a location as outside society's domain, for waterscapes (like the open sea and the mere) are dangerous locations often associated with monstrous figures.

Views regarding landscape at the time were filtered through society's religious leanings as well. Whether Western religion created a sense of mastery or stewardship over nature is a debated issue among some scholars. As historian Keith Thomas explains, the Aristotelian view that humans were the only beings with a rational soul was "taken over by the medieval scholastics and fused with the Judaeo-Christian teaching that man was made in the image of God ... Instead of representing man as merely a superior animal, it elevated him to a wholly different

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<sup>31</sup> For exact data regarding the changes in sea level and temperatures, see David Hill, *An Atlas of Anglo-Saxon England* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1981), 11.

<sup>32</sup> Kelley M. Wickham-Crowley, "Living on the *Ecg*: The Mutable Boundaries of Land and Water in Anglo-Saxon Contexts," *A Place to Believe In: Locating Medieval Landscapes*, eds. Clare A. Lees and Gillian R. Overring (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 108.

status, halfway between the beasts and the angels.”<sup>33</sup> Thomas concludes that this ranking of humans within nature afforded new “rights” to humans for the exploitation of the environment. Articulating similar ideas, medieval historian Lynn White, in his seminal work on ecocriticism, traces the roots of the current ecological crisis back to religious teachings during the medieval period, which revolved around the idea that God had created all things on Earth for the explicit benefit of humans.<sup>34</sup> “Man and nature are two things,” White writes, “and man is master.”<sup>35</sup> Both ecocritics and biblical scholars have since disputed White’s assertions. Lawrence Buell considers White’s views “generalizations,” and calls attention to the debate surrounding translations of *Genesis* regarding the terms “dominate” and “cultivate.”<sup>36</sup> But controversy aside, generally speaking, in a pre-Christian medieval pagan society man was not necessarily master, but rather coexisted with nature; the practice of animism—“the belief in spirits everywhere, in the non-living as well as in the living”<sup>37</sup>—allowed for the possibility of coexistence between humans and the environment by placating the guardian spirits beyond the community’s boundaries. In Icelandic animism, the pagan gods were once “guardians of the country” (where *country* is a

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<sup>33</sup> Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England 1500-1800* (New York: Penguin, 1983), 31. Thomas adds that Aristotle believed the soul was made up of three elements: the nutritive soul (which humans shared with vegetables); the sensitive soul (shared by humans and animals); and the rational soul (unique to humans).

<sup>34</sup> Lynn White’s main area of scholarship pertains to technological advances during the Middle Ages, and some of his other works focus on the use and advancement of medieval agricultural implements. See “Technology and Invention in the Middle Ages,” in *Speculum*, 15 (1940): 141-56, and *Medieval Technology and Social Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).

<sup>35</sup> Lynn White, Jr. “Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ed. Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (1967; rpt. Athens/London: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 8.

<sup>36</sup> Lawrence Buell, in *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 150 and 2.

<sup>37</sup> See Edward Clodd, *Animism: The Seed of Religion* (London: Archibald Constable, 1905), 22; Frank Grady, *Representing Righteous Heathens in Late Medieval England* (New York: Pallgrave MacMillan, 2005), 1-16.

synonym for *land*) and the sea, but by the thirteenth century church mandates specifically forbid Icelanders from believing in *landvættir*, or “creatures of the country” who were thought to live in groves, mounds, or waterfalls.<sup>38</sup> When the Church began associating indigenous religious views with Christianity, the association directly affected the relationship between humans and nature. On the one hand, spiritual figures were removed from nature and placed above in heaven, while movable angels and demons from Judaism were added; the removal of spiritual figures in nature and the addition of figures that were not necessarily fixed to a particular location nullified specific associations between the spiritual and nature.<sup>39</sup> On the other hand, the shifting view of the guardian spirits as neutral and later antagonistic was proportional to their growing association with demons as expounded on by Christian church leaders.<sup>40</sup> Humans, then, had to respond to this antagonism from “nature” by being antagonistic in turn. In some instances this opposition was expressed through an “exploitive attitude,” examples of which are captured through visual representations of man and nature in Western illustrated calendars. In calendars before A.D. 830, “the months were shown as passive personifications. The new Frankish calendars, which set the style for the Middle Ages, are very different: they show men coercing the world around them—plowing, harvesting, chopping trees, butchering pigs.”<sup>41</sup> The change from passive to active images underscores the shifting attitudes toward controlling nature in a hands-on manner.

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<sup>38</sup> Richard North, in *Heathen Gods in Old English Literature* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 211.

<sup>39</sup> See White, “Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” 10; and Clodd, *Animism*, 54-5 and 59-60.

<sup>40</sup> See Martine de Reu, “The Missionaries: The First Contacts between Paganism and Christianity,” *The Pagan Middle Ages*, ed. Ludo J.R. Milis (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 1998), 13-38.

<sup>41</sup> White, “Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” 8.

It follows that *Beowulf*, as a product of Christian views from a western European society, expounds a message that speaks directly on reducing the threat of the *othered* figure (whether pagan gods or monsters) on the land.<sup>42</sup> In accordance with Augustinian precepts, those chosen by God have the ability to commandeer the lands that once exhibited “the work of giants.” As medieval scholar Alfred Siewers explains,

... Augustinian theological emphases on the corruption of nature, extended to natural landscape and its ancestral associations with indigenous culture, empowered the Anglo-Saxon ideological project of superimposing a new cultural landscape on Britain’s most fertile land areas, in narrative landscapes based on a sense of Anglo-Saxon culture as God-chosen and hegemonic that eased textually the presence of earlier inhabitants as thoroughly as Old English linguistically replaced Romano-Celtic languages in those areas.<sup>43</sup>

In other words, in Old English literature it is justifiable for the “God-chosen” to remove native occupants from the land in order to appropriate the space. This is reminiscent of the later

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<sup>42</sup> While some critics continue to view *Beowulf* as essentially pagan, with only a coating of Christianity, others find the presence of Christian doctrine in the poem to be much stronger. Overall, Roy Liuzza considers the poem to be “Obscure in its origins ... enigmatic in its history” (*Beowulf*, 30), but speaks assuredly of the text’s Christian connection, when he states, “The author of the poem ... was certainly a Christian: the technology of writing in the Anglo-Saxon period was almost entirely confided to monastic scriptoria” (*Beowulf*, 32). For more on *Beowulf*’s Christian elements, see M.B. McNamee, “*Beowulf*: An Allegory of Salvation?” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 59 (1960): 190-207; Margaret Goldsmith, *The Mode and Meaning of Beowulf*, London: Athlone, 1970; Alan Cabaniss, “*Beowulf* and the Liturgy,” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 54 (1955): 195-201; Christine Fell, “Paganism in *Beowulf*: A Semantic Fairy-Tale,” *Pagans and Christians: The Interplay Between Christian Latin and Traditional Germanic Cultures in Early Medieval Europe*, ed. T. Hofstra et.al., *Mediaevalia Groningana* 16 (1995): 9-34.

<sup>43</sup> Alfred K. Siewers, “Landscapes of Conversion: Guthlac’s Mound and Grendel’s Mere as Expressions of Anglo-Saxon Nation Building,” *The Postmodern Beowulf: A Critical Casebook* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2006), 201.

European colonial justification of seeing native lands “as unused, underused or empty.”<sup>44</sup> In *Beowulf*, the “God-chosen” humans and the *othered* monsters are at odds with each other as they occupy the same spaces. Their proximity to each other leads to violence and death on both sides. The *Beowulf*-poet implies that God favors the Danes and Geats. While they sing praises in their halls to the *ælmihtiga eorðan worhte*, the Almighty [who] created the earth (l. 92b), God condemns the monstrous figures. Grendel is one *wonsæli wer*, unblessed man (l. 104a), who has *godes yrre bæc*, borne God’s anger (l. 711b), and now must *wræclastas træd*, traverse the exile’s path (l. 1352b), over large expanses of land.

Fabienne Michelet calls particular attention to the scene of praise within Heorot, when the *scop* sings of God’s creation of men and the earth (ll. 90-99), for its significance in the establishment of a royal residence, a dwelling.<sup>45</sup> With the construction of Heorot, *Sele hlifade*, *heah ond horngeap*, a hall that towered high and horn-gabled (ll. 81b-2), and is visible from afar, the Danes have claimed their stretch of land. Michelet adds,

To occupy, to delimit, to defend: this is precisely what is at stake in *Beowulf*, where communities first have to exist in space. . . . [T]o secure a territory and to prosper is a recurrent concern of the *Beowulf* poet, thus testifying to the importance of spatial control and of land possession. To occupy a tract of ground literally means to exist as a group. The first task of a good leader is to protect the

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<sup>44</sup> Val Plumwood, in “Decolonizing Relationships with Nature,” *Decolonizing Nature: Strategies for Conservation in a Post-Colonial Era*, ed. William Adam and Martin Mulligan (London: Earthscan, 2003), 53.

<sup>45</sup> Fabienne L. Michelet, *Creation, Migration, and Conquest: Imaginary Geography and Sense of Space in Old English Literature* (Oxford University Press: London, 2006), vii.

homeland, and epic poetry preserves the memory of its original conquest from monsters or hostile neighbors.<sup>46</sup>

The Danes have *occupied* their territory, but it is far from *secure*. The threat they face is that of the monsters that patrol the surrounding area. The view Michelet is proposing for the Anglo-Saxons is anthropocentric: they claim lands (away from others), take possession of these locations and mark them off as belonging to their newly established community. Afterwards they must defend against any attempts at recuperating the lands. The relationship between the Danes and their surroundings becomes what ecocritic Val Plumwood calls hyper-separation, where the dominant culture defines itself in opposition to and away from the *other*.<sup>47</sup> Once a community has appropriated new lands, nature, often hyper-separated from society, can easily become the *outside* and be perceived by that same society as a static background. As Plumwood explains, “‘backgrounding’ is perhaps the most hazardous and distorting effect of ‘othering’ from a human prudential point of view. When the Other’s agency is treated as background or denied, we give the Other less credit than is due to them . . . and we pay attention only when something goes wrong.”<sup>48</sup> For example, the Danes knew of Grendel and Grendel’s mother living near the moors (l. 1345-57), but seem to have assumed that the distance between the monsters and the community would remain intact. The Danes awaken to the presence of the monsters precisely when something goes wrong—when Grendel attempts to reclaim the place occupied by the new hall by reterritorializing Heorot as a monstrous space.

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<sup>46</sup> Michelet, *Creation, Migration, and Conquest*, 74-5.

<sup>47</sup> Val Plumwood, “Decolonizing Relationships with Nature,” ed. William Adams and Martin Mulligan, *Decolonizing Nature: Strategies for Conservation in a Post-Colonial Era* (Earthscan: London, 2003), 52. Plumwood’s definition of hyper-separation is reminiscent of the role Cohen’s monsters play as mirrored images to society’s values.

<sup>48</sup> Plumwood, “Decolonizing Relationships with Nature,” 54.

The *Beowulf*-poet warns about remaining complacent to the dangers outside in nature: do not underestimate the power of the monstrous, for monsters can react against humans at any moment. He advocates for a colonization of the environment beyond the walls of the community but clearly stipulates that such a task must go to the *right* individual, more specifically, in this instance, to someone who is *more* than human. Referring to Beowulf, the poet tells us that,

se wæs moncynnes      mægenes strengest  
on þæm dæge      þysses lifes. (ll. 196-7)

he was of mankind of the mightiest strength  
in those days of this life.

Grendel's reterritorialization of Heorot lasts twelve years (l. 147), during which time none of the local Danes is able to defeat him.<sup>49</sup> Overcoming Grendel requires a special *superhuman*, and Beowulf fulfills the requirement.

### ***III. Established Boundaries: Monstrous Dwellings and their Keepers***

#### **The Moors and the Mere**

Old English poets tend to focus literary attention on larger vistas rather than the minutia in nature. As Margaret Goldsmith puts it, "the English poet sweeps his gaze across the whole earth and the firmament."<sup>50</sup> The *Beowulf*-poet belongs to this tradition, depicting, for example, the moors as a whole rather than zooming in on a bird or some heather that may grow in the area.

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<sup>49</sup> The poet never specifies if Grendel had once lived on the land now occupied by Heorot, but one can assume that before the Danish community appeared the area had been under the Grendel-kin's control as likely hunting grounds.

<sup>50</sup> Goldsmith compares the Old English poetic tradition of broad views of nature to that of the Irish poets' tendency to zoom in on the small details of nature, particularly in creation songs. See *The Mode and Meaning of Beowulf* (London: Athlone, 1970), 44.

The poet does, however, address one particular detail about the places he writes about—he tells us who possesses the land. In the text, if land is outside the borders of the community, it has not been claimed by humans, so the Danes and the Geats see it as a threatening space occupied by the unknown *other*. The first monstrous dwellings that the *Beowulf*-poet takes the audience into are the *mistige moras*, misty moors (l. 162), when introducing us to Grendel. It is here where,

ac se æglæca ehtende wæs,  
 deorc deapscua, duguþe ond geogoþe,  
 seomade ond syrede, sinnihte heold  
 mistige moras. (ll. 159-62a)

but the wretch was persecuting,  
 the dark shadow of death, veteran warriors and young warriors,  
 he lay in wait and ambushed, in endless night he held  
 the misty moors.

Significantly, the *Beowulf*-poet tells us that the *æglæca heold* the misty moors.<sup>51</sup> The term *healdan* has kept its definition into modern times, and can mean “to hold,” “to possess,” “to occupy,” and “to inhabit.”<sup>52</sup> Similarly, *heald* refers to “keeping, custody, guard, protection,” directing associations toward ideas of guardianship over the land by the monstrous figures.

When Hrothgar later tells Beowulf of Grendel’s history, Hrothgar provides more details regarding the presence of the monsters in the moors. He says to Beowulf:

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<sup>51</sup> Although the term *æglæca* is defined by the Bosworth-Toller as “miserable being, wretch, monster; miser, perditus, monstrum,” it is a term with a problematic history. See my discussion on pp. 54-5 for an in-depth analysis.

<sup>52</sup> CASD, s.v. *healdan* (v.) def. 2a.

þæt hie gesawon      swylce twegen  
 micle mearcstapan      moras healdan,  
 ellorgæstas. (ll. 1347-9a)

that they saw two such  
 massive boundary-walkers holding the moors,  
 alien spirits.

In this first section of Hrothgar’s description, he reiterates the point that Grendel and Grendel’s mother hold the moors (l. 1348), but here he refers to them as *mearcstapan*.<sup>53</sup> *Mearc* would refer to a “march” as a boundary or a borderland, while *stæppan* is “to step, go, proceed.”<sup>54</sup> As such, these creatures are *boundary walkers*, and the moors the monstrous lands that function as a boundary; the Grendel-kin become a “monstrous border patrol,” like the demonized creatures Cohen discusses as enforcing the divide between any society and the unregulated space that surrounds it. As Cohen posits, patrolling monsters maintain the status quo of the divide, a separation in the shared dynamic. In addition, I argue that this division between the monsters and society is temporary and at times fragile, permeable: the monsters can be challenged and the land they occupy taken away once the monsters face a rival that is equal to their level of strength. The poet also labels the monsters as alien spirits, *ellorgæstas*.<sup>55</sup> *Ellor* refers to “elsewhere,” while *gast* can be a “spirit, ghost.”<sup>56</sup> Taking *ellorgæst* as “alien spirit” points toward the idea of foreignness and disconnection from the community. But *ellorgæst* can also mean “elsewhere spirit,” focusing our attention on displacement as well. The Anglo-Saxon terms direct us to see

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<sup>53</sup> Grendel is said to hold the moors in lines 104, 162.

<sup>54</sup> Bosworth-Toller, s.v. *mearc* (n.) def. 1b; s.v. *stæppan* (v.) def. 1b.

<sup>55</sup> CASD, s.v. *ellorgæst* (n.) def. 1.

<sup>56</sup> Bosworth-Toller, s.v. *ellor* (n.) def. 1a; s.v. *gast* (n.) def. 1b.

that the monsters are in possession of certain territories, and that society thinks of these monsters as existing elsewhere, away from the community. If the monsters exist “elsewhere” but are in possession of nearby lands, then humans will be more apt to attempt removal of the monsters to take over the area or for the monsters to attack the human community. However, both monsters and their dwellings are highly threatening, and not any ordinary human can vanquish or conquer them.

In order to claim the land away from the monsters, the heroic figure will have to first locate the hidden monstrous dwelling after partaking in a perilous journey. When Hrothgar describes such a location to Beowulf, what is most striking (and will be the hero’s first obstacle) is the seeming inaccessibility of the place, both due to living (wolves, monsters) and non-living (slopes, torrents, crags, etc.) deterrents:

Hie dygel lond

warigeað, wulfhleoþu,      windige næssas,  
 frecne fengelad,      ðær fyrgenstream  
 under næssa genipu      niþer gewiteð,  
 flod under foldan. (ll. 1357b-61a)

That secret land

they guard, wolf-inhabited slopes, windy headlands,  
 perilous fenpaths, where the mountain stream  
 under the misty headlands downward go,  
 the flood under the earth.

The *lond* here is described as *dygel*. Because *diegol* means “secret, hidden, obscure, unknown, deep,” attention shifts to the land’s inaccessibility to outsiders.<sup>57</sup> The term *warian* can mean to “guard, protect, defend: warn,” and to “hold, possess, attend.”<sup>58</sup> Thus, Grendel and Grendel’s mother are the “protectors” or “defenders” of the land, in the sense that they have helped preserve the hidden quality of this region simply by their off-putting presence, keeping the humans away beyond the unappealing characteristics exhibited by the area—high wolf population, high winds, and torrential waters.

One possible explanation for the Danes’ exploratory reluctance in the *dygel lond* is precisely that locals are aware of the presence of the monsters in that region and, thus, avoid it. What is significant about these monsters is that they are directly linked to sin, in the Christian sense; this, I argue, adds to the poet’s justification to colonize nature and “cleanse” the region of monsters. Even though Beowulf has recently defeated Grendel and is familiar with the threat posed by the monsters, Hrothgar speaks to Beowulf of the dangers the Danes face beyond the borders of the village, and emphasizes two central threats: first the monsters and then the landscape. Hrothgar tells Beowulf,

Ic þæt londbuend,      leode mine,  
 selerædende,      secgan hyrde  
 þæt hie gesawon      swylce twegen  
 micle mearcstapan      moras healdan,  
 ellorgæstas.      ðæra oðer wæs,  
 þæs þe hie gewislicost      gewitan meahton,  
 idese onlicnæs;      oðer earmscepæn

<sup>57</sup> CASD, s.v. *diegol* (adj.) def. 1.

<sup>58</sup> CASD, s.v. *warian* (v.) def. 1b, and 1c, respectively.

on weres wæstmum      wræclastas træd,  
 næfne he wæs mara      þonne ænig man oðer;  
 þone on geardagum      Grendel nemdon  
 foldbuende. (ll. 1345-55a)

I [from] dwellers in the land, people of mine,  
 hall-counselors, have heard tell,  
 that they saw, two such  
 massive boundary-walkers holding the moors,  
 alien spirits. One of them was,  
 as they most certainly might be able to discover,  
 in the likeness of a woman; the other, misshapen,  
 in the form of a man, walked the exile's path,  
 except he was larger than any other man;  
 in former times named 'Grendel'  
 by the dwellers in the land.

Because the first characteristic Hrothgar touches on regarding the monsters is their human-like shape, the text points to what is both most distinctive about them and most disturbing. They are *human*-like. There is a degree of familiarity in their shapes, but this same familiarity highlights the differences in the creatures' bodies. Grendel has the form of a man but is described as *earmsceapen*, which can mean "miserable, wretched."<sup>59</sup> However, the adjectival form *earm* specifically means "poor, wretched, pitiful, destitute, miserable."<sup>60</sup> When paired with *sceapen*,

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<sup>59</sup> Bosworth-Toller (adj.) def. 1.

<sup>60</sup> CASD, s.v. *earm* (adj.) def. II

shaped, it would more accurately refer to the shape of wretchedness. Physical deformity was a key factor in determining the well being of a human or other creature. As Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe has explained, in Anglo-Saxon England, the body became a legible sign for guilt, which resulted from sin.<sup>61</sup> Roy Liuzza's translation of the term as "misshapen" is precise in capturing the essence of Grendel from the perspective of the Danes, who, like others of the Middle Ages, saw a direct connection between deformity and sin.<sup>62</sup> Even before knowledge of Grendel's viciousness, his deformity and embodiment of sin is reason enough to avoid him and the regions he occupies—that is, until the arrival of a beastly man whose strength is comparable to the monsters. Beowulf assists the Danes with clearing the regions of its monsters, thus allowing humans to colonize nature, while also "cleansing" the region of sin.

The sin associated with the Grendel-kin stems from belonging to *Caines cynne*, Cain's kin (l. 107a), and inheriting the stigma of the transgressions committed by their common human ancestor. David Williams considers Cain's story of expulsion from Eden and later sexual union with beasts crucial in the "Western tradition of monstrosity" because it "identifies the moment and the act by which monsters come into physical being in the world, making possible the historical explanation of monsters required by the Judeo-Christian worldview."<sup>63</sup> As Williams expounds, the Bible provided an explanation for the origin of monsters, and in so doing guaranteed their separation from society due to the stain of sin. Grendel's origin as a descendant of Cain also helps explain his human-like appearance, which then becomes a constant reminder

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<sup>61</sup> Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe, "Body and Law in Late Anglo-Saxon England," in *Anglo-Saxon England* 27 (1998): 209-32.

<sup>62</sup> Seamus Heaney, in his *Beowulf*, (New York/London: Norton, 2000), translates *earmsceapen* as "warped."

<sup>63</sup> David Williams, *Deformed Discourse: The Function of the Monster in Mediaeval Thought and Literature* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996), 116-7.

to the Danes of Cain's fall from God's grace and the dangers of disobedience. Since obedience was central in the relationship between a lord and his thanes, particularly the control a king exercised over his men, the ills of disobedience are an important lesson for the poet to emphasize to the audience. If the humanoid appearance of the Grendel-kin brings sin to mind for the Danes, it also exacerbates the threat level from the monsters: for one, if the monsters *look* like a human they may also *think* like a human, and a cunning monster is much more dangerous because his intelligence is closer to that of humans and will thus be a more formidable foe; in addition, there is the possibility of transformation, where the creature was previously a human but was transformed into a monster, and can similarly transform other humans, as is the case with the *draugar*.

Although in describing Grendel's physical appearance the *Beowulf*-poet is famously minimalist, he does provide enough detail for scholars to draw a direct connection between Grendel and the *draugar*.<sup>64</sup> A well-established folkloric figure, the *draugr* was a type of Norse undead prone to terrorizing the living during the night by walking about the region, while zealously protecting its possessions.<sup>65</sup> The *draugar* commonly inhabited burial mounds (usually their own barrow) or places where they had buried valuable treasure while they were still living

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<sup>64</sup> This idea is discussed by Lapidge, in "Beowulf and the Psychology of Terror," 374-79, as well as N.K. Chadwick, "The Monsters and Beowulf," *The Anglo-Saxons: Studies in Some Aspects of their History and Culture Presented to Bruce Dickins* (London: Bowes & Bowes, 1959), 171-203; Katherine Hume, "From Saga to Romance: The Use of Monsters in Old Norse Literature," *Studies in Philology* 77 (1980): 1-25; and John D. Niles, *Beowulf: The Poem and its Tradition*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 10.

<sup>65</sup> The singular form of the term is *draugr*, while the plural is *draugar*.

men, but always outside of the community's borders and away from living humans.<sup>66</sup> The distance from society (both in physical space and social values) is key to the relationship a *draugr* has with his former society. As Katherine Hume explains,

[*Draugar*] embody the nightmarish, shadow side of society, the ruthless elements that are normally repressed. [They are] bloodthirsty, and totally self-centered. They resemble heroes in their strength and can be distinguished mainly by the lack of that socialization which prevents heroes from abusing those weaker than themselves. . . . The portrayal of *draugar* reflects the society's subliminal awareness of its own weaknesses: desire for gold and love of special objects, bloodthirstiness, selfishness, and belief in physical strength as a trait valued for itself rather than for what it can do for society.<sup>67</sup>

Hume's discussion of the *draugar*'s tendency to reflect social weaknesses accentuates monsters' mirroring function. If, as Cohen argues, monsters are society's mirror by reflecting a very particular image, then it follows that the *draugar* are a mirror for Anglo-Saxon society's darker side. They embody what society eschews and are seen as reprehensible by a community that will attempt to keep the *draugar* at a distance. In portraying Grendel as similar to the *draugar*, the

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<sup>66</sup> Grendel exhibits remarkable similarities in behavior, physical traits, and/or in following the story line with well-known *draugar*: Glámr from *Grettis Saga*, Agnarr from *Hálfðanar Saga Eysteinsonar*, and Thráinn the Berserker from *Hrómundar Saga Greipssonar*. For a detailed discussion of each of the tales listed above, see N.K. Chadwick, "Norse Ghosts: A Study in the Draugr and the Haugbúi," *Folklore* 57.2 (1946): 50-65. Folkloric origins can also be found for Beowulf, who has often been associated with the "bear's son," as Christopher R. Fee and David A. Leeming discuss, in *Gods, Heroes, and Kings* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 106-7. In stories of the "bear's son," a super-human warrior, the offspring of a human woman and a great bear, spends the night with a group of companions in a new location; they are attacked at night by an invading monster who kills one of the companions, and the warrior pursues the creature to its underwater lair, where the hero is victorious. It is interesting to note that in this case, the warrior has a human-shape and is considered to *be* human even though he has a beast for a father—unlike the classification for Grendel as monstrous.

<sup>67</sup> Hume, "Monsters in Old Norse Literature," 13.

poet is drawing from a pool of cultural reference, further exacerbating the negativity of the monster's presence and the tainted environment the creature inhabits—an environment that should be cleansed by removing the monstrous menace.

The second central threat that Hrothgar explains to Beowulf pertains to the location of the monstrous places and their proximity to the Danish community; in particular, it is the mere that he depicts in detail as a looming danger, due to the vicinity of the monstrous dwelling. He says,

Nis þæt feor heonon  
 milgearnearces      þæt se mere standeð;  
 ofer þæm hongiað      hrinde bearwas,  
 wudu wyrtum fæst      wæter oferhelmað.  
 þær mæg nihta gehwæm      niðwundor seon,  
 fyr on flode.      No þæs frod leofað  
 gumena bearna,      þæt þone grund wite;  
 ðeah þe hæðstapa      hundum geswenced,  
 heorot hornum trum,      holtwudu sece,  
 feorran geflymed,      ær he feorh seleð,  
 aldor on ofre,      ær he in wille  
 hafelan hydan.      Nis þæt heoru stow! (ll. 1361b-72)

It is not far from here  
 measured in miles, that the mere stands;  
 over it hang groves covered in frost,  
 wood held fast by its roots overshadows the water.  
 There one might each night see a fearful wonder,

fire on the water. Not even the wise of them lives  
of the children of men that knows the bottom.  
Though the heath-stalker harassed by hounds,  
the stag with strong horns seeks the forest,  
from afar put to flight, rather will give up his life,  
his life on the bank, than he will [jump] in  
to hide his head. This is not a pleasant place!

The threat from the mere begins with its proximity: *Nis þæt feor heonan / milgemeances þæt se mere standeð*, "It is not far from here, measured in miles, that the mere stands." Although he mentions the darkness of the area, and even touches on the shape of the trees, for Hrothgar the principal threat is the *fyr on flode*, the fire on the water. It is a *niðwundor*, a fearful wonder. Whether Hrothgar has ever ventured into this area is unclear, although his detailed description suggests first-hand knowledge. Now, in his old age, he describes this dangerous land from a safe distance. The story of a stag, willing to die in the hunt rather than jump in the water, is in fact the perfect anecdotal ending to emphasize his point while drawing a significant analogy with the Danes: The Anglo-Saxon term for stag is *heorot*; thus, Hrothgar's choice of animal evokes his mead hall, Heorot. Just like the stag would rather face its known foes (the hounds) than plunge into unknown waters, the king and his thanes await the attacks from Grendel in their familiar hall, rather than taking the fight into the unfamiliar mere. But no place seems truly safe, as Hrothgar's description of the Grendel-kin's mere continues:

þonon yðgeblond      up astigeð  
won to wolcnum,      þonne wind styreþ,

lað gewidru,      oðþæt lyft drysmaþ,  
 roderas reotað. (ll. 1373-76a).

From there surging waves rise up,  
 dark to the clouds, when the wind stirs up  
 the grievous storms, until the air becomes gloomy,  
 the skies weep.

Hrothgar presents a terrifying image: tempestuous dark waters rise from the mere and are caught up by the wind, which takes the water up into a storm that subsequently descends elsewhere. His words imply the threat that can stretch forth from the mere, with imagery that for modern readers may conjure up associations with acid rain. In this case, distance is not an issue, for the grievous storms, *lað gewidru*, can reach anywhere—and such is the idea he presents to Beowulf. If the monsters function as boundary markers limiting the places humans may enter, then this instance shows that the threat of the monsters' presence can reach out beyond the boundaries, and into the realm of the human. With permeable boundaries, the gravity of the threat intensifies.

When Beowulf and his retinue travel to the mere in search of Grendel's mother, the *Beowulf*-poet further emphasizes the boundary divide between the human and the monstrous by focusing his attention on the region. A *mere* is “a sheet of standing water; a lake; a pond, a pool,” during the Anglo-Saxon period.<sup>68</sup> It is likely that Grendel's mere is a lake of standing water, particularly because Hrothgar says that *se mere standeð*, the mere stands (l. 1362b), implying still waters. This particular mere is inhabited by a plethora of monsters, beyond the Grendel-kin, both familiar and exotic to the war party, which adds to the physical threat of the boundary. Serpents, sea-dragons, and other sea-monsters occupy the mere and the surrounding area:

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<sup>68</sup> OED, s.v. *mere* (n.1) def. 2.

Gesawon ða æfter wætere      wyrmcynnes fela,  
 sellice sædracan,      sund cunnian,  
 swylce on næshleoðum      nicras licgean,  
 ða on undernmæl      oft bewitigað  
 sorhfulne sið      on segrade,  
 wyrmas ond wildeor;      hie on weg hruron,  
 bitere ond gebolgne,      bearhtm ongeaton,  
 guðhorn galan.      Sumne Geata leod  
 of flanbogan      feores getwæfde,  
 yðgewinnes,      þæt him on aldre stod  
 herestræl hearda;      he on holme wæs  
 sundes þe sænra,      ðe hyne swylt fornam.  
 Hræþe wearð on yðum      mid eoferspreotum  
 heorohocyhtum      hearde genearwod,  
 niða genæged,      ond on næs togen,  
 wundorlic wægboras;      weras sceawedon  
 gryreligne gist. (ll. 1425-41a)

They saw then within the water many of the race of serpents,  
 strange sea-dragons exploring the water,  
 also on the slopes of headlands lay water-monsters  
 that in the morning-time often undertake  
 a journey bringing sorrow on the sail-road,  
 dragons and wild beasts. They rushed away

bitter and enraged; they heard the sound,  
 the war-horn resounding. One Geatish man  
 with an arrow and bow, severed it from life  
 battling against the waves, that in its vital organs stood  
 the hard war-arrow; it on the sea was  
 swimming slower, as death carried it away.  
 Quickly it was on the waves, against boar-spears  
 savagely barbed, severely pressed,  
 fiercely attacked and on to the headland dragged,  
 the wondrous creature of the waves; the men examined  
 this terrible guest.

There is a degree of isolation and strangeness associated with the area itself, but the men respond differently to the various kinds of creatures present based on their own previous familiarity with some creatures. The *nicras*, sea monsters (l. 1427b), appear to be more familiar to both the Danes and the Geats since the *Beowulf*-poet describes the creatures as being those *ða on undernmæl oft bewitigað / sorhfulne sið on segrade*, that in the morning-time often undertake a journey bringing sorrow on the sail-road (ll. 1428-9). What is important in this line is the use of the frequency adverb *oft*; the presence of this word highlights that these *nicras* are familiar creatures to sea travelers. However, the *sædracas*, sea-dragons, seem to be a novelty and are described as *sellice* (l. 1426a), defined as strange or wondrous, indicating that the men may not commonly encounter these particular monsters.<sup>69</sup> After a Geatish bowman shoots one of the creatures before it submerges under water, the men finish it off with spears as they drag it out. The poet explains

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<sup>69</sup> CASD, s.v. *seldlic* (adj.) def. 1a, “rare, strange, wondrous.”

that *weras sceawedon /gryrelicne gist*, the men examined this terrible guest (ll. 1440b-41a). While *sceawian* means “to look, gaze, see,” it is also defined as “inspect, examine, scrutinize,” making plausible the men’s unfamiliarity with their kill—a creature that is also described as a *wundorlic wægborā*, wondrous creature of the waves (l. 1440a).<sup>70</sup> Through their inspection, the men are removing the element of the unknown. The behavior of the men, specially the *local* Danes, and the poet’s choice of adjectives can indicate that the men seldom venture this far into the region near the mere. For the Geats, the strangeness of the encounter might be explained because they are from a foreign land. But even in their homeland there are monstrously marginalized places.

### The Barrows

In the final third of the poem, readers have an opportunity to explore the representation of the *ælwihtra eard* from a different point of conceptualization; in Geatland these spaces are occupied by the monstrous, the marginalized humans, and finally the dead. The final barrow scene, relating to “Beowulf’s Barrow,” in particular shows the effects of deterritorialization on the land. The *Beowulf*-poet introduces us to the barrow as a place for the hoarding of treasure, a place for the burial of the dead, and, significantly, as a contested marginalized space that best exemplifies the on-going conflict between the human and the non-human. Barrows, or burial mounds, are traditionally graves covered by a mound of earth and/or stones, whose size varies depending on whom is being interred. Prevalent in many parts of the world, barrows were

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<sup>70</sup> Bosworth-Toller, s.v. *sceawian* (v.) def. 1a, “to look, observe, behold, see,” CASD, s.v. *sceawian* (v.) def. 2a, “inspect, examine, scrutinize”; Bosworth-Toller, s.v. *wundorlic* (adj.) def. 1, “wonderful, exciting admiration or surprise,” CASD, s.v. *wundorlic* (adj.) def. 1a “wonderful, remarkable, strange”; CASD, s.v. *wægborā* (n). “child of the waves.”

particularly popular during the sixth and seventh centuries in Anglo-Saxon England.<sup>71</sup> Their primary role was for the interment of the dead, but they also became repositories of treasure (as valuable items were buried with some of the deceased), and a way of permanently marking the land.<sup>72</sup> Barrows became marginalized spaces because of their “occupants.” The attitude of Anglo-Saxon society toward barrows was that of “superstitious wariness,” since barrows were associated with supernatural hauntings for the Anglo-Saxons.<sup>73</sup> Such superstitious wariness could have led to the initial link between barrows and boundary markers since the Anglo-Saxons placed barrows at the edge of the community or at the edge of a property line; barrow boundaries functioned as a warning sign to people: beyond those limits, the likely presence of monsters, whether *draugar* or ghosts, increases.<sup>74</sup>

In *Beowulf* the barrows are especially difficult to access. The first barrow (the dragon’s barrow) is described as a high *stanbeorh steapne*, stone-barrow (2213a). The poet provides a more detailed description of the barrow’s location when speaking of its pre-dragon days, when a man, the “last survivor,” discovered it and deposited the treasure within:

Beorh eallgearo

wunode on wonge      wæteryðum neah,

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<sup>71</sup> Stephen Pollington, *Anglo-Saxon Burial Mounds: Princely Burials in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (Swaffham, Norfolk: Anglo-Saxon Books, 2008), 2.

<sup>72</sup> Pollington, *Anglo-Saxon Burial Mounds*, 35. For an extensive discussion on the practice of burying treasure in barrows, see Martin Carver, *Sutton Hoo: Burial Ground of Kings?* (London: British Museum Press, 1998).

<sup>73</sup> Sarah Semple, “A Fear of the Past: The Place of the Prehistoric Burial Mound in the Ideology of Middle and Later Anglo-Saxon England,” *World Archeology* 30.1 (1998): 123. The association of barrows and ghosts is something that has continued into contemporary times, as Martin Carver explains in *Sutton Hoo: Burial Ground of Kings?* Edith Pretty, who prompted the initial excavation of Sutton Hoo, did so at the insistence of friends and family who spoke of “shadowy figures around the mounds after dusk, and a vision of a man on a white horse” (4).

<sup>74</sup> For more on a historical discussion of Anglo-Saxon burials as boundaries see Della Hooke, *The Landscape of Anglo-Saxon England* (London: Leicester University Press, 1998), 62-83.

niwe be næsse,      nearocraeftum fæst. (ll. 2241b-43)

A fully-prepared barrow  
stood on open ground near the sea waves,  
newly made on the headland, made secure by difficult-skill.

The term *eallgears* is composed of two separate words: *eall*, which means “fully, wholly, entirely,” and *gears*, which refers to “prepared, ready, equipped, finished.”<sup>75</sup> The *beorh*, or barrow, can also be described as being “fully finished,” a completed structure lacking only an interred body or a hoard.<sup>76</sup> This fully finished barrow, which stood in a place near the sea, on a *næss*, cliff, is a place set apart from and hindering (most) human intrusion because of its *nearocraeft*, difficult access—a term that refers to the *cræft*, skill, in making something “constricted” or “limited” and causing “difficulty” or “hardship.”<sup>77</sup> However, it is not only inaccessibility but also distance from a community that makes the barrow a marginalized location.

The remoteness of this barrow aids in its detachment from society, where it is *eldum uncuð*, unknown to men (l. 2214a), in a similar manner as the Grendel-kin mere is set apart; however, the entrance is not hidden from *all* men: just like a monster, who lives outside the bounds of society, finds access so too does the “last survivor” and, later, the thief. The barrow becomes a permeable place for the marginalized, where outcasts can gain access to a non-hostile

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<sup>75</sup> CASD, s.v. *eall* (adv.) def. 2, and *gears* def. 1, respectively.

<sup>76</sup> The *Beowulf*-poet does not directly explain why the barrow is finished but unused, seemingly abandoned, but it is possible it once belonged to the people who were kin to the “last survivor.”

<sup>77</sup> The only recorded usage of *nearocraeft* in the body of extant Anglo-Saxon works appears in *Beowulf*. CASD, s.vv. *nearo* (adj). def. 2, “narrow, constricted, limited, petty [...] causing or accompanied by difficulty, hardship, oppressive.”

place.<sup>78</sup> The “last survivor” is by definition an outcast: the whole of his community was killed in war, and now he is an outcast from other societies as well who would be reticent to accept a stranger into their fold.<sup>79</sup> For Anglo-Saxon culture, as can be seen in poems like “The Wanderer” and “The Wife’s Lament,” community was everything and a fate worse than death awaited those who endured “the ultimate in hardships: destitution, and enforced separation from one’s kindred or clan.”<sup>80</sup> In losing a kin group, a person also lost part of him/her self, since an individual’s social identity was strongly tied to the sense of belonging to the kin, as a person’s role in the community and relationship with others shaped self-conception.<sup>81</sup> A kin group helped shape personal/social identity and also took responsibility for a person’s actions: “This obligation for the personal marks an intersection of the community’s role in the individual’s social identity and its role in the shaping of her or his self identity; at the same time as the community’s responsibility functions to provide the individual with a social place, it also says that one’s own actions ... are ultimately in the domain of responsibility of others.”<sup>82</sup> An individual who has no kin group, regardless of the reason, has no one to take responsibility for his or her actions.

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<sup>78</sup> Semple, in “A Fear of the Past,” discusses the Oxfordshire eyre roll record from 1261, in which the discovery of “outcasts” hiding in barrows was a common occurrence (114).

<sup>79</sup> The death of the community’s members appears in lines 2236-41, and again in lines 2249-67.

<sup>80</sup> Leonard H. Frey, “Exile and Elegy in Anglo-Saxon Christian Epic Poetry,” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 62.2 (1963): 294.

<sup>81</sup> Pauline E. Head, *Representation and Design: Tracing a Hermeneutics of Old English Poetry* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1997), 35. For more on the importance of community in Anglo-Saxon society, see Anne L. Klinck, *The Old English Elegies: A Critical Edition and Genre Study* (Montreal/Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1992), 223-51; for a thorough study on exile and kinship, see Stanley B. Greenfield, “The Formulaic Expression of the Theme of ‘Exile’ in Anglo-Saxon Poetry,” *Essential Articles for the Study of Old English Poetry*, ed. Jess B. Bessinger and Stanley J. Kahrl (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1968), 352-62.

<sup>82</sup> Head, *Representation and Design*, 35.

Thieves are another type of outcast that can inspire fear in people because they pose a threat to the livelihood of the community members. Anglo-Saxons viewed thievery as a serious crime—in fact, even more so than homicide. T.B. Lambert explains that,

[i]t is a startling but infrequently remarked upon fact that for five centuries English law, which prescribed the sternest penalties for theft, contained only a relatively minor royal fine for homicide. Whereas the first clear statement that the penalty applied to thieves is found in the late seventh-century West Saxon laws of Ine, we have no equivalent statement with respect to homicide before ... the late 1180s.<sup>83</sup>

The protection of personal property was key for the proper functioning of a community, leading to people's distrust of others. In the laws of King Wihtred of Kent, ca. 695, it is clearly stated that “[i]f a man from afar, or a stranger, quits the road, and neither shouts, nor blows a horn, he shall be assumed to be a thief, [and as such] may be either slain or put to ransom.”<sup>84</sup> Even the suspicion of thievery was punishable by death. As the *Beowulf*-poet indicates through his word choice, the thief warrants more than just suspicion being a *secg synbysig* (l. 2226a)—a guilty man or a man “busy with sin.”

The “last survivor,” the dragon, and the thief are all marginalized because they are separated from human communities, but they are also the ones who can locate the hidden barrow. Marginalization could be determined through guilt, either real or apparent, but also by not belonging, whether by being a stranger or by being different. The marginalized barrow, due to its distance from a community and inaccessibility for the average person, is intricately

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<sup>83</sup> T.B. Lambert, “Theft, Homicide, and Crime in Late Anglo-Saxon Law,” *Past and Present* 214.1 (2012): 3.

<sup>84</sup> Wilfrid Bonser, “Anglo-Saxon Laws and Charms Relating to Theft,” *Folklore*, 57.1 (1946): 7.

associated with marginalized figures who, precisely because they are *othered* and not part of a community, must search out and find a marginalized space they can occupy away from society. Even Beowulf, a heroic warrior and beloved king, occupies a marginalized space when he is interred in a barrow after his death. However, in his case marginalization appears to be a choice on his part, rather than the community's. With his dying words, Beowulf instructs Wiglaf regarding the burial, saying:

Hatað heaðomære      hlæw gewyrcean  
 beorhtne æfter bæle      æt brimes nosan;  
 se scel to gemyndum      minum leodum  
 heah hlifian      on Hronesnæsse,  
 þæt hit sæliðend      syððan hatan  
 Biowulfes biorh,      ða ðe brentingas  
 ofer floda genipu      feorran drifað. (ll. 2802-08).

Order men famed in battle to build a burial mound  
 bright after the funeral pyre, at the sea's promontory,  
 it shall [be] a memorial to my people,  
 and tower high on Whale's Headland,  
 so that it seafarers then may call it  
 'Beowulf's Barrow,' when their ships  
 over the seas' mists from a far sail.

The location Beowulf requests is reminiscent of the dragon's barrow location *wæteryðum neah, / niwe be næsse*, near the sea waves, newly made on the headland (ll. 2242b-2243a), also at a distance from society, with the principal difference being that Beowulf's barrow will not be

hidden but very visible from afar as it is *heah ond brad*, high and broad (l. 3157). The Geats build a barrow for Beowulf near the edge of a cliff so that the barrow can be seen from the sea, visible to any approaching vessels (and possible invaders), marking this particular spot and this stretch of land as belonging to Beowulf.

By marking this land as a burial ground, associations with the dead set in keeping humans away while ensuring Beowulf maintains sole possession of the land even after his death. People subsequently shun the barrow, even abandoning the magnificent treasure:

forleton eorla gestreon      eorðan healdan,  
 gold on greote,      þær hit nu gen lifað  
 eldum swa unnyt      swa hit æror wæs. (ll. 3166-8)

the wealth of earls they left, the earth holds,  
 gold in the ground, where it still exists,  
 as useless to men as it was before.

The treasure had been useless to humans when the dragon possessed it, and it is useless once again. No one approaches the barrow to reclaim the treasure, for it remains haunted by monstrous associations from the days of the dragon's occupation:

þonne wæs þæt yrfe,      eacencræftig,  
 iumonna gold      galdre bewunden,  
 þæt ðam hringsele      hrinan ne moste  
 gumena ænig, (ll. 3051-54a).

Then was that heritage exceedingly strong,  
 the gold of ancient men was encircled in a spell

that the ring-hall could not be reached  
[by] any man.

The poet refers to the barrow as a *hringsele*, a ring-hall, quite possibly with a touch of irony contrasting the living and the dead through place: a ring-hall would typically be a bright lively space, filled with people, food, drink, and treasure; a barrow would be dark and quiet, with a single dead body (or the ashes of the dead), and treasure.<sup>85</sup> In his discussion on pagan beliefs represented in *Beowulf*, G.V. Smithers proposes that the treasure interred with Beowulf acquires “supernatural associations of a potentially baleful kind” because it is meant for the dead and not the living as a reward for the actions of the dead during their lives—a point further contrasted by the poet with the reference to the *hringsele*.<sup>86</sup> Building on the pagan associations of barrows with ghostly apparitions, it is likely that the Church enforced the concept of the barrow as a fearful place in order to distance people from pagan burial locations, furthering the representation of barrows as marginalized places.<sup>87</sup> The *Beowulf*-poet participates in this tradition by creating a powerful final image of demarcation between lands, and possibly between pagan and Christian practices.

In Geatland, Beowulf defeats the dragon and rids the land of a monster while claiming the land for his people. But human colonization of this region is very short lived because through his interment in “Beowulf’s Barrow,” possession of the land reverts to the *othered*—in this case, the dead. In life, and even in death, Beowulf is the only man who is capable of taking full

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<sup>85</sup> The word *hringsele* appears three times in *Beowulf*: In the first instance, Beowulf uses the term for Heorot while he describes the celebrations upon his arrival, as he narrates his adventures to Hygelac (l. 2011); the two subsequent uses of the word are in reference to the barrow (l. 2840 and 3053).

<sup>86</sup> G.V. Smithers, *The Making of Beowulf* (Durham: University of Durham Press, 1961), 19.

<sup>87</sup> Semple, “A Fear of the Past,” 118.

possession of the land; his ability to do so stems from the unique qualities that make him a beastly man—a hybrid.

#### ***IV. Breaking the Boundaries of the Monstrous: The Hybrid***

On the most basic level, *hybrid* refers to “the offspring of two animals or plants of different species, or (less strictly) varieties; a half-breed, cross-breed, or mongrel.”<sup>88</sup> It involves bringing together and uniting two different elements into one, or, as Robert Young explains more specifically, “Hybridity thus makes difference into sameness, and sameness into difference, but in a way that makes the same no longer the same, the different no longer simply different.”<sup>89</sup> In other words, hybridity bridges the difference-gap between elements and ties them together; in the hybrid one finds the union of the previously separated, where, for example, A and B are now more closely associated because C (the hybrid) embodies qualities of both. For the Danes and the Geats, Grendel is a monster but he is also uncomfortably humanoid. He is *earmsceapen*, *misshapen* (l. 1351b), yet strangely familiar. His hybridity extends to his lineage because he is said to be the offspring of a man (Cain) and beasts. Grendel’s formidable strength keeps human challengers away until Beowulf arrives, and Beowulf is indeed the perfect match for Grendel. It stands to reason then that Beowulf is also a hybrid figure of sorts, likewise manifesting elements of the human and the monstrous, which allows him to successfully battle foes belonging to both classifications, as well as other hybrid figures like Grendel. I do not mean to suggest that Beowulf’s parentage is monstrous like Grendel’s, but rather that his physical prowess classifies him also as the *other*, different from the average human being.

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<sup>88</sup> OED, s.vv. *hybrid* (n.) A.1.

<sup>89</sup> Robert Young, “The Cultural Politics of Hybridity,” *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, eds. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (London/New York: Routledge, 1995), 158.

Beowulf's own monstrous-like quality, his hybridity, allows him to reshape the landscape by taking control away from the monstrous creatures. Throughout the poem, Beowulf accomplishes astounding feats that some scholars consider too extreme not to be hyperbolic, while other scholars attribute these to Beowulf's "monstrous qualities," such as his physical strength and swimming prowess.<sup>90</sup> Stanley Greenfield explains that, "there may be, after all, a touch of the monstrous in the hero, and that such a touch is not alien to the nature of the Germanic epic hero."<sup>91</sup> Even though Greenfield does not give a definition for his use of "monstrous," he uses the term more as a synonym for "superhuman" while he argues in favor of Beowulf's ability to hold his breath under water. Andy Orchard associates Beowulf more directly with the idea of the monstrous, particularly in relation to the battle inside Heorot. He writes, "Grendel and Beowulf meet in an atmosphere in which the distinctions between man and monster have been deliberately obscured, and in a twilight domain where the mark of the assailant is measured as much in terror and anger as in corporeal harm."<sup>92</sup> Greenfield and Orchard both emphasize the blurred lines of "human" and "monster" that Beowulf represents; and to this I add Beowulf's seeming awareness of his own hybridity as he repeatedly compromises his advantage in order to equalize a battle with any monster.

In this instance, the monster and the man are indistinguishable in their battle prowess because they are equals, a fact Beowulf himself recognizes when he decides to remove his armor

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<sup>90</sup> For an in-depth re-examination of Beowulf as an ordinary hero, see Fred C. Robinson, "Elements of the Marvelous in the Characterization of Beowulf," *Old English Studies in Honour of John C. Pope*, ed. Robert B. Burhn and Edward B. Irving, Jr. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), 119-37.

<sup>91</sup> Stanley Greenfield, "A Touch of the Monstrous in the Hero, or Beowulf Re-Marvellized," *English Studies: A Journal of English Language and Literature* 63.4 (1982): 294-5.

<sup>92</sup> Andy Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf Manuscript* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Brewer, 1995), 37.

and leave behind his weapon before the battle so that he, Beowulf, does not use any man-made advantages over Grendel. He says,

No ic me an herewæsmun      hnagran talige,  
 guþgeweorca,      þonne Grendel hine;  
 forþan ic hine sweorde      swebban nelle,  
 aldre beneotan,      þeah ic eal mæge.  
 Nat he þara goda      þæt he me ongean slea,  
 rand geheawe,      þeah ðe he rof sie  
 niþgeweorca;      ac wit on niht sculon  
 secge ofersittan,      gif he gesecean dear  
 wig ofer wæpen. (ll. 677-85a)

I myself do not reckon poorer in vigor of war,  
 and warlike deeds, than Grendel does himself;  
 therefore him with my sword I shall not kill,  
 deprive [him] of life, though I fully might;  
 he does not know the skills, that he might strike me back,  
 cut through my shield, although he may be strong  
 in his evil work; but we at night should  
 forgo our swords, if he dares to seek out  
 a battle without weapons.

While Beowulf's self-assurance could be simply a performance, a boast expected of such warriors, it could also show insight into his desire to battle a challenging foe.

Another equalizing factor can be found in the *Beowulf*-poet's use of ambiguous terms that further highlight to the fragile divide between the monstrous and the human by breaking down the barrier that would separate these and underscoring a commonality that can exist between the two. Early in the poem, when Unferth calls Beowulf's reputation into question by inquiring about a particular swimming competition, Beowulf reveals details of the encounter that are representative of the superhuman abilities he possesses. Unferth begins by asking,

Eart þu se Beowulf,      se þe wið Breca wunne,  
 on sidne sæ      ymb sund flite,  
 ðær git for wlence      wada cunnedon  
 ond for dolgilpe      on deop wæter  
 aldrum neþdon? (ll. 506-510a)

Are you the Beowulf who strove with Breca  
 on the broad sea competed swimming across,  
 where for your pride you tackled the waves  
 and for a foolish boast, in deep water,  
 risked your life?

Unferth does not look kindly upon Beowulf, as he nurses *beadurune*, a secret hostility (l. 501a), toward the Geat, and wishes to underscore the *dolgilpe*, foolish boast (l. 508a), that leads to the imprudence of a seemingly physically vulnerable man entering the open, unbound sea, without the protection of a vessel or armed guards. But Beowulf takes this opportunity to boast of his heroic prowess. He speaks of how he was dragged to the bottom of the sea by a creature he first calls *fah feondscada*, a hostile destructive foe (l. 554a), and then *aglæca* (l. 556a). The term *aglæca* is problematic due to the fluidity of its meaning. Typically translated as “monster” when

used to refer to Grendel (l. 159), and to the dragon (l. 2520), it is also used for the warrior Sigemund (l. 893), and in the plural form for both the dragon *and* Beowulf together (l. 2592). The word means “miserable being, wretch, miscreant, monster, fierce combatant.”<sup>93</sup> Sharing the same terminology for both *man* and *monster* adds a level of equality between the fighters, by showing that they are well matched. But in this contextual framework, not all humans are created equal, and only those with the most advanced warrior skills can enter into the monstrous landscape or waterscape, beyond the monstrous borders, and defeat their foes.

Beowulf repeatedly challenges the limits set by the monstrous “herdsmen,” the monsters that patrol borders limiting human access, and advances the human territorial claim. He enters into the *deop wæter*, battles the *niceras nigene*, nine water-monsters, and dives into the mere, where, *Flod blode weol ... / hatan heolfre*, the flood welled with blood ... and hot gore (ll. 1422a, 1423a). With the exception of Beowulf, the Danish and the Geatish people attempt to stay away from all monstrous areas—leaving the monsters to be usually successful in their border patrolling. One such instance is during the swimming match with Breca, where there is an indication that the particular region of the sea into which they venture is known for its beastly population, since Beowulf mentions that he and Breca were prepared for danger:

Hæfdon swurd nacod,    þa wit on sund reon,  
 heard on handa;    wit unc wið hronfixas  
 werian þohton. (ll. 539-541a)

We had naked swords, when we rowed on the ocean,

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<sup>93</sup> According to the Bosworth-Toller Dictionary. Also, CASD, s.v. *aglæca* (n.) “wretch, monster, demon, fierce enemy.” However, S.M. Kuhn, “Old English *Aglæca* – Middle Irish *Ólach*,” in *Linguistic Method: Essays in Honor of Herbert Penzl*, ed. I. Rauch and G.F. Carr (The Hague: Mouton, 1979), 213-30, explores other meanings of the word before affirming that of “fighter.”

hard in our hands; we ourselves against wales  
 thought to protect.

At the time, *hronfixas*, whales, would have been considered monstrous. The thirteenth century medieval bestiary MS. Bodley 764, includes a description of the *aspidochelon*, which refers to a whale or a gigantic tortoise.<sup>94</sup> The bestiary states that “it is also called sea-monster because its body is so huge,” and that it “was this creature that took up Jonah; its stomach was so great that it could be mistaken for hell.”<sup>95</sup> The creature’s threat, according to the bestiary, comes from its ability to camouflage itself as an island luring unsuspecting sailors to beach on its backside before dragging them to the bottom of the sea to drown—reminiscent of the sea-monsters’ intent on dragging Beowulf to the bottom as well. But the creature’s camouflaging is an elaborate ruse, as it “raises its back above the waves, and it seems to stay in the same place. The winds blow sea-sand on it and it becomes a level place on which vegetation grows.”<sup>96</sup> In order for vegetation to grow on its back the whale would have to remain immobile for a sustained period of time, blurring the lines between an organic living creature and inorganic matter. The whale, then, is also a type of hybrid monster whose ability to bridge the gap between a mobile animal and a stationary island gives it an advantage over ordinary man. However, the whale is vulnerable to the challenge of a hybrid man who is capable of conquering both in land and in water.

In preparation to face the dangerous whales, Beowulf sets off to sea only with *swurd nacod*, bare swords, in hand, under-fitted for battle as is customary for him when facing any

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<sup>94</sup> Having written the MS. Bodley 764 bestiary sometime between 1220 and 1250, the compiler included material from Biblical Scripture, Gerald of Wales *Topographia hibernica* ca. 1187, and Rabanus Maurus’s ninth century German treatise *De rerum naturis*. Depictions in the bestiary reflect consistent beliefs that trace back to early Church authors in different regions.

<sup>95</sup> Richard Barber, trans., *Bestiary: MS Bodley 764* (1992; reis. Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK: Boydell, 1993), 204.

<sup>96</sup> Barber, *Bestiary*, 204.

monster. Some scholars, like Frederick Biggs, consider Beowulf's reference to "bare swords" as a weapon of choice against these creatures as a strategic rhetorical move on behalf of the Geat, since it "may have had some practical purpose if Beowulf uses characteristic Germanic understatement to express their plan to make sea travel safer."<sup>97</sup> However, throughout the poem Beowulf faces monsters in a similar fashion as he does the whales: he removes his armor and leaves weapons aside when battling Grendel; and, although because of his old age he wears armor and carries weapons during his fight with the dragon, he leaves his warrior entourage behind and enters the dragon's cave alone.

Beowulf's retelling of his battle with the sea monsters calls attention to the seeming ease with which he defeats them, restructuring the power dynamic of the waterscapes. His victory over the creatures is favorable for him, but also for the human sea travelers who were once accosted in those waters:

Swa mec gelome      laðgeteonan  
 þreatedon þearle.      Ic him þenode  
 deoran sweorde,      swa hit gedefe wæs.  
 Næs hie ðære fülle      gefean hæfdon,  
 manfordædlan,      þæt hie me þegon,  
 symbel ymsæton      sægrunde neah;  
 ac on mergenne      mecum wunde  
 be yðlafē      uppe lægon,  
 sweordum aswefede,      þæt syðþan na

<sup>97</sup> Frederick M. Biggs, "Beowulf's Fight with the Nine Nicors," *The Review of English Studies* 53.211 (2002): 317. Biggs' analysis of the fight positions the sea-monsters as metaphorical representations of the Danes, which leads to a broader reading of the poem's central theme regarding royal succession.

ymb brontne ford      brimliðende  
 lade ne letton. (ll. 559-69a)

Thus me often hateful ravagers  
 severely harrassed. I served them  
 with my dear sword, as it fitting was.  
 By no means did they the feast have rejoicing,  
 Those evil-doers, when they consumed me,  
 sitting around a feast near the sea-bed,  
 but in the morning, wounded by my sword,  
 by the shore up they lay,  
 killed by sword-blows, that never since  
 on the high sea seafarers'  
 passage [they] did not hinder.

Although his original intent during his altercation with the sea monsters is personal survival, in defeating the *niceras nigene*, nine water-monsters (l. 575), he potentially opens up passage for people traversing those waters by removing some of the threat. Accordingly, Beowulf wrests control of the stretch of sea away from monsters for humankind.

#### ***V. Conclusion***

In *The Life of St. Guthlac*, composed ca. 730, a monk named Felix tells of events, from some 30 years earlier, concerning St. Guthlac who moved to the island of Crowland, amidst the

wild Fens, to live as a hermit.<sup>98</sup> Residing in a dilapidated barrow away from society, Guthlac battled against the harsh elements, and against the British-speaking demons he had forcefully evicted from the burial mound.<sup>99</sup> By the time of his death, Guthlac had driven the demons away and claimed the barrow as his own, converting it into an emblem of the spiritual struggles of a Christian and placing the barrow at the geographical center of the poem.<sup>100</sup> In his pursuit of spiritual solitude, Guthlac tried to colonize nature through the removal of “monsters” and the possession of a burial mound. For his part, Beowulf also leaves his strongest mark on the land with “Beowulf’s barrow.” His burial mound stands as his final attempt to control nature and use himself, and his famed *aglæca* qualities, to demarcate the land as his own. While Guthlac opened the island for other humans to occupy later on, Beowulf maintains the area around his barrow as a no-man’s-land—people avoid the area near it and the Geats themselves depart, never to return. In life Beowulf deterritorializes the monsters, and in death he does the same for his own people. This nuanced reading of the poem underscores Beowulf’s problematic role as a hero: the environment is determined by what/who occupies it; the presence of the monsters marginalizes the land, leaving Beowulf to function as a colonizing signifier for humanity (he is man taking possession of nature), but one that stands for hybridity: *bestly* and *manly*. In my view, the poet represents Beowulf in an uncomfortable light as both conquering hero and monstrosly masculine fighter, effectively revealing that man must himself *be* monstrous to exercise the control over nature that Beowulf accomplishes.

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<sup>98</sup> The Fens refer to what was once marshland in Eastern England, and which were drained both naturally (through falling sea levels) and manually (through engineering feats) over the centuries. The area is now comprised of low-lying farmland [Oliver Rackham, *The Illustrated History of the Countryside* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1994), 188-96].

<sup>99</sup> Bertram Colgrave, trans., *Felix’s Life of St. Guthlac* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

<sup>100</sup> Laurence K. Shook, “The Burial Mound in *Guthlac A*,” *Modern Philology* 58.1 (1960): 10.

In the later Middle Ages there is a shift away from physically monstrous qualities to colonize nature. Instead, the focus is on maintaining control over nature through enclosure and mastery, as I will discuss in the next chapter, before recognizing the benefits of a more balanced relationship through stewardship, as can be seen in my final chapter.

## Chapter 2

“*For to Walken in the Wodes Wilde*”: The Patriarchal World and the Green Realm of *Femenye* in Chaucer’s Tales.

To be an ecologist, one must also be a feminist.

~ Patrick Murphy

Although Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* centers largely on humans, his subtle yet strategic use of nature reflects the cultural shift regarding the environment that further distinguishes the later Middle Ages from the Anglo-Saxon period. What I see as one of Chaucer’s pivotal contributions to the medieval conceptualization of the environment is precisely his poetic advocacy for nature as a safe haven, but one that is susceptible to ill treatment by humans. Chaucer strengthens the pastoral view of nature and moves away from the standard of an earlier period that once emphasized the dangers of the wild, as I argue is the case in *Beowulf*. In place of a threatening nature, he represents a nature that can be bound and colonized by man.<sup>1</sup> Yet he seems to critique such controlling actions by underscoring the problems of domination and gender inequality in the late Middle Ages. Although current ecocritical thought has moved past the dualistic association of nature with women, I choose to revisit this point because in order to obtain a deeper understanding of medieval views regarding the environment, societal views toward another marginalized entity (in this case, women) must be reexamined. In Chaucer’s work the portrayal of social attitudes regarding nature and women reflect cultural perceptions

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<sup>1</sup> I will be using the mass noun *man* when referring to the male segment of society only.

about control and mastery over the less powerful. However, Chaucer's association of nature and women is not an expression of the cliché that women are "closer to nature," but rather, he challenges the patriarchy precisely by representing man's failed attempts at controlling not only women's "nature" but also nature itself.

Chaucer's sympathy for the marginalized prefigures modern ecocritical discussions. Ecocritic Patrick Murphy discusses the commonly connected ideology of those who show an interest in protecting nature and in protecting women. He writes,

the domination and oppression of women and nature are inextricably intertwined. To be an ecologist, one must also be a feminist, since without addressing gender oppression and the patriarchal ideology that generates the sexual metaphors of masculine domination of nature, one cannot effectively challenge the world views that threaten the stable evolution of the biosphere, in which human beings participate or perish.<sup>2</sup>

In this chapter I examine untamed and domesticated nature through Chaucer's female characters to contextualize his critique of man's overpowering control over nature within fourteenth-century changes taking place due to the cities' burgeoning population and the onset of the plague. In particular, I focus on *The Knight's Tale*, *The Merchant's Tale*, and *The Wife of Bath's Tale*.<sup>3</sup> The former two feature enclosed garden settings and analogize women and nature as beautiful and objectified entities, but *The Knight's Tale* contrasts the garden with the wildwood, through Emelye, while *The Merchant's Tale* stresses a gendered dispute between May and her husband over the dominance of the garden space. *The Wife of Bath's Tale* further complicates the

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<sup>2</sup> Patrick Murphy, *Literature, Nature, and Other: Ecofeminist Critiques* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995), 48.

<sup>3</sup> All quotations are taken from *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

relationship between humans and nature by introducing the question of mastery, both between humans (through marriage) and between humans and nature. Chaucer's depiction of the patriarchal treatment toward one marginalized group (women) is a vehicle to further understand medieval society's conceptualization and treatment of another marginalized entity, nature.

Scholarly attention on women in *The Canterbury Tales* continues to yield insight into Chaucer's works. The critics whom I particularly engage are those who examine gender as a social construction, and those who advance the conversation on Chaucer's views regarding patriarchy. Jill Mann considers women to be central to the poet's "imaginative vision" and to our examination of the cultural and historical context of his time.<sup>4</sup> Mann demonstrates that he reassesses and complicates the gendered power dynamic. As a poet, however, Chaucer would have found himself part of the group of medieval poets marginalized by the court, a status he would have shared with women as subordinate figures.<sup>5</sup> As a result of such marginalization, Elaine Tuttle Hansen argues that Chaucer displaces his anxieties as a poet onto the female figure in his works, but, unlike Mann, she does not find him to have any real sympathy for women.<sup>6</sup> However, Chaucer's engagement with women could also be "ambivalent," as Sheila Delany argues through her historical-cultural reading of *The Legend of Good Women*, and proposes that gender and sexuality are mediated by political power, language, and art, among other elements.<sup>7</sup> Regardless of whether Chaucer is seen as a proto-feminist or not, however, it is crucial to

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<sup>4</sup> Jill Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2002), vii.

<sup>5</sup> Elaine Tuttle Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fiction of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 37.

<sup>6</sup> Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fiction of Gender*, 37-8. On views concerned with Chaucer marginalizing women to address masculine problems of authority and identity, also see Susan Crane's *Gender and Romance in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

<sup>7</sup> Sheila Delany, *The Naked Text: Chaucer's Legend of Good Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 188.

recognize his acknowledgement of the limitations of the patriarchy because he presented material that was sometimes questionable and sometimes extreme but that invariably instigates discussion at some level on gender-related issues. It is precisely Chaucer's challenge of patriarchal views through his representation of gender identity that Carolyn Dinshaw examines through her application of psychoanalysis and language theory.<sup>8</sup> She comments on Chaucer's awareness of the limitations of patriarchy, as well as his attempts at understanding the literary and real ramifications of "masculine acts performed on feminine bodies."<sup>9</sup>

In my analysis I add nature to the examination of patriarchal control and assess how men and women interact with nature, but I particularly look at a continuation of "masculine acts performed on feminine bodies" and on bodies of nature. By situating my study within a historical-cultural context, I engage with the poet's and with society's anxieties about nature that were displaced onto the female body. What an ecocritical lens adds to these studies of gender is an additional emphasis on how Chaucer's green world forges a sharper view of the social relationship between men and women within the literary medieval world.

Some scholars have already recognized Chaucer's ecocritical potential. Lisa J. Kiser, focusing on *The Parliament of Fowles*, argues for the poet's strong depiction and critique of the human domination of nature.<sup>10</sup> Kiser equally takes medievalists and ecocritics to task by chastising them for having either "largely ignored the subject of environmental perspectives in medieval texts" or generalizing about medieval approaches to nature.<sup>11</sup> Kiser shows that

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<sup>8</sup> Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).

<sup>9</sup> Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*, 25.

<sup>10</sup> Lisa Kiser, "Chaucer and the Politics of Nature," *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism*, ed. Karla Armbruster and Kathleen R. Wallace (Charlottesville/London: 2001), 41-56.

<sup>11</sup> Kiser, "Chaucer and the Politics of Nature," 41.

medieval thoughts regarding the environment were much more sophisticated than many have assumed. Laura Howes not only looks at the literary sources that inspired Chaucer's gardens but also analyzes the cultural convention of the garden and how this informed his works.<sup>12</sup> Howes' scholarship examines the position of men and women in relation to the garden and stipulates that in order to truly understand a character, we must know the spaces she inhabits and what she does in these spaces.<sup>13</sup> Reinvigorating the "green Chaucer" conversation, Sarah Stanbury applies modern views on human agency and stewardship as a contrast with medieval views on nature in order to show that for Chaucer nature was a personification rather than a spatial force. Her discussion centers on the concerns Chaucer exhibits regarding nature through the use of metaphor as it relates to the non-human world.<sup>14</sup> In taking up similar topics, I join these ongoing conversations by applying a modern framework of ecocriticism to *The Canterbury Tales*, but I also step into a long-standing discussion on the dynamics of gender and the representation of women. I consider it crucial to put the discourses of gender and environment into conversation with each other in order to obtain new insights on ideological issues of patriarchal control prevalent in the Middle Ages and critiqued by an author whose work is a cornerstone for the period. Chaucer's work embodies the cultural shift, or transition, between casting nature as a threatening force, as is the case in *Beowulf*, and considering the benefits of practicing stewardship of the land.

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<sup>12</sup> Laura L. Howes, *Chaucer's Gardens and the Language of Convention* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997).

<sup>13</sup> Howes, *Chaucer's Gardens and the Language of Convention*, 2.

<sup>14</sup> Sarah Stanbury, "EcoChaucer: Green Ethics and Medieval Nature," *Chaucer Review* 39.1 (2004): 1-16.

### *I. Walled-In: Medieval Gardens*

Medieval gardens are a central point in my analysis because they embody man's control over nature and over women. Even their absence from a tale, as is the case in *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, is telling about the relationship of the marginalized to the patriarchy—of all three tales, that of the Wife's exhibits the strongest women and it is also the one lacking an enclosed garden. Due to Chaucer's intricate weaving of female autonomy, or lack thereof, and garden enclosure, a detailed discussion of gardens is warranted.

During the Middle Ages, a garden was typically designed as an enclosed internal courtyard (*hortus conclusus*).<sup>15</sup> On a day-to-day basis, human interaction with gardens occurred in two different ways, both of which were taken into consideration during the design phase: people viewed gardens from a far (from high windows or towers), and also walked through and admired them up close on the ground.<sup>16</sup> We can find numerous depictions of gardens in art that provide a visualization of the layout and design.<sup>17</sup> For example, in an illuminated depiction of the Garden of Pleasure, from *Le Roman de la Rose*, the tall walls of an enclosed garden are easily visible, as is a layout of trees and plants pleasing to the eye: tall fruit trees on the periphery, trellises of red and white flowers against the walls, and rectangular raised beds of lavender by the small tree in the right side of the image; in that same section of the garden, in the upper-right hand, a turf bench is visible, with another turf bench somewhat visible behind the standing women (see Fig. 1).

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<sup>15</sup> John Harvey, *Medieval Gardens* (Beaverton, OR: Timber Press, 1981), x-xi.

<sup>16</sup> Marilyn Stokstad, "The Garden as Art," *Medieval Gardens* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Trustees for Harvard University, 1986) 181.

<sup>17</sup> For more on the importance of visual art for medieval garden history, see Stokstad, "The Garden as Art," 182.



Fig. 1. The Garden of Pleasure, *Le Roman de la Rose*.<sup>18</sup>

In the design and upkeep of medieval gardens, gardeners transplanted nature from without to within the garden and ensured that the greenery that grew inside fit very particular parameters within the established, highly structured pattern.<sup>19</sup> Paintings portraying various garden environments, which typically reflect realistic portrayals, not only depict similar types of plants and trees within the garden, but also show a strong uniformity in the style of layout. Stokstad's description of a particular garden from a medieval painting can also be applied to other contemporary estate gardens because of the formulaic nature in garden design:<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> The Garden of Pleasure, *Le Roman de la Rose*, ca. 1485, Flanders, London, British Library, MS. Harley 4425, fol. 12v (photo British Library).

<sup>19</sup> Although there is a great likelihood that there were regional distinctions in medieval gardens, the scholarly sources that I have referenced for this study did not speak of these beyond the occasional choice in plants depending on climate.

<sup>20</sup> Stokstad describes the *Virgin and Child Enthroned*, Flanders, fifteenth century, panel painting, lent by the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, MO.

The garden is flat and enclosed by a high wall; the raised beds, about four feet across, are practical and efficient ...[but] the rectangular plant beds have the less than thrilling regularity of a chessboard; nevertheless, they create a strong geometric pattern ... marked by contrasting benches and trellises and contained by framing walls. ... The changes in the level between beds and benches gave the garden unity of form, and the walls provided a controlling frame; the well, fountain, or tree became a central focal point.<sup>21</sup>

Man has taken away nature's freedom within the garden, where aesthetic quality is at the forefront of his creation. Gardeners worked toward a highly beautified nature, not only interested in maintaining nature but also in transforming it into something meant to be pleasing to the eye, whether it was an herbarium specializing in medicinal herbs, a vegetable/fruit garden in a monastery, or a pleasure garden filled with colorful plants and flowers.

Gardens attached to royal estates were not typically intended for growing consumable produce but instead grew herbs and flowers.<sup>22</sup> As Albertus Magnus explained in his treatise *De vegetabilibus et plantis* (ca. 1260),

There are, however, some places of no great utility or fruitfulness but designed for pleasure, which are rather lacking in cultivation and on that account cannot be reckoned with any of the said lands: for these are what are called pleasure gardens. They are in fact mainly designed for the delight of two senses, viz. sight

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<sup>21</sup> Stokstad, "The Garden as Art," 181-2.

<sup>22</sup> "Kitchen gardens," with a large variety of fruits and vegetables meant for consumption, were more typical of monasteries than royal estates. For a detailed listing of the plants commonly grown in monastic gardens, in accordance with Charlemagne's *Capitulare de villis imperialibus* in which he outlined the plants estates and monasteries should grow, see Harvey, *Medieval Gardens*, 31-2.

and smell. They are therefore provided rather by removing what especially requires cultivation.<sup>23</sup>

Albertus goes on to indicate that the required vegetation consists of very short grass, colorful flowers, and sweet-smelling herbs, as well as non-fruit shade trees around the edge. At the center of the garden, there should be a fountain to help purify the garden.<sup>24</sup> Albertus' treatise and his directions for designing a garden were consistently popular during the later Middle Ages, with the modification of adding fruit trees occasionally—in fact, January's garden in *The Merchant's Tale* seems to follow Albertus' guidelines (ll. 2028-37).

The symmetrical order found within a medieval estate garden contrasted strongly with the chaos beyond the walls in the plague-infested community that likely surrounded the garden from the mid-fourteenth century onwards during any of the outbreaks. Those who could not leave the community for the country in order to flee from the threat of the plague had another recourse in nature, by following the medical advice of the time and withdrawing to “sweet-smelling gardens” where stress was low due to amiable company and healthy scents.<sup>25</sup> Gardens became even more crucial during the plague years as they became synonymous with safety from illness.

## ***II. Nature as Safe Haven: Black Death and City Life***

The shift toward depicting wild nature as a longed-for place rather than a dangerous one is due in part to two related historical occurrences: the great pandemic of bubonic plague, and the

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<sup>23</sup> Qtd. in Harvey, *Medieval Gardens*, 6.

<sup>24</sup> Harvey, *Medieval Gardens*, 6.

<sup>25</sup> People believed that one mode of contagion for the plague was through foul air; because of the scent from herbs and flowers, people assumed gardens were healthier. See Glending Olson, *Literature as Recreation in the Later Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982) 165-83.

rising populations of urban centers. A mysterious pestilence of uncertain origins, the plague was easily the most devastating assault on the population. It arrived in the southwest coast of England (in Melcombe Regis, modern-day Weymouth) in the summer of 1348, moving toward the thriving metropolis of London by winter of that same year.<sup>26</sup> This first onslaught lasted into early 1350, killing by various estimates from 1/3 of the population to 48% of the country's inhabitants.<sup>27</sup> Although death toll numbers for the country vary, those for London are consistently the highest of all cities. London was particularly vulnerable due likely to overcrowding and lack of proper sanitary conditions at the time.

While the causes of the plague were unknown at the time, people realized that coming in close contact with those infected could be a death sentence—a fact that propelled a temporary exodus from cities toward nature.<sup>28</sup> According to the *Chronicon Galfridi le Baker de Swynebroke*, a chronicle composed by a Swinbrook clerk that covers the years from 1305-1356, some believed that, “the breath of those who had lived among the dying would be infectious.”<sup>29</sup> People were dangerous, and large groups of people were worse; nature suddenly provided an opportunity to move away from danger into more sparsely populated areas. Extant records for temporary relocations show that many (from the upper classes or those belonging to religious

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<sup>26</sup> Bristol has also been linked with the arrival of the plague in England, but most scholars now believe it began in Melcombe. For a detailed narrative of the plague's advent, see Rosemary Horrox, trans. and ed., *The Black Death* (Manchester/New York: Manchester University Press, 1994), 62-91. For a discussion on conditions in coastal English towns that propelled the epidemic see Benedict Gummer, *The Scourging Angel: The Black Death in the British Isles* (London: Vintage, 2010), 130-61.

<sup>27</sup> For more on death toll estimates, see John Hatcher, *Plague, Population and the English Economy 1348-50* (London: Macmillan, London, and Basingstoke, 1977).

<sup>28</sup> Gummer, *The Scourging Angel*, 58.

<sup>29</sup> The original line reads, “*quolibet putante anelitus vivencium inter sic morientes fuisse infectivos.*” See E.M. Thompson, ed., *Chronicon Galfridi le Baker de Swynebroke* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1889), 99.

affiliations) who were financially able to do so fled toward the countryside.<sup>30</sup> Those who remained behind tried to spend their time surrounded by sweet smelling plants often found in enclosed gardens.

The city of London at this time was a burgeoning place, spreading out beyond the walls that once enclosed it with a population that counted one in every sixty people in England before the plague.<sup>31</sup> Most residents lived within the one square mile that made up the walled city (all seven gates of which were barred every night), enclosing the small winding alleys of the poor and the broad avenues of the nobility with limited green spaces open to all.<sup>32</sup> After the first outbreak, however, London began to change in more ways beyond the population loss. The lasting effects of the Great Death ranged from the subjects taught in the universities, to the redistribution of the labor force and the restructuring of manorialism.<sup>33</sup> People began to question

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<sup>30</sup> Gummer lists Archbishop Zouche, near York, who went to his castle in Cawood (51); Bishop Ralph Shrewsbury, who left his diocese in Bath for “his most remote manor house, at Wiveliscombe ... on the edge of Exmoor” (66); Bishop Edington, who left London’s Southwark for his manor house in Esher (103), as did Edward III, relocating for part of the winter to a palace in Kent, belonging to John Ufford, the new Archbishop of Canterbury (67). The Chaucer family also moved away from the city shortly before the plague arrived in London, but they did so for unrelated reasons. Although the exact year of his birth is unknown, young Geoffrey would have been close to eight years old when his father, John Chaucer, a vintner and later deputy butler to Edward III’s household, was dispatched to Southampton to oversee the import duties on wine. The family did not return to London until 1350, when the plague had already begun to subside. See Brewer, *An Introduction to Chaucer*, 4-5.

<sup>31</sup> Gummer, *The Scourging Angel*, 96.

<sup>32</sup> As Derek Pearsall describes in *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer: A Critical Biography* (Oxford/New York: Blackwell, 1992), 19, “Most of the streets and alleys were unpaved; there would be animals, animal dung, refuse, offal everywhere; the smells would be strong ... Parts of the city would look little different from a farmyard, though there would also be spacious tree-lined gardens, and some magnificent town houses, public buildings and churches.”

<sup>33</sup> The high mortality amongst the clergy led to the decline of the teaching of Latin, and the rise of English in school settings. For clergy mortality, see May McKisack, *The Fourteenth Century: 1307-1399* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), 331-2.

previous certainties, social hierarchies, and past authorities.<sup>34</sup> Such was the backdrop to Chaucer's poetry.

In his extant work, however, he possibly alludes to the plague only twice, even though he lived through all five outbreaks of the Black Death during the fourteenth century.<sup>35</sup> First, in the *General Prologue*, when speaking of the Reeve and the fear he instills in others because no power can control him, the farm workers are "adrad of hym as of the deeth" (l. 605).<sup>36</sup> Later, in *The Pardoner's Tale*, the three men search for Death, who works through the plague, "Ther cam a privee theef men clepeth Deeth, / That in this contree al the peple sleeth ... He hath a thousand slayn this pestilence" (ll. 675-6, 679). Although it was a devastating scourge on society, some scholars argue that on the surface the plague does not appear to have a strong presence in Chaucer's poetry.<sup>37</sup> This seeming absence of the plague in his works appears more obvious when he is contrasted with other writers who placed the plague at the center of their work, as did Boccaccio in *The Decameron* (early 1350s). The Italian poet uses the pandemic of the Black Death in his country as part of the framing story by setting up the narrators as a group of young aristocratic men and women from Florence who flee the city to an abandoned villa in the

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<sup>34</sup> Horrox, *The Black Death*, 229.

<sup>35</sup> After 1348-50, the second major outbreak for that century occurred in 1361-62, followed by a series of smaller ones in 1369, 1374-9, and 1390-3. See Rosemary Horrox, trans. and ed., *The Black Death* (Manchester/New York: Manchester University Press, 1994), 85-92.

<sup>36</sup> Larry Benson notes that while this line probably refers to the plague, it could also refer to death in general. He adds that the presence of the definite article is what points to the plague ["Explanatory Notes," fn. 605, *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 822].

<sup>37</sup> Derek Pearsall speculates that Chaucer's memories about the Black Death were probably not damaging to the author's psyche, implying that Chaucer did not need to purge previous traumatic experiences through his poetry [*The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 28].

countryside.<sup>38</sup> They find temporary solace from the ravages of the plague in a setting away from others and closer to nature. Even though Chaucer may not be as direct as Boccaccio in referencing the plague, there is evidence in *The Canterbury Tales* of people's attitudes altered by the plague as seen in Chaucer's representation of enclosed gardens as spaces of safety, beauty, order, and control in an otherwise problematic and chaotic world.

### ***III. Hortus conclusus: The Knight's Tale***

At the center of *The Knight's Tale* are a woman and a garden. Emelye's presence in the garden fuels two men's desire for her simply because she is there, and they are able to see her from their prison window as she wanders within the garden walls. The former brothers-at-arms become estranged as they compete for her love—and yet she remains unaware of their existence. Arcite is released, and eventually Palamon escapes. Their encounter and subsequent duel in the woods leads to a more formalized joust, organized by Theseus and with Emelye as the unwilling prize. After Arcite wins her, he is killed through the intervention of the gods. The tale ends when Emelye is married to Palamon under Theseus' instruction.

Although the garden is central to the plot of *The Knight's Tale*, by not providing a detailed description of the garden, Chaucer relies on the familiarity his medieval audience would have had with a garden scene. As Howes explains, “medieval garden design [was] the product of a culture fascinated with literary garden descriptions and with illustrations depicting gardens.”<sup>39</sup> The relationship between literary gardens and real-life gardens was so close in the Middle Ages,

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<sup>38</sup> It is not possible to ascertain whether Chaucer and Boccaccio ever met in person during Chaucer's trip to Italy in 1373. But Chaucer's exposure to Boccaccio's works seems likely. See N.R. Havely, *Chaucer's Boccaccio: Sources of Troilus and the Knight's and Franklin's Tales* (Cambridge, UK: Brewer, Rowman & Littlefield, 1980), 9-12.

<sup>39</sup> Howes, *Chaucer's Gardens*, 22.

that “illustrations of Boccaccio’s *Decameron* were actually used for gardening treatises, so exact and particular were some of their versions of the gardens in which ladies meditated or received their lovers.”<sup>40</sup> The beauty of real-life gardens inspired literature; and gardens in literature inspired the design of real ones. This relationship between literature and reality lead to certain general expectations from the audience: a garden must be pleasing to the senses and particularly to sight. Of course, such aesthetic virtue was also valued in courtly heroines; as I will show, the aesthetic quality of gardens and women that was valued by society illuminates the complex power dynamic in Medieval England. My argument proceeds in two stages: first, by showing that Chaucer analogizes women and nature, and second, by exploring the ramifications of aligning the mistreatment of women with the damages done to nature. Ultimately, this chapter demonstrates how deploying this analogy allows Chaucer to prompt his readers to re-evaluate patriarchal control over marginalized entities.

Chaucer emphasizes beauty as a common denominator in his analogy of nature and women, in order to encourage readers to see how a patriarchal society can lean toward domination and possession.<sup>41</sup> In *The Physician’s Tale*, Chaucer credits Virginia’s beauty to Nature’s hand:<sup>42</sup>

Fair was this mayde in excellent beautee  
 Aboven every wight that man may see;  
 For Nature hath with sovereyn diligence

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<sup>40</sup> Derek Pearsall and Elizabeth Salter, *Landscapes and Seasons of the Medieval World* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973) 110.

<sup>41</sup> Anthropologists theorize that the association of women with nature goes back to the third millennium BCE. See Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Ecofeminism: Symbolic and Social Connections of the Oppression of Women and the Domination of Nature,” in *Ecofeminism and the Sacred*, Carol J. Adams, ed. (New York: Continuum, 1993), 13-23.

<sup>42</sup> I use *Nature* to refer to the personified force and *nature* as it relates to the non-human world.

Yformed hire in so greet excellence,  
 As though she wolde seyn, “Lo! I, Nature,  
 Thus kan I forme and peynte a creature,  
 Whan that me list; who kan me countrefete? (PhT, ll. 7-13).

In Chaucer’s view, Nature, as God’s “vicaire general” (l. 20), has the ability to make a woman beautiful if *she* desires to do so. While Chaucer’s personification of Nature, or Natura, as a female figure is not his original contribution, but rather follows a long tradition of medieval writers, I find it to be of significance because it furthers the association of women and nature.<sup>43</sup> In fact, Nature also strengthens the link through her task of beautifying both nature and women; she not only has free reign in making beautiful things, but she also appears to be responsible for all beauty: “For right as she kan peynte a lilie whit, / And reed a rose, right with swich peyntyre / She peynted hath this noble creature” (PhT, ll. 32-4). The parallel between “this noble creature” and a lily or rose suggests that Nature can easily beautify women and flowers. The clear association of women with beautified nature is useful to approaching other representations of women.

As conventional medieval blooms, the same flowers that Nature paints in *The Physician’s Tale* are the flowers Chaucer links to Emelye in *The Knight’s Tale*:

That Emelye, that fairer was to sene  
 Than is the lylie upon his stalke grene,  
 And fressher than the May with floures newe—  
 For with the rose colour stroof hire hewe,

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<sup>43</sup> The personification of Natura as *vicaria Dei*, the vicar of God, was also used by Bernard Silvestris in *De mundi universitate* (ca. 1140s), Alain de Lille in *De planctu naturae* (ca. late 1160s), and by Jeun de Meun in the *Roman de la Rose* (ca. 1275).

I noot which was the fyner of hem two— (KT, ll. 1035-9)

Emelye's pleasing appearance and youthfulness is so closely aligned with that of the flowers that it is difficult for the Knight to separate their beauty. Relating the lily and the rose to her is significant because it allowed Chaucer's contemporary readers to draw parallels between the character and the symbolic meaning of the flowers. The lily is a flower traditionally linked with innocence and purity, and Emelye is untainted sexually, spiritually, and emotionally.<sup>44</sup> The rose, tied to the concept of romantic love, is an ironic addition because she does not have romantic feelings for any of the men who lust after her.<sup>45</sup>

Chaucer places the beautiful Emelye, like so many beautiful flowers, within an enclosed garden that serves as physical and symbolic space:

And in the gardyn, at the sonne upriste,  
 She walketh up and doun, and as hire liste  
 She gadereth floures, party white and rede,  
 To make a subtil gerland for hire hede;  
 And as an aungel hevenysshly she soong.  
 The grete tour, that was so thikke and stroong,  
 Which of the castel was the chief dongeoun  
 (Ther as the knyghtes weren in prisoun  
 Of which I tolde yow and tellen shal),

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<sup>44</sup> As Beverly Seaton explains in *The Language of Flowers: A History* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1995), 43-4, in Western culture, the rose is associated with love and pleasure, but also with Venus, with the Virgin Mary, and the passion of Christ; similarly, the white lily has been linked to the Virgin Mary because of the color's association to purity.

<sup>45</sup> It is also possible that Chaucer is making an allusion to *Le Roman de la Rose*, not only because of the inclusion of the rose but because the French poem depicts a man actively pursuing a passive "flower."

Was evene joynant to the gardyn wal

Ther as this Emelye hadde hir pleyynge. (KT, 1051-61)<sup>46</sup>

It would appear that Emelye, a former Amazon conquered by Theseus, is now domesticated to the point that she finds her *pleyynge*, or amusement, in weaving garlands of flowers for her hair and spending her time walking back and forth in the garden. Although the flowers that she uses for the garland are not named, the colors, white and red, coincide with the traditional colors of the lily and the rose, mentioned a few lines above (KT, ll. 1035 and 1037). There is no indication if one color is more prevalent than the other, but they are both part of the garland; the presence of white, innocence, brings to the forefront the non-sexual associations of red for Chaucer's audience, that of the Virgin Mary and the passion of Christ.<sup>47</sup> For Emelye, "hire liste" (l. 1052), her desire and her pleasure, comes from crowning herself with purity and virginity—traits she wishes to preserve, as seen in her prayer to Diana discussed below.<sup>48</sup> However, looming over Emelye's space in the garden is "The grete tour, that was so thikke and stroong" (l. 1056). The phallic symbolism in Chaucer's immediate reference to the castle's prison tower highlights the looming masculinity that surrounds and threatens Emelye's chosen virginity. Her protective garland may not be enough protection.

Precisely through the depiction of garland making, Chaucer furthers the significance of gendered locations (i.e., the garden and the wild woods) by using different plants for women and

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<sup>46</sup> The editorial addition of parentheses in these lines separates the parallel between Emelye within the garden walls and the knights within prison walls.

<sup>47</sup> The Rose was a common Marian symbol representing "perpetual virginity," but particularly in the writings of Johannes de Garlandia (ca. 11<sup>th</sup> century) and the *Bridgettine Myroure of Oure Ladye*, a Middle English translation of the Latin service for Bridgettine nuns. See Georgiana Donavin, *Scribit Mater: Mary and the Language Arts in the Literature of Medieval England* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2012), 94 and 241.

<sup>48</sup> MED s.v. *list* (n.2.) def. 1.a. "Desire, wish, will; longing, craving"; def. 2. "Pleasure, joy; enjoyment; also, a source of pleasure or joy."

men. When Emelye wanders in her garden, she weaves a garland that underscores associations with innocence and virginity. By contrast, when Arcite pines for the love of Emelye, he weaves a garland with emblematic tones of enclosure and control.<sup>49</sup> Arcite finds his materials about a mile or two away from the castle, in the woods,

And to the grove of which that I yow tolde  
 By aventure his wey he gan to holde  
 To maken hym a gerland of the greves,  
 Were it of wodebynde or hawethorne leves. (KT, ll. 1505-8)

His garland is not made of flowers found within the walled garden, but instead of material in the *greves*, or brushwood.<sup>50</sup> Arcite's selection of *wodebynde* and *hawethorne* draws attention to the choices Chaucer makes based on the use and symbolism of these flowers/leaves. Both woodbine, also known as honeysuckle, and hawthorn are used in England for hedgerows. Woodbine is a particular favorite because of its ability to twine itself around other plants. Howes finds in Emelye's and Arcite's garland-making tacit commentary on the significance of their locations: She is in an enclosed location, while he is in an open field.<sup>51</sup> But I find that there is more to the distinctive materials used for the garlands. Emelye only has access to the flowers that have been brought in from the wild and enclosed in a garden because of their beauty—a garden that also encloses her as a woman. Once escaped from the bounds of the castle, Arcite can easily move about the woods and select any materials he wants for his garland, and in so doing chooses the

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<sup>49</sup> His behavior is reminiscent of the Lover in *Le Roman de la Rose* who, upon finding beautiful roses in the garden but having to leave them behind, laments, “if I could have made a garland of them, there is nothing I would have loved so well.” [Frances Horgan, trans., *The Romance of the Rose* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 26].

<sup>50</sup> OED s.v. *greave* (n.1.) def. 1.a. “brushwood”; def. 1.b. “branches, twigs”; def. 2. “a thicket.”

<sup>51</sup> Howes, *Chaucer's Gardens*, 91.

leaves from two plants used specifically for enclosure and restriction by their association with hedgerows. Emelye is enclosed while Arcite gathers materials for enclosure, delineating expected roles for women and men.<sup>52</sup>

It is precisely an enclosed world that Emelye initially shares with the two knights—an imprisonment both men eventually leave, but one she only exchanges for two forced marriages.<sup>53</sup> Emelye's *hortus conclusus* in Theseus's palace shares a wall with the prison tower that holds Palamon and Arcite. Moments before Palamon looks out the window and sees Emelye in the garden, Chaucer draws a powerful parallel between the two characters: Emelye, a former warring Amazon, and Palamon, a former battle-famed knight, are now encased within walls. Chaucer writes:

And Palamoun, this woful prisoner,  
As was his wone, by leve of his gayler,  
Was risen and romed in a chambre an heigh,  
In which he al the noble citee seigh,  
And eek the gardyn, ful of braunches grene,  
Then as this fresshe Emelye the shene  
Was in hire walk, and romed up and down.

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<sup>52</sup> Here, I do not use the term *enclosure* in the legal sense regarding land use, but rather in regards to the enclosing characteristic of a walled garden.

<sup>53</sup> Although unclear in the text whether Arcite and Emelye marry before his death, he refers to her as “my wyf” (l. 2775), she is later given a ceremonial place of honor at his funeral (ll. 2941-2), and Theseus calls her Arcite’s “wyf” (l. 3062).

This sorweful prisoner, this Palamoun,<sup>54</sup>

Goth in the chambre romynge to and fro

And to hymself compleynyng of his wo. (KT, ll. 1063-72)

Whether it is an enclosed garden or a prison cell, these spaces function in the same way by keeping people within set bounds. Palamon's jailer has given him permission to walk about the cell, so he "romed in a chambre" while Emelye down below is "in hire walk." What is most striking is that in her walk she "romed up and doun" while Palamon in his cell was "romynge to and fro." The echoes of the phrases and the closeness, just two lines apart, unmistakably associate both settings with imprisonment by highlighting the physical limitation of the spaces—the garden is another prison cell.

Like the beautiful flowers gardeners take from the wild and enclose in a garden, where surrounded by stonewalls the flowers grow under the watchful eyes of gardeners, trimmed, pruned, and endlessly fused over, Chaucer encourages readers to see a woman as objectified while enclosed within walls because of her beauty. Specifically, because Emelye returns with Theseus after his conquest of the Amazons, I find it useful to think of this objectification as what ecocritic Val Plumwood calls "instrumentalism." A more active form of objectification, instrumentalism is a characteristic of the dualistic logic in colonialism, in which the dominator claims that the relationship between dominated and dominator is beneficial to both; however, in this relationship the dominator will not only see the dominated as a possession, but will expect

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<sup>54</sup> Since editors added grammatical markers and punctuation (which the original manuscripts lack) to Chaucer's works, it is plausible to consider "this sorweful prisoner" as referring to Emelye just as much as it can refer to Palamoun. Based on the author's intended design to link the two characters through their physical action (i.e., how they walk), it is likely that the link extended directly to their state as prisoners (l. 1063 and 1070). For a discussion on the addition of grammatical markers and punctuation, see Howell Chickering, "Unpunctuating Chaucer," *The Chaucer Review* 25.2 (1990): 96-109.

the dominated to actively give up his/her own interests and pursuits to become an instrument for the dominator's own purposes and desires.<sup>55</sup> Men within Emelye's immediate surroundings first objectify her because of her beauty and then instrumentalize her (or attempt to) so that she may satisfy the dominators' desires, whether it is the desire to physically possess her, to orchestrate a politically advantageous marriage through her, or to personally marry her. Emelye's beauty gains her the unwelcome attention of men, and men prompt her to forego her much prized liberty and maidenhood in order to marry one of them. She must give up her own desires in exchange for the "benefit" of living under the protection of men, sheltered in a garden or as a wife.

This enclosed garden was meant to be a safe cell for Emelye; yet also, because it is constructed by men and with men's sense of safety, it becomes the constricting embodiment of male rule. In Emelye's particular case, however, Chaucer shows that gardens are problematic in their intended "safety." As Howes explains, "Theseus's garden in the *Knight's Tale* represents the way in which men control, guard, and imprison women for their own purposes: political, personal, and narrative. As wives or as prospective wives, women must be contained..."<sup>56</sup>

Emelye is a beautiful war trophy contained in the garden. She has been instrumentalized as a likely marriageable commodity by her brother-in-law, Theseus, who will decide her future and use her as a tool in a political alliance—but for now he keeps her "safely" hidden away.

However, Emelye has no privacy and is at the mercy of two men's leering gazes. These men turn her into an object, observed, desired, scrutinized. Her quiet solitude is shattered and her future choices in life determined by others. The garden is meant to be Emelye's safe zone and should be private, as Stokstad explains: "As the only private place in the very public spaces of the castle

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<sup>55</sup> Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993), 41-68, and particularly 53.

<sup>56</sup> Howes, *Chaucer's Gardens*, 94.

and manor house the garden provided a pleasant setting for ... any activity requiring privacy. Secure and convenient, the walled pleasure garden usually lay directly under the windows of the private apartments and often had its own stairs. A young woman could feel secure in this exclusive garden....<sup>57</sup> Therefore, Chaucer's audience would have understood Emelye's expectation of privacy. He shows how patriarchy's intent to "protect" women is only an illusion for domination—Emelye is not safer from the gaze of men while in the garden, but instead is more exposed because she is not aware of the loss of privacy.

Along with a loss of privacy, Emelye has also lost her freedom in the garden. Even though she supposedly can do "hire liste" within the garden walls, she is confined *within* the garden walls and her doing is limited to walking and collecting flowers. The patriarchy that rules over her—in this case Theseus—dictates the "freedom" she can exercise. The narrator Knight is very particular in reminding his audience through high praise that Theseus "conquered al the regne of Femenye" (KT, l. 866) through his prowess; but Chaucer prompts readers to consider the quality of life of the conquered by showing this woman's longing for freedom—an argument he gives voice to in Emelye's prayer to Diana, where she states what her true wishes are. Emelye says,

Chaste goddesse, wel wostow that I  
 Desire to ben a mayden al my lyf,  
 Ne nevere wol I be no love ne wyf.  
 I am, thow woost, yet of thy compaignye,  
 A mayde, and love huntynge and venerye,  
 And for to walken in the wodes wilde,

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<sup>57</sup> Stokstad, "The Garden as Art," 181.

And nocht to ben a wyf and be with childe. (KT, ll. 2304-10)

Emelye wants to be free to return to a lifestyle similar to that of the Amazons—even doubly emphasizing the hunting of beasts of the chase and the hunting of game animals, *huntynge* and *venerye*.<sup>58</sup> But in her list of demands for happiness, Emelye does not mention the garden. A *hortus conclusus* is not part of her wish, and instead “to walken in the wodes wilde” would be her preference. Emelye not only says she wishes to roam through the woods, but emphasizes that these woods should be *wilde*, which would refer to vegetation that is “growing unchecked, overluxuriant,” and, if speaking of land or fields, it would refer to an area that is “uncultivated, undeveloped.”<sup>59</sup> Her ideal nature is in direct opposition to the stylized and cultivated garden. Emelye sees the wild woods as a place for her to be free, and where nature is also free to grow unchecked.<sup>60</sup>

In light of her prayer to Diana, where Emelye longs for the *wodes wilde*, I question the source of her emotional response at Arcite’s funeral and propose the possibility that her tears and anguish are directed at the loss of the *wodes wilde* instead. Theseus orders the construction of an enormous funeral pyre for Arcite, leading to the clearing of a large section of the woods:

Heigh labour and ful greet apparaillynge

Was at the service and the fyr-makyng,

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<sup>58</sup> MED s.v.v. *huntyng(e)* (ger.) def. a. “The practice of hunting, the chase; an instance of the chase, a hunt.” And, s.v.v. *venerye* (n.2.) def. a. “The practice of hunting game animals.” As Anne Rooney explains, in *Hunting in Middle English Literature* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK: Boydell and Brewer, 1993), 15-6, although never consistent across all hunting manuals, typically beasts of the chase were the buck, doe, fox, marten, and roe deer, while venery were the hare, hart, wolf, and boar.

<sup>59</sup> MED, s.vv. *wild(e)*, (adj.) def. 6a.a; s.vv. *wild(e)*, (adj.) def. 7a.

<sup>60</sup> During the Middle Ages, the wild woods were also associated with freedom from social and community laws; many people fled into the woods in order to escape persecution and prosecution. See Corinne J. Saunders, *The Forest of Medieval Romance: Avernus, Broceliande, Arden* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1992), 3.

That with his grene top the hevene raughte;  
 And twenty fadme of brede the armes straughte—  
 This is to seyn, the bowes weren so brode.  
 Of stree first ther was leyd ful many a lode.  
 But how the fyr was maked upon highte,  
 Ne eek the names that the trees highte,  
 As ook, firre, birch, aspe, alder, holm, popler,  
 Wylugh, elm, plane, assh, box, chasteyn, lynde, laurer,  
 Mapul, thorn, bech, hasel, ew, whippeltree—  
 How they weren feld shal nat be toold for me. (KT, ll. 2913-24)

The pyre's construction requires altering the landscape dramatically, but Theseus and his men exhibit no apparent awareness of their activity's effects on the natural setting. Instead, they work steadily to cut trees and pile the wood higher and higher atop a bed of straw, *stree*, on the pyre so as to touch heaven, *hevene raughte* (l. 2915).<sup>61</sup> Chaucer uses the rhetorical strategy of *occupatio* in discussing the damage done to the woods for the benefit of Arcite's pyre. Even though he says that, "How they weren feld shal nat be toold for me" (l. 2924), and later "I wol nat tellen ... But shortly to the point thanne wol I wende / And maken of my longen tale an ende" (ll. 2963, 2965-6), he still names all of the 21 trees that are cut down for the fire: oak, fir, birch, aspen, alder, holm oak, poplar, willow, elm, sycamore, ash, boxwood, chestnut, linden, laurel, maple, thorn, beech, hazel, yew, and the dogwood. Chaucer catalogues the diversity of trees, which range in size from the very tall, like the fir that can reach up to 260 feet tall, to the boxwood that is shrub-sized. He also includes trees that commonly share the same region, as is the case with the beech

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<sup>61</sup> MED s.v. *rechen* (v.1) def. 3.a. "to touch, come into contact with."

and the birch, but mentions others, like the alder, which tend to grow only in damp conditions usually near rivers. They are not limited to a particular geographical location in England, since these trees are from different areas across the country; therefore he includes a cross section of English vegetation that also helps bridge the gap between the Classical story setting and contemporary time/space in England. Furthermore, his list is sprinkled with iconic trees, like the oak, the elm, and the yew, all known for their girth and gnarled appearance that gives them a level of distinction and individuality among trees, adding to the tragedy that they are being cut down.

Emelye is not only a witness to this woodland devastation, but she also is required to participate, “as was the gyse” (l. 2941), that is, the custom for the deceased’s beloved to start the ceremonial fire for the funeral pyre (l. 2942).<sup>62</sup> Continuing his use of *occupatio*, Chaucer writes that he will not mention how Emelye “... swowned whan men made the fyr; / Ne what she spak, ne what was hir desir” (ll. 2943-4). She swoons when others fan the flames. Most readers of the romance generally assume that her emotional response is for Arcite. But Chaucer makes Emelye’s desire clear when she prays to Diana: “And for to walken in the wodes wilde, / And nought to ben a wyf and be with childe.” (ll. 2309-10). She does not want a husband, and she wants to eschew the confines of the garden for the openness of the wild woods. In front of her she now sees those wild woods leveled and consumed by flames. I find it plausible to see her lament as being one for the physical loss of the woods and metaphorical loss of freedom, rather than for the passing of a man she would have been forced to marry—particularly a man who, on his deathbed, recommends she marry his surviving friend (ll. 2793-7). The death of Arcite momentarily seems as if Diana has answered Emelye’s prayer, but his suggestion that Emelye

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<sup>62</sup> MED s.v. *gise* (n.) def. 1.b. “the practice of a particular time of place, custom.”

marry Palamon snatches away that possibility and exhibits continued male power over her. Usually widowhood was the only time women had more control over their lives.<sup>63</sup> But in this case, she is already being passed off to another man, furthering the possibility that Chaucer's contemporaries might read Emelye's grieving as meant for the freedom she almost had.

The lament implied in Chaucer's catalogue of destroyed trees gains emphasis by comparison to his list of trees in the *Parliament of Fowls*, since the focus of each passage is markedly different: one is tree-focused while the other is human-centered. In the *Parliament of Fowls*, when the narrator initially enters the garden, he sees the following:

The byldere ok, and ek the hardy ashe;  
 The piler elm, the cofre unto carayne;  
 The boxtre pipere, holm to whippes lashe;  
 The saylynge fyr; the cipresse, deth to playne;  
 The shetere ew; the asp for shaftes pleyne;  
 The olyve of pes, and eke the dronke vyne;  
 The victor palm, the laurer to devyne. (PF, ll. 176-82).

Chaucer has associated the trees directly with the practical and metaphorical uses humans give to them. For example, the oak and the ash are meant for building materials (l. 176), while the elm is used for pillars and coffins.<sup>64</sup> The boxwood is for pipe-making, while the holly is best suited for crafting whips (l. 178), and the fir is meant for sailing vessels, *saylynge*, since it is typically used

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<sup>63</sup> See Judith M. Bennett, "Widows in the Medieval English Countryside," *Upon My Husband's Death: Widows in Literature and Histories of Medieval Europe*, ed. Louise Mirrer (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 69-114.

<sup>64</sup> MED, s.v. *pilere* (n.) def. 1.a. "A pillar or column," s.v. *cofre* (n.) def. 1. "Applied to a variety of containers or receptacles: (a) a coffin or casket," and s.v. *careine* (n.) def. 1.a. "A dead body, a corpse."

to make ships' masts (l. 179).<sup>65</sup> For the wars of men, the yew tree is made into bows and the aspen tree provides the arrows (l. 180).<sup>66</sup> For their metaphorical significance, the olive branch is equated with peace (l. 181), the palm tree with victory, and the laurel with divination (l. 182).<sup>67</sup> By contrast, *The Knight's Tale* laments trees for their own sake and not the loss of human's building materials. Chaucer reminds his audience that the loss is great by highlighting the size of the funeral bier. It is extremely high reaching toward heaven (l. 2915), and also very wide at "twenty fadme of brede," or 120 ft. broad (l. 2916). He adds afterward, "This is to seyn, the bowes weren so brode" (l. 2917), to still further call attention to the size of the trees that have been cut.

Even if they are the most prominent victims of men's domination over nature, trees are not Chaucer's only concern. Arcite's pyre leads to the destruction of a large expanse of woodland, and also to the massive displacement of woodland inhabitants:

... the goddess ronnen up and down,  
 Disherited of hire habitacioun,  
 In which they woneden in reste and pees,  
 Nymphes, fawnes and amadrides;  
 Ne hou the beestes and the brides alle  
 Fledden for fere, whan the wode was falle;  
 Ne how the ground agast was of the light,  
 That was nat wont to seen the sonne bright. (KT, ll. 2913-32).

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<sup>65</sup> Andrew Murray, *Ship-building in Iron and Wood* (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1863), 156.

<sup>66</sup> MED, s.v. *sheter(e)* (n.) def. 1.b. "characterized by its use in making bows," and s.vv. *shaft(e)* (n.2) def. 1.c. "the shaft of an arrow."

<sup>67</sup> MED, s.v. *laurer* (n.) def. 1.c. "laurel as an emblem of victory, excellence, or divination."

The gods, nymphs, fauns, and wood nymphs (*amadrides*) lose their home and must flee elsewhere.<sup>68</sup> Chaucer's particular use of *disherited* to describe their situation is crucial because it signals that they have been dispossessed of what was theirs, of their inheritance.<sup>69</sup> In her work on the colonization of nature, Plumwood discusses the assumption humans often make regarding the availability of lands that seem empty simply because other humans are not present; and yet, these lands are typically occupied by other beings.<sup>70</sup> It is reminiscent of the struggle between humans and non-humans over the land in *Beowulf*. The problem arises because of perception: "An anthropocentric culture rarely sees nature and animals as individual centres of striving or needs, doing their best in their conditions of life. Instead, nature is conceived in terms of interchangeable and replaceable units (as 'resources'), rather than as infinitely diverse and always in excess of knowledge and classification."<sup>71</sup> Plumwood's deliberations on nature resonate with Chaucer's work particularly because he seems to be aware of the "individual centres" of non-human nature. He directs his readers' attention to the loss of the trees and the dispossession of the woodland faeries, so that the thoughtless actions of humans—searching for self-aggrandizement, in this case, by being able to provide an extraordinary funeral for a fallen man—can be scrutinized as their negative impact comes to light. The assault against the humanoid victims stresses the inherent similarities between the human and the non-human by showing how both value their home and wish for safety. The dispossessed in *The Knight's Tale*

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<sup>68</sup> As non-humans, but traditionally anthropomorphic woodland beings, the gods, nymphs, fauns, and wood nymphs are hybrid figures, occupying a place between the human and the animal.

<sup>69</sup> MED, s.v. *disheriten* (v.) def. 1.a. "To dispossess (sb.) of an inheritance; deprive or despoil (of land, possessions, privileges, office, etc.); -- (a) with obj.; (b) with obj. and of, from phrase; (c) *fig.* to deprive (sb.) of salvation."

<sup>70</sup> Val Plumwood, "Decolonizing Relationships with Nature," *Decolonizing Nature: Strategies for Conservation in a Post-colonial Era*, ed. William Adams and Martin Mulligan (London: Earthscan, 2003) 503.

<sup>71</sup> Plumwood, "Decolonizing Relationships with Nature," 505.

are non-human, but they could just as well be human, and they are still being punished through no fault of their own.<sup>72</sup>

However, the ills propagated through the destruction of the trees and the removal of the non-human inhabitants from their home remain unnoticed by Theseus, the ruler who could have prevented the damage. Paradoxically, Theseus even appears to lament the loss of a single imaginary oak tree, yet fails to realize the damage he has done to a multitude of trees. During his famed Boethian “First Mover” speech he says,

Loo the ook, that hath so long a norisshynge  
 From tyme that it first bigynneth to sprynge,  
 And hath so long a lif, as we may see,  
 Yet at the laste wasted is the tree” (KT, ll. 3017-20).

Theseus emphasizes the time required for the tree’s growth (ll. 3017-18), and then praises the longevity of the tree (l. 3019). He uses *wasted* when speaking of the tree’s end, a word that possesses many negative connotations regarding loss: “to devastate,” “to despoil,” “to squander,” “to spend ... frivolously, misspend,” “to cause to waste away,” “to cause destruction,” “to slaughter.”<sup>73</sup> In this case, the old saying is apropos for Theseus, since he can see the tree but not the forest. He uses the tree as an abstraction, without considering the real effects of his actions against live trees, and discusses the oak as an example of the transitory quality of life—how all things in this world must pass away (ll. 2986-3074). He attributes these losses to the design of the First Mover, who knows why things must be. However, in the case of the countless trees

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<sup>72</sup> Chaucer’s sympathetic representation of the non-human in this passage is similar to his representation of faeries at the beginning of the *Wife of Bath’s Tale* (ll. 860-81), who are dispossessed by the arrival of lecherous friars.

<sup>73</sup> MED, s.v. *wasten* (v.) def. 1.a. “to devastate”; 1.b. “to despoil”; 3.a. “to squander”; 3.c. “to spend ... frivolously, misspend”; 4.a. “to cause to waste away”; 6.a. “to cause destruction”; 6.b. “to slaughter.”

destroyed for Arcite's pyre it was not Nature or God's inevitable hand intervening; instead, it was Theseus himself. His lament is not for the tree because he is a man detached from nature. Theseus' attention is focused on the human while disregarding the non-human; for example, he strives to expand the human Chain of Love, both in reconciling Palamon and Arcite, and in marrying Palamon and Emelye.<sup>74</sup> Theseus tries to be a "human First Mover."<sup>75</sup> Such a quality is problematic for a leader who attempts to portray himself as being understanding of a higher order but who instead disregards the order of nature. When it comes to nature, he only values it in an abstract sense and for the benefit it can grant him. For Theseus, Emelye and nature are commodities he has at his disposal: the former is a marriageable asset who can unite him to a man of renown; the later is an instrument for self-aggrandizement as it allows Theseus to exhibit his power and riches through the extravagant funeral he bestows on the dead.

While Theseus values nature and women for what they provide for him, in *The Merchant's Tale* January values nature and women for their beauty. In both tales those in power objectify the marginalized, but the behavior of the women is markedly different.

#### ***IV. Breaking (Boundaries) and Entering the Garden: The Merchant's Tale***

In *The Knight's Tale*, Chaucer shows the limitations that force women to stay within certain bounds; in *The Merchant's Tale* he provides an inversion to that theme. While Emelye wishes to leave the confines of the garden, in this tale, May is her antithesis endeavoring to *enter* the garden in order to control the space for her own pleasure. For May, the pear tree within the garden is the one place in the household where she can escape from January's constant vigilance, even if only momentarily, to meet her lover; the garden becomes a contested space of power and

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<sup>74</sup> David Benson, "The 'Knight's Tale' as History," *The Chaucer Review* 3.2 (1968): 122-3.

<sup>75</sup> Benson, "The 'Knight's Tale' as History," 122.

sexuality that is under the husband's control until the wife eventually dispossesses him of it. In *The Merchant's Tale*, the objectification of a woman's beauty and men's tendency to possess her and her beauty are key to showing Chaucer's criticism of control over and enclosure of women and nature. While there are marked differences in *The Merchant's Tale* from that of the *Knight's* and the *Wife's*, the story of May and January's garden helps bridge the key issues present in the other tales: enclosed spaces, an emphasis on beauty and its role in possession, mastery/control, and, eventually, balance.

In *The Merchant's Tale*, the prison motif resurfaces: January, an aptly named wealthy older man, becomes a jailer to May, his beautiful and young wife.<sup>76</sup> January chooses May as wife because of her beauty and youthfulness. But May does not regard him very highly at all. Although January is possessive from the beginning, because of insecurities brought on by his post-wedding blindness, he intensifies his watchfulness over her. She makes a copy of the garden key in wax, and passes on the replica to Damyan, her lover, in order to facilitate an amorous tryst. However, January's eyesight returns, through the intervention of the god Pluto, just in time to see what is transpiring; through Proserpina's intervention, May is able to talk her way out of the situation, leaving January unsure of what he thought he had seen.<sup>77</sup>

While there are allusions via enclosure to ownership of the land in *The Knight's Tale*, the association between a woman and the land is much more direct with May, as she is subsumed into her husband's estate. She is objectified as a result of January's treatment of her during

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<sup>76</sup> The names of January and May, read allegorically, are a constant reminder of their ages (young and old): one is closer to the end of his life, while the other is youthful like the spring month she is named after. See Norman E. Eliason, "Personal Names in the *Canterbury Tales*," *Names* 21 (1973): 137-52, and Emerson Brown, Jr., "Chaucer and a Proper Name: January in the *Merchant's Tale*," *Names* 31 (1983): 79-87.

<sup>77</sup> Pluto and Proserpina have a discussion over gender, in which Pluto accuses all women of being treacherous, and Proserpina gives a lengthy response in defense of women. In the end, Pluto acquiesces to his wife's argument (ll. 2237-2319).

marriage, and the treatment she receives at the hands of the men he sends to procure her.<sup>78</sup> Justyn and Placebo “... wroghten so, by sly and wys treetee” (l. 1692) to hasten the marriage, and through many a “scrit and bond” (l. 1697) they negotiate until “she was feffed in his lond” (l. 1698). The use of the word *feffed* for May’s status is of particular note because it refers to giving a person “possession of a feudal estate held in heritable or perpetual tenure,” as well as “to put (an estate in land) in a person’s possession.”<sup>79</sup> The term is derived from *fee*, which in feudal law refers to a land estate.<sup>80</sup> It is possible to read the line “she was feffed in his lond” as referring to her taking possession of January’s estate; but in the context of May’s domination, it more likely indicates that May is in fact treated as property—she is now part of January’s estate, as if she had been incorporated into the land itself, where ownership remains at the hands of the “superior lord.” This treatment of women as commodity, however, would not be surprising to Chaucer’s contemporary readers: during the Middle Ages, certain crimes perpetrated against women, like rape, were in fact viewed as crimes against men’s property. This issue is of particular import in *The Wife of Bath’s Tale*, which begins with a rape scene and later includes what critics like Jill Mann have called a “rape-in-reverse” in the marriage of the Loathly Lady and the knight.<sup>81</sup> For January, May is a piece of property, and, more specifically, he sees her as a pleasure garden, for

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<sup>78</sup> For further discussion on May as a possession, see Paul A. Olson, “Chaucer’s Merchant and January’s ‘Hevene in Erthe Heere,’” *English Literary History* 28.3 (1961): 203-14.

<sup>79</sup> MED, s.v. *feffen* (v.) def. 1.a. and 1.c.

<sup>80</sup> OED, s.vv. *fee*, (n.2) def. I.1.a., “an estate in land ... held on condition of homage and service to a superior lord, by whom it is granted and in whom the ownership remains.”

<sup>81</sup> See Corinne J. Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2001).

he thinks of her as “His fresshe May, his paradys” (1822), at a time when *paradys* could refer to a beautiful earthly garden, especially an enclosed one.<sup>82</sup>

As one of January’s other prized possessions, the garden is precisely designed with beauty in mind, as the narrator reports that January, “Amonges othere of his honeste thynges, / ... made a gardyn, walled al with stoon” (ll. 2028-9), that is so fair, “that he that wroot the Romance of the Rose / Ne koude of it the beautee wel devyse” (ll. 2032-3). Even the most famous garden during the Middle Ages cannot compare to January’s.<sup>83</sup> While *honeste* can refer to something honorable and respectable, during the late Middle Ages, it also referred to something beautiful.<sup>84</sup> Thus, January’s garden complements his other beautiful possessions, and it is further beautified by the presence of a fountain and a laurel tree at the center (ll. 2034-5), which indicate that it is a traditional “pleasure garden” as Albertus Magnus defined in his treatise. As if he were transplanting flowers into the confines of a private garden, January wants to possess beauty alone, so much that he keeps it hidden from the sight of others. The garden is under lock and key, and “...he wol no wight suffren bere the keye / Save he himself” (ll. 2043-44); it becomes January’s favorite private place, and even May can only enter when in his company. January shows the possessiveness toward his garden as he does toward May:

... neither in halle, n’yn noon oother hous,  
 Ne in noon oother place, neverthemo,  
 He nolde suffer hire for to ryde or go,

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<sup>82</sup> MED s.v. *paradise* (n.) def. 3, “An orchard, a garden; a pleasure garden.” And OED, s.v. *paradise* (n.) def. 4a. “A garden, esp. an enclosed one; an orchard.”

<sup>83</sup> Unlike the young lover in the French poem, January is not the active protagonist in this garden. Rather, it is May who steps into the active role of pursuing a sexual goal.

<sup>84</sup> MED, s.v. *honeste* (adj.) def. 1.a. “Of persons, their reputations, desires: honorable, respectable, noble,” and def. 3.a. “Of things, animals, bodily parts: beautiful, comely, excellent, fine; of places, lands: beautiful, plenteous, rich ...”

But if that he had hond on hire always. (MerT, ll. 2088-91)

Chaucer underscores how January dehumanizes May and how he further instrumentalizes her, to use Plumwood's terminology, after his blindness sets in: she must constantly be within reach of his grasp wherever she goes. May loses any remaining freedom that she may have had as a human being, and while the lack of privacy is a burden for her, it gives him peace of mind. In response to his restrictiveness, "ful ofte wepeth fresshe May" (l. 2092), but she never audibly complains.

Chaucer establishes May and the garden alongside each other, as possessions in January's estate that augment the beauty within his grasp. Chaucer, however, also further ties them together through language with the use of the adjective *fresshe*.<sup>85</sup> This connection, like the association of women and flowers, places women and nature on a similar plane for readers. The word appears 21 times in the tale. Of these, 18 are used to describe May, and the remaining three refer to the garden itself or elements of nature within it.<sup>86</sup> When January first chooses May, out of all the maidens in town, for his wife, he thinks of her in relation to "Hir fresshe beautee and her age tender" (l. 1601); afterwards she is typically referred to as "fresshe May," which both continually evokes her youthfulness and strengthens her connection with nature. The first time the adjective is used to describe something other than May, it refers to the garden itself, appearing significantly late in the poem by the time a reader's association with *fresshe* and May is well established: January links his two possessions when he goes "Into his fresshe gardyn" (l.

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<sup>85</sup> MED s.v. *fresh* (adj.) def. 6a.a., "of flowers, gardens, etc.: unfaded, unwithered, verdant, fresh; ~ and grene"; def. 6a.b., "of human features: youthful, ruddy, gay, fresh." The following definitions may also inform how January sees May when he refers to her as *fresshe*: def. 7.a., "Gay, cheerful, joyous, lively, lusty"; def. 8.a., "Vigorous; not weary or tired out"; and def. 8.b., "Refreshed."

<sup>86</sup> The phrase "Hir fresshe beautee" is in l. 1601; the phrase "fresshe May" is used in ll. 1782, 1822, 1859, 1871, 1882 (which uses "fresshe lady May"), 1886, 1896, 1932, 1955, 1977, 2054, 2092, 2095, 2100, 2116, 2185, and 2328.

2158) while holding May by the hand. The other two uses of *fresshe* occur when Pluto and Proserpina enter the garden; while she gathers flowers, he sits “Upon a bench of turves, fresshe and grene” (l.2235).<sup>87</sup> And finally, when Damyan hides happily in the garden he is sitting up in the tree, “An heigh among the fresshe leves grene” (l. 2327). In addition, another definition for *fresshe* is “eager (to do something); bold, fierce.”<sup>88</sup> May’s “*fresshe*-ness” takes on a new meaning as the tale progresses and she acquires more agency. She is also bold and quick to respond when January accuses her of infidelity, easily convincing him that his eyes with newly restored sight have tricked him (ll. 2368-96). As her assigned adjective indicates, Chaucer characterizes May’s youth as well as the boldness of her actions throughout the tale.

As the tale progresses, just as May’s body is a sexualized object, the garden becomes a sexualized space where May’s sexuality and the garden as sexual location are joined together. It becomes January’s preferred location to take his wife, where “thynges which that were nat doon abedde, / He in the gardyn parfourned hem and spedde” (ll. 2051-52). The setting of January’s sexual relations with May has been transferred to the garden. However, these garden dalliances do not conjure up romantic images. On the contrary, the recurrent descriptions of the couple’s interactions hint that “*fresshe* May” does not welcome January’s sexual advances; the Merchant even indicates that, “She preyseth nat his pleyying worth a bene” (l.1854) to show her lack of satisfaction in the marriage. But as Norman Harrington has established, in *The Merchant’s Tale* there is a “heightened awareness of sex, particularly in its most ugly, violent, and repellent forms” that indicate May’s aversion toward her husband’s advances.<sup>89</sup> Harrington further adds

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<sup>87</sup> *Turves* refer to pieces of turf; thus, Pluto sits on a turf bench. *MED* s.v. *turf* (n.) def. 1a. “A slab of earth cut from the surface of the soil with grass and roots adhering.”

<sup>88</sup> *MED*, s.v. *fresh* (adj.) def. 9.a.

<sup>89</sup> For more on sexuality in the *Merchant’s Tale*, see Norman T. Harrington, “Chaucer’s Merchant’s Tale: Another Swing of the Pendulum,” *PMLA* 86.1 (1971): 25-31 (qt. from 29).

that intimate details between January and May are shown with distressing meticulousness, while focusing on January's physical appearance almost as if trying to disgust the reader,<sup>90</sup> as occurs when January, "With thikke brustles of his berd unsoften" (l.1824) takes May in his arms and "rubbeth hire aboute hir tendre face" (l.1827). Chaucer constructs the quintessential marriage between two unequal types, and takes every opportunity to point out May's disgust and dissatisfaction with January, while also establishing an association between sexuality and nature in which the marginalized are the sexualized objects. The imbalance of power and satisfaction in the marriage leads to a struggle over mastery of the garden; this is of significance when contrasted with *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, which I will discuss at length below, where the balance of power and satisfaction in a marriage leads to a balanced mastery over nature.

In the end, January metaphorically transfers so much of his masculine power into controlling access to the garden, as well as the garden itself, that it becomes very easy for May to emasculate him. The Merchant states that,

This noble knyght, this Januarie the olde,  
Swich deyntee hath in it to walke and playe,  
That he wol no wight suffren bere the keye  
Save he hymself; for of the smale wyket  
He baar alway of silver a clyket,  
With which, whan that hym leste, he it unshette.  
And whan he wolde paye his wyf hir dette  
In somer seson, thider wolde he go,  
And May his wyf, and no wight but they two;

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<sup>90</sup> Harrington, "Chaucer's Merchant's Tale," 29.

And thynges which that were nat doon abedde,

He in the gardyn parfourned hem and spedde. (MerT, ll. 2042-52)

January believes he is the only one who can access the garden, and always carries with him the silver latchkey, *clyket*, for the small door within the larger gate, *wyket*,<sup>91</sup> so that “whan that hym leste, he it unshette.” The phallic association of the unsheathed latchkey is extended when the narrator states in no uncertain terms that January “wolde paye his wyf hir dette” by having sexual relations with her in the garden. When May makes a copy in wax of the garden key and passes on the replica to Damyan (l. 2114-21), she takes control of January’s phallic power (the key) to gain access to a space she re-appropriates for her own pleasure. Temporarily, May directs Damyan, and, to an extent, January, who, even though he has regained his sight, is malleable in the end and, as Joseph Parry points out, becomes “the passive member of the relationship.”<sup>92</sup>

However, she is still January’s property, as is the garden, and, although she gains power through speech in the conclusion of the tale, she will likely be silenced again. Throughout the majority of the tale, May never speaks. Readers are only privy to her “thoghte” (ll. 1982-5) when she decides to love Damyan, but she does not otherwise express her views vocally until she enters the garden temporarily not controlled by men; it is then that she speaks repeatedly.<sup>93</sup> Although her speech, partly inspired by Proserpina (ll. 2265-70), is quick, fluid, and argumentative, it is short lived; in the end “to his palays hoom [January] hath hire lad” (l. 2415). January leads May by the hand out of the garden setting and into an indoor setting; and while *leden* retains its meaning and refers to the act of conducting or guiding someone, it also means

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<sup>91</sup> While the term *wyket* refers to a “small door,” it can also refer to a woman’s vulva. See MED, s.v. *wiket* (n.) def. 1.a, and 2.a, respectively.

<sup>92</sup> Joseph D. Parry, “Interpreting Female Agency and Responsibility in the *Miller’s Tale* and the *Merchant’s Tale*,” *Philological Quarterly* 80.2 (2001): 155.

<sup>93</sup> In lines 2188-2206, 2368-75, 2380-3, 2387-9, and 2396-2410.

“to control [and] have power over” another.<sup>94</sup> Chaucer emphasizes January’s regained sight and regained control over her and the garden. The Merchant closes the tale with “Now, goode men, I pray yow to be glad” (l. 2417), encouraging his male audience to be pleased for January’s re-appropriation of power. With such an ending to the tale, Chaucer underscores the return to patriarchal control: both the woman and the garden are once again possessions belonging to a man. However, by undercutting the sympathy he has built for May, he prompts his audience to see the ills of January’s power.

#### ***V. Mastering Green: The Wife of Bath’s Tale***

As I have argued, Emelye wants mastery over her life choices and wishes to leave the confines of a stylized nature, and May wants mastery over an enclosed space of nature by reclaiming the garden as her own personal *paradyse*. The Loathly Lady in *The Wife of Bath’s Tale* presents a new challenge to man’s dominion over the marginalized, however. She wants a degree of mastery over man, which then, I argue, extends to a reorganization of the power dynamic in the land. Chaucer’s Loathly Lady differs significantly from Emelye and May in that she possesses both a higher degree of power through supernatural abilities and an unbound territorial link to nature: While Emelye and May are tied to enclosed gardens (one placed within it by a man and the other kept out of it by a man), the Loathly Lady comes out of wild nature, the forest *grene*, and is ungoverned by men. Her connection to untamed nature is significant because her marriage becomes the only one of the three to involve shared power between husband and wife, not domination; her equalized marriage, I contend, symbolically parallels the lesson found in medieval Celtic Sovereignty tales regarding a king’s relationship with the land, and thus

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<sup>94</sup> MED, s.vv *leden* (v.1) def. 1.a, 2.a, and 4.a, respectively.

informs the contemporary relationship between English landlords and the systems of open-field and enclosure.

*The Wife of Bath's Tale* tells of a rapist knight who is condemned to find within the span of a year what women most desire or lose his head upon his return to court. After much traveling and too many possible answers, he encounters an old woman by the side of the woods. She gives him the answer: "Wommen desiren to have sovereynetee / As well over hir housbond as hir love, / And for to been in maistrie hym above" (ll. 1037-40). His life is spared, but in exchange she tricks him into marrying her. He complies unwillingly and continually laments his fate of marrying a poor and haggard old wife.<sup>95</sup> After she lectures him on *gentillesse*, she transforms into a beautiful and faithful young woman when he agrees to give her mastery.

*The Wife of Bath's Tale* has often been read productively through lenses of gender and of class.<sup>96</sup> The tale asks readers to reconsider longstanding assumptions that man should exercise power over the marginalized, as also occurred in *The Knight's Tale* and *The Merchant's Tale*, and it prompts readers to question whether members of the nobility are inherently superior to those of lower status. Dinshaw has argued that in *The Wife of Bath's Tale* Chaucer gives voice to the "excluded feminine" through the author's critique of patriarchal discourse, and that precisely

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<sup>95</sup> Chaucer never gives a detailed description of the Loathly Lady, unlike other analogues of the tale. When the knight first sees her, readers are told that, "A fouler wight ther may no man devyse" (l. 999), and she is repeatedly described as foul and loathsome.

<sup>96</sup> For more on gendered readings of *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, see Lynne Dickson, "Deflection in the Mirror: Feminine Discourse in *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 15 (1993): 61-90; Susan Carter, "Coupling the Beastly Bride and the Hunter Hunted: What Lies Behind Chaucer's 'The Wife of Bath's Tale,'" *Chaucer Review* 37.4 (2003): 329-45. For more on social class, see Dorothy Colmer, "Character and Class in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 72 (1973): 329-39; Mary Carruthers, "The Wife of Bath and the Painting of Lions," *PMLA* 94.2 (1979): 209-22; Stephen Knight, "The Social Function of Middle English Romances," *Medieval Literature: Criticism, Ideology, and History*, ed. David Aers (New York: St. Martin's, 1986), 99-122; Louise O. Fradenburg, "The Wife of Bath's Passing Fancy," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 11 (1989), 31-58.

because of his awareness of the ills of patriarchy, through his writings Chaucer tried to give voice to otherwise silent women.<sup>97</sup> In tracing the excluded feminine in these three tales, the women who are associated with enclosed gardens have limited speech. Emelye only speaks to Diana in prayer, and May only speaks when inspired by Proserpina. Before and after these moments they are silent. But the Loathly Lady, originating in wild nature and associated with a Celtic goddess of the land, speaks repeatedly and even speaks more than the knight. The Wife's tale does eventually show a reversed gender dynamic when the Loathly Lady requires that the knight marry her. As Jill Mann has suggested, the knight's forced marriage is a more fitting punishment to his crime than his previous task by the Queen. Mann characterizes it as "a fantasy realisation of rape-in-reverse."<sup>98</sup> The Loathly Lady has taken power, speech, and autonomy away from a man. But that power struggle evens out in the end, and Mann sees the tale's ending as advocating for a "visionary glimpse of *mutuality* in male-female relationships" in which even the sense of "obedience" changes to reflect an emotional rather than an oppressive response.<sup>99</sup> The inversion and eventual equalizing of power between a man and a woman, in marriage, takes on a larger meaning, beyond that of the personal relationship, when examined through associations with the Celtic analogues of other Loathly Lady tales.

Many scholars have noted the connection between the Loathly Lady and the Sovereignty goddess, but often these associations focus on the depiction of a balanced marriage. I wish to

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<sup>97</sup> Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*, 129, and Priscilla Martin, *Chaucer's Women: Nuns, Wives, and Amazons* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1990), 210.

<sup>98</sup> Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer*, 72.

<sup>99</sup> Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer*, 74, italics original.

reexamine the link to the Sovereignty tradition in regards to mastery over the land.<sup>100</sup>

Particularly, I find the challenge to the consensus of male power by favoring a mutually beneficial marriage, rather than a hierarchical one, to be a metaphorical representation of man's rule of the land. Traditionally, in the Sovereignty tales, "the female deity was the embodiment of the physical land and of its dominion and the sacred marriage between goddess and king-spouse was the foundation of societal rule."<sup>101</sup> Although the knight is not a king, he can be seen as representative of male power in general and the noble class in particular—a key point to consider when he is lectured on *gentillesse*.

When the story begins, Chaucer establishes a link between the non-human female world and a safer outdoor space, and a link between the human male world with that of a threatening place. As Elizabeth Biebel-Stanley explains, "nature, the locus of women's power in the Celtic sovereignty tales, becomes violated by the masculine will as society and its masculine principle of power ... encroaches upon the feminine principle."<sup>102</sup> In other words, male control proliferates over natural spaces associated with women, only in this case such control extends beyond the

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<sup>100</sup> For more on Celtic Sovereignty legends, see S. Elizabeth Passmore, "Through the Counsel of a Lady: The Irish and English Loathly Lady Tales and the 'Mirror for Princes' Genre," *The English 'Loathly Lady' Tales: Boundaries, Traditions, Motifs*, ed. S. Elizabeth Passmore and Susan Carter (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007), 3-41; and Elizabeth M. Biebel-Stanley, "Sovereignty Through the Lady: 'The Wife of Bath's Tale' and the Queenship of Anne of Bohemia," *The English 'Loathly Lady' Tales: Boundaries, Traditions, Motifs*, ed. S. Elizabeth Passmore and Susan Carter (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007), 73-82. These studies, of course, are indebted to earlier explorations of Chaucerian literature and Celtic folklore by O.J. Padel, *Arthur in Medieval Welsh Literature* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000); Kemp Malone, "The Wife of Bath's Tale," *Modern Language Review* 57.4 (1962): 481-91; and Roger S. Loomis, *Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1927).

<sup>101</sup> Erica J. Sessle, "Exploring the Limitations of the Sovereignty Goddess Through the Role of Rhiannon," *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 14 (1994): 9. See also Alfred K. Siewers, "Reading the Otherworld Environmentally," *Strange Beauty: Ecocritical Approaches to Early Medieval Landscape* (New York: Pallgrave MacMillan, 2009), 35-65.

<sup>102</sup> Biebel-Stanley, "Sovereignty Through the Lady," 75.

garden and the palace woods, as was the case in *The Knight's Tale* and *The Merchant's Tale*, and envelops larger regions pertaining to a community's land. When the Wife of Bath begins her tale, she says that in the past, "Al was this land fulfild of fayerye. / The elf-queene, with hir joly compaignye, / Daunced ful ofte in many a grene mede" (WBT, ll. 859-61). The Wife emphasizes the lively and happy atmosphere in a land overseen by a female deity. However, the idyllic reign has ended. Men have taken over the land, displacing the female authority figure from the outdoors and creating a threat for the remaining human women. The elf-queen is banished from her former dominion in nature by the "lymytours," the mendicant friars who are limited to working within a certain space.<sup>103</sup> As the Wife goes on to state,

For ther as wont to walken was an elf  
 Ther walketh now the lymytour himself  
 In undermeles and in morwenynges,<sup>104</sup>  
 And seyth his matins and his hooly thinges  
 As he gooth in hys lymytacioun.  
 Wommen may go saufly up and doun.  
 In every bussh or under every tree  
 Ther is noon oother incubus but he,  
 And he ne wol doon hem but dishonour. (WBT, ll. 873-81)

Chaucer tinges the Wife's words with irony when she points out that women can now "go saufly" in this land, presently under friar control, because there will be no other sexual threat, or

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<sup>103</sup> MED s.v. *limitour* (n.) def. a. "A mendicant friar whose begging, preaching, and hearing of confessions was limited to one of the subdivisions of the territory of a monastery."

<sup>104</sup> MED s.v. *undermel(e)* (n.) def. a. "The early part of the afternoon"; and s.v. *morwenyng (morninge)* (n.) def. 1.a. "Morning, dawn, break of day."

*incubus*, in the land but the friar himself.<sup>105</sup> When under man's control, natural spaces become dangerous.

The Wife associates men's dominion of the land with sexual assaults on women. The *lymytours* take possession of the land with no regard to other (non-human) inhabitants, as Theseus does in *The Knight's Tale*, and the knight takes possession of the maiden's body with no regard to her outcry. Linking the abuse of women's bodies with the control of the land has significant ramifications about male power and dominion during the Middle Ages, as well as the sexual objectification and commodification of the marginalized. Women, like the land, could be someone's property, as we see when May is "feffed" to January's land (MerT, l. 1698). In *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, female characters initially lose control of their physicality: the elf-queen is dispossessed of her land, and the maiden of her maidenhead. The Loathly Lady, however, maintains her power and extracts control away from the knight from the moment she first appears. The Wife says,

And in this wey it happed hym to ryde,  
 In al this care, under a forest syde,  
 Wher as he saugh upon a daunce go  
 Of ladyes foure and twenty, and yet mo;  
 Toward the which daunce he drow ful yerne,  
 In hope that som wysdom sholde he lerne.  
 But certeinly, er he cam fully there,  
 Vanysshed was this daunce, he nyste where.  
 No creature saugh he that bar lyf,

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<sup>105</sup> MED s.v. *incubus* (n.) def. a. "A spirit or demon which deludes and terrifies people in dreams, which has intercourse with women in their sleep, and which may drive men mad."

Save on the grene he saugh sittynge a wyf—

A fouler wight ther may no man devyse. (WBT, ll. 989-99)

There is an air of mystery surrounding the Loathly Lady, and her dancing companions are reminiscent of the elf-queen's *joly compaignye*. They vanish while the Loathly Lady remains, anticipating the knight's approach, sitting on the *grene mede* and bringing to mind the elf-queen's dancing ground. A *grene* is particularly "a grassy place, a field, the ground, [or] the green earth."<sup>106</sup> Both of these female figures are introduced in relation to the land, and both possess supernatural abilities, as does the Sovereignty goddess.

Amidst issues of land occupation and control, the Loathly Lady, as a Sovereignty figure connected to nature, advocates for balance rather than struggle in the relationship between a husband and a wife, as well as the relationship between man and the land. Thus, the education of the knight through her lecture on *gentillesse* not to abuse power applies to his association to the land, as well as his treatment of women. In *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, we see a female figure who is outside the garden walls, who appears to occupy the *wodes wilde* that Emelye longed for, who has control over her physical body, unlike May, and who chooses the knight as her sexual partner, a choice that the other two women lack.<sup>107</sup> The mutual relationship exhibited at the end of the tale shows a couple that "functions as two individuals and as one" because neither is forced to follow the other's will.<sup>108</sup> The Loathly Lady, as a Sovereignty figure with a strong

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<sup>106</sup> MED, s.v. *grene* (n.) def. 1.a. "A grassy place, a field, the ground, the green earth; village or town green."

<sup>107</sup> Also, in other analogues of the story the Loathly Lady does not have control over her shape-shifting but instead is under a curse cast by someone else, as is the case in *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* and Gower's *Tale of Florent*. Chaucer's change is important because the Loathly Lady, in maintaining power over herself, is a stronger female figure than the rest.

<sup>108</sup> Biebel-Stanley, "Sovereignty Through the Lady," 79. Her argument is directed at the relationship between a king and his queen (in this case, Richard II and Queen Anne).

connection to the *grene* and to the woodland fairies (non-human) is as a stand-in for the land; she instructs the knight, as representative of noble men, to coexist with her and “lyve unto hir lyves ende / In parfit joye” (ll. 1257-8).

Presenting the Loathly Lady as a stand in for the land allows for a nuanced reading of the *gentillesse* (nobility) speech she gives to the knight. A seemingly unexpected oration that explains the origin of nobility as coming from a person’s good actions (ll. 1113-6) and from God (ll. 1129-30) rather than from riches (l. 1110) or inheritance (l. 1118), the exchange between the Loathly Lady and the knight has an undercurrent that links the tale to issues of the land. When the knight complains of his marriage to her, he says, “Thou art so loothly, and so oold also, / And therto comen of so lough a kynde” (ll. 1100-01). The word *kynde* is commonly taken to mean “lineage,” and the knight’s criticism assumed to refer to her seeming low birth and poverty.<sup>109</sup> However, *kynde* can also refer to “nature,” and by choosing this reading of the term the knight’s critique takes on a different focus.<sup>110</sup> Rather than her poverty, her “lough a kynde” can evoke closeness to the land itself, since the term *lough* precisely can refer to “being distant from heaven and close to the center of the earth,” or in geographical terms from a low land or meadow.<sup>111</sup> But rather than move closer, the knight would prefer to distance himself from the physical land she represents—instead, such actions would be detrimental to his rule were this a Celtic sovereignty narrative. But he is no king; he is merely a nameless knight, a nobleman “everyman” figure for those disrespectful of the land/women.

The Loathly Lady’s words condemn the knight’s views on the marginalized—those of a *lough kynde*. Her lesson, which is directed at noblemen (l. 1111) who base their status on their

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<sup>109</sup> MED, s.v. *kinde* (n.) def. 11.a.

<sup>110</sup> MED, s.v. *kinde* (n.) def. 8.a.

<sup>111</sup> MED, s.v. *loue* (adj.) def. 1.b and 1.c, respectively.

ancestors' riches, and who claim noble lineage through family heritage (ll. 1118-20), centers on perspective: How man chooses to see the land and how he positions himself in relation to it will dictate his relationship with the land. At this time, England was experiencing a massive commodification of the land at a faster rate than ever before.<sup>112</sup> The shift was from the open-field system of agriculture (the fields of a manor or village were divided into strips of land that were then cultivated by peasants) to enclosure. *Enclosure* referred to a landowner's restriction of the communal pastures, or open-field system, by enclosing land that once was shared with the commoners and privatizing its use (typically, the switch was from arable land to sheep grazing).<sup>113</sup> The practice of enclosure slowly gained momentum, since it was legalized in the Statute of Merton in 1235, later fueled a number of rebellions, and was one of the factors that prompted the Peasants' Revolt (an event that Chaucer directly references in *The Nun's Priest's Tale*).<sup>114</sup> This change caused social and economic stress among the farmers, many of whom were forced off the lands. As a Sovereignty figure of the land, the Loathly Lady's insistence that the knight be conscious of those less fortunate brings to mind the struggling tenants oppressed by the English landlords as the number of arable lands was shrinking.

Chaucer is famously subtle when it comes to including historical events in his writings (the Peasants' Revolt is one exception). But I propose that *The Wife of Bath's Tale* goes beyond commentary on gender relationships in the Middle Ages and denotes the problematic

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<sup>112</sup> See Allan Kulikoff, *From British Peasants to Colonial American Farmers* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 11.

<sup>113</sup> See Simon Fairlie, "A Short History of Enclosure in Britain," *The Land* 7 (2009): 13-16.

<sup>114</sup> Discontent with enclosure was one of the issues behind The Peasants' Revolt in 1381. It became a prominent issue in Jack Cade's rebellion in 1450, Kett's rebellion in 1549, and in the Captain Pouch revolts from 1604-1607.

commodification and redistribution of the land—a redistribution that led to the large displacement of people from the country to the city.<sup>115</sup>

## ***VI. Conclusion***

Many scholars recognize Chaucer's challenge to his audience to consider the problematic lack of position granted women in medieval society. What has been less obvious is that the strong alignment of women and nature in Chaucer's works reflects a critique not only of man's overpowering of women, but also of his indifference to and lack of respect for nature. The less powerful, such as nature and women, as Chaucer reveals, are often at the mercy of man's control. Such is the lesson Emelye experiences when she is forced to accept two unwanted husbands and witness the partial destruction of the *wodes wilde* she desires. The powerful men Chaucer shows in *The Knight's Tale* (Theseus, Palamon, and Arcite), although they consider themselves benevolent, disregard the wishes and wellbeing of those they see as marginalized. They are not doing it deliberately (they do not intentionally pain Emelye, nor does Theseus set out to destroy the woods for the purpose of destruction), but rather they are unaware of the harm that they are orchestrating by seeing only their own gratification and others as instruments for that gratification. May, in *The Merchant's Tale*, becomes a commodity, just like the garden, because of her beauty. For January, May, as a thing of beauty, is as much a *paradyse* as the garden, and thus meant to be possessed. Like Theseus, Palamon, and Arcite, January is not evil nor does he deliberately mean to hurt his wife. But, like the others, he is unaware of how his actions constrict the woman in his life. By focusing on the patriarchy's ill treatment of the less powerful, Chaucer calls attention to the imbalance created by society and shows that both nature and women suffer

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<sup>115</sup> Rosemary Hopcroft, *Regions, Institutions, and Agrarian Change in European History* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 17-20.

when “owned” and limited, held as objects for admiration rather than allowed to coexist. In *The Wife of Bath’s Tale*, it is precisely a woman who voices the concern for her sex and for nature, while instructing man (the nobility) on how to acquire an awareness of his relationship with the land. The Loathly Lady embodies a connection to the land and attempts to sway man to value perspectives other than his impulse to dominate, to commodify, and to own.

Unlike the Anglo-Saxon period, nature is no longer the looming threat that should be kept within bounds or colonized. Instead, in Chaucer’s medieval world, the land and women are aesthetically pleasing objects that man erroneously attempts to own and control. As a constant thread in the stories, all three tales deal with noblemen, albeit of varying degrees; Chaucer here appears to be including a touch of the didactic and following Gower’s “middel weie” of “sentence and solas” and writing “somewhat of lust, somewhat of lore.” His entertaining stories offer a lesson for the nobleman.

While Chaucer questions issues of mastery over the marginalized and the commodification of the land, a contemporary writer in the West Midlands of England, the *Pearl*-poet, presents the benefits of proper stewardship of the land and also seems to provide a model for the nobleman.

## Chapter 3

Green Knight, Green Steward: Environmental Sustainability in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

The divine mandate to use the world justly and charitably ... defines every person's moral predicament as that of a steward. But this predicament is hopeless and meaningless unless it produces an appropriate discipline: stewardship. And stewardship is hopeless and meaningless unless it involves long-term courage, perseverance, devotion, and skill. This skill is not to be confused with any accomplishment or grace of spirit or of intellect. It has to do with everyday proprieties in the practical use and care of the created things—with 'right livelihood.'

~ Wendell Berry<sup>1</sup>

The *Pearl*-poet gives readers an unexpected ideal for achieving a sustainable relationship between the court and nature in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. King Arthur and his court are aristocratic men, the members of society who historically divided the land into civilized territories or wild spaces. Because Arthurian knights often exemplify social ideals, in a text that values responsible maintenance of the natural environment, they theoretically should also represent an ideal of stewardship. Yet the *Pearl*-poet, whose interest in landscape and green spaces has long been recognized, chooses another figure to embody that ideal: the Green Knight, who occupies a castle on the geographical fringes of society and is treated as a stranger to the

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<sup>1</sup> Wendell Berry, *The Gift of Good Land: Further Essays Cultural and Agricultural* (1981; rpt. New York: Counterpoint, 2009).

Arthurian court, showcases a more complex understanding of the natural environment.<sup>2</sup> While a prior generation of scholars theorized that he represented a “nature” figure or that his location marked him as somehow “closer” to nature, I argue that the Green Knight exhibits a concern for his land and its creatures that shows an early English example of environmental awareness.<sup>3</sup> The *Pearl*-poet depicts the politically and geographically marginalized Knight caring for his land and monitoring the wildlife; he depicts the Knight’s control as a program of conservation that cannot be simply explained by the assumption that he is a figure of nature. Rather, his interactions with the environment become an alternative model for noble readers, contrasted to the frivolous court. Through the juxtapositions of the Arthurian court and the Green Knight, the poet asserts a new ideal of knighthood, one that is specifically attuned to nature *qua* nature.

First, I will outline useful modern approaches to *SGGK* before turning to analyze the text. Although likely written ca. 1385, a published transcription of the poem from the extant MS Cotton Nero A.x was first available in 1839, but a translation, by Jessie L. Weston, was not available until 1898. Since then, critics have applied various methodologies to it that underscore the rich and layered content of the poem. From looking at the poem’s representations of courtly

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<sup>2</sup> For more on the poet’s different uses of landscape in *Sir Gawain*, see Ralph W.V. Elliott, “Some Northern Landscape Features in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” *Iceland and the Mediaeval World: Studies in Honour of Ian Maxwell*, ed. Gabriel Turville-Petre and John Stanley Martin (Clayton, Australia: Wilke and Company, 1974), 132-43; Ordelle G. Hill, *Looking Westward: Poetry, Landscape, and Politics in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Newark: University of Delaware, 2009); in *Pearl*, see John Finlayson, “‘Pearl’: Landscape and Vision,” *Studies in Philology* 71.3 (1974): 314-43; and Elizabeth Petroff, “Landscape in *Pearl*: The Transformation of Nature,” *The Chaucer Review* 16.2 (1981): 181-93.

<sup>3</sup> For the Green Knight as a version of the Green Man, see Jessie L. Weston, *From Ritual to Romance* (1919; rpt. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), and John Speirs, *Medieval English Poetry: The Non-Chaucerian Tradition* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), 148. Speirs’ book is a reprint of his original article “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” in *Scrutiny* 16 (1949): 274-300. For a critique of this view as more indicative of the early twentieth century attitudes toward nature than medieval ones, see Derek Brewer, “The Colour Green,” *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, ed. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson (Cambridge: Brewer, 1997), 181.

traditions, to gender roles and sexual mores, scholars have used varied lenses.<sup>4</sup> In analyzing the text's distinctive North Midlands' dialect, critics have been able to specify setting and location more easily—even though almost nothing is known of the poet.<sup>5</sup> Such work has permitted other critics, like Michael J. Bennett, to pursue the historical and political background of the poem more closely. Focusing on the historiography of medieval England, Bennett broadly explores Lancashire and Cheshire, the regions' provincial culture, as well as the power structure of the gentry, and how this informs events in the poem creating possible Ricardian connections.<sup>6</sup> While the historical context is crucial for a modern understanding of the poem, so is the artistic quality of the poem. Alain Renoir discusses the famed descriptive skill of the *Pearl*-Poet in guiding the reader's attention through visuals:

The technique of our poet is to draw a single detail out of a uniformly illuminated scene which is then allowed to fade out in obscurity and of which we may be given an occasional dim glimpse at psychologically appropriate moments. The twentieth century is thoroughly familiar with this device. In effect, it is that most commonly associated with the cinematograph, where the camera may at will focus either upon the whole scene or upon a single detail, while illumination may

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<sup>4</sup> See David Aers, *Medieval Literature: Criticism, Ideology, and History* (New York: Harvester, 1986), 99-122; and Geraldine Heng, "Feminine Knots and the Other: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *PMLA* 106 (1991): 500-14.

<sup>5</sup> Marie Borroff, "The Phonological Evidence," *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: A Stylistic and Metrical Study* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962).

<sup>6</sup> See: Michael J. Bennett, *Community, Class and Careerism: Cheshire and Lancashire Society in the Age of SGGK* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003), and "The Historical Background," *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, ed. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson (Cambridge: Brewer, 1997), 71-90.

be used so as to keep the audience aware of the background against which the action takes place.<sup>7</sup>

If, as Renoir attests, the *Pearl*-poet had cinematographic-like skills, then like a modern-day cinematographer the poet would have chosen every image carefully attempting to conjure certain visuals for the reader. A great number of these visuals focus precisely on nature, both in Camelot and Hautdesert; the environmental close-ups in the poem are the ones I find blooming with meaning for a “green reading” of the text. Following in Renoir’s work, Sarah Stanbury argues that *SGGK* is “an emphatically visual poem,” and one that “luxuriates in visual detail, describing people and their dress” as well as “the passage of the seasons, architectural detail, decorative furnishings, and natural scenery.”<sup>8</sup> Nothing, she states, escapes the poet’s eye. But the question remains, “What is the role of these visual acts [in the poem]?” Stanbury believes “this question is crucial for understanding a text that subtly yet persistently eludes clarification, for it allows access to the poem through a system of perceptual lenses rather than a single monocular focus.”<sup>9</sup> Stanbury’s study of visual acts in the poem is pivotal in examining the dichotomy the poet sets up when looking at the outdoors/indoors, allowing his poetic eye to linger on these different settings, and thus allowing readers’ eyes to focus attention more on one or the other. In my examination of *SGGK* I will be employing broad views, particularly when dealing with historical issues, like those Bennett raises, but my main focus will be on the specific, like Stanbury and Renoir, in analyzing what the *Pearl*-Poet has chosen to show us, what the poet has underscored, and what political, cultural, and, mainly, environmental issues a scene may stress.

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<sup>7</sup> Alain Renoir, “Descriptive Techniques in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” *Orbis Litterarum* 13 (1958): 127.

<sup>8</sup> Sarah Stanbury, *Seeing the Gawain Poet: Description and the Act of Perception* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 97.

<sup>9</sup> Stanbury, *Seeing the Gawain Poet*, 98.

The methodologies of modern critics who have examined *SGGK* allow glimpses both into the minutia of the poem—from the smallest embroidered detail on Guinevere’s dress—and into its vastness—to the socio-political lessons it offers readers. In her examination of the poem, Lynn Arner sees the Green Knight as a hybrid figure, a border figure between the English and the Welsh. Rather than a border hybrid, Larry D. Benson sees the Green Knight as a very clearly-defined figure: the “stock enemy of knighthood in medieval romance,” to be precise. Benson, like John Speirs, considers the Green Knight to be a version of the Wild Man in literature.<sup>10</sup>

This notion of hybridity—long recognized in *SGGK* scholarship—is also essential to understanding the Green Knight’s potential as an environmentally centered figure. In recent years, *Sir Gawain* has become a staple text for medievalists to reexamine from an ecocritical perspective. William F. Woods uses nature as a way to see into the inner self, particularly Gawain’s, and argues for an existing link to nature within man; and Michael W. George sees Gawain as antagonistic toward nature while the Green Knight exhibits a harmonious relationship with nature. More recently Gillian Rudd underscores the importance of the natural wilderness in Wirral for a full understanding of the poem’s ecological bent.<sup>11</sup> Building on these studies and additionally considering how Bertilak/the Green Knight interacts with the flora and fauna, I illustrate how he exemplifies an ideal steward. I define *stewardship* as referring to the responsible use of resources that allow for a sustainable existence, following environmental activist Wendell Barry’s figurative definition of stewardship as “a ‘marriage’ of man and place,

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<sup>10</sup> See Larry D. Benson, *Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1965), 72-95, and John Speirs, “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” in *Scrutiny* 16 (1949): 274-300.

<sup>11</sup> For recent ecocritical readings of the poem, see William F. Woods, “Nature and the Inner Man in ‘Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,’” *The Chaucer Review* 36.6 (2002): 209-27; Michael W. George, “Gawain’s Struggle with Ecology: Attitudes toward the Natural World in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” *The Journal of Ecocriticism* 2.2 (2010): 30-44; and Gillian Rudd, “‘The Wilderness if Wirral’ in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” *Arthuriana* 23.1 (2013): 52-65.

culture and nature.”<sup>12</sup> Stewardship is not about dominion but balance. As ecologist Aldo Leopold explains,

A harmonious relation to land is more intricate, and of more consequence to civilization, than the historians of its progress seem to realize. Civilization is not ... the enslavement of a stable and constant earth. It is a state of *mutual and interdependent coöperation* between human animals, other animals, plants, and soils, which may be disrupted at any moment by the failure of any of them.<sup>13</sup>

For Leopold, a prominent and influential voice in environmental studies, building a mutual relationship of sustainability between humans and the environment leads to a stronger society, more so than anything else humans can build. The *Pearl*-poet expresses a similar sentiment by contrasting a world built by humans, where they are constantly building and rebuilding, with a place built by humans but balanced within nature. While we might assume that medieval thinkers would adhere to Genesis’s edict that grants man dominion over all created nature, the *Pearl*-poet demonstrates an emerging sense of stewardship as an ideal.<sup>14</sup>

Part of what makes the Green Knight an ideal is the fact that he is a hybrid figure:

Bertilak is the quintessential aristocratic host, and the Green Knight is the supernaturally green

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<sup>12</sup> Qtd. in Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* (London/New York: Routledge, 2004), 113.

<sup>13</sup> Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac & Other Writings on Ecology and Conservation*, ed. Curt Meine (1949; rpt. New York: Library of America, 2013), 326-7. Italics original.

<sup>14</sup> The basis for the challenge to dominion usually comes in discussions of modern marriage, which is typically much more balanced than many scholars once assumed medieval marriages to have been. However, there are prominent examples in Chaucer and Gower (e.g., *The Wife of Bath’s Tale* and other marriage group tales) that illustrate how a balanced marriage is an ideal itself and also a useful metaphor for imagining social and political ideals. See, for example, Jill Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer* (Cambridge, U.K.: D.S. Brewer, 2002), 70-99; and Misty Schieberle, “Thing Which a Man Mai Noght Areche: Women and Counsel in Gower’s ‘Confessio Amantis,’” *The Chaucer Review* 42.1 (2007): 91-109.

guardian figure. Scholars recognize his hybridity in terms of political affinities.<sup>15</sup> A hybrid figure is particularly suited for a poem originating from the northwest Midlands of England because the region itself houses disparate cultures. A courtly and frontier-like society comprises the original audience for the poem, and Bertilak/Green Knight becomes a figure that speaks to both groups.<sup>16</sup> On the one hand, as Michael Bennett explains, the remoteness of the region, its forbidding topography and climate led to spotty settlements and a frontier-like atmosphere.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, in the fourteenth century it became a “bastion of royal power” because of connections to the royal household and its designation as a palatinate, granted to John of Gaunt in 1377.<sup>18</sup> While the northwest Midlands appeared rugged, there were some gentrified households in the region—it was not the social wasteland it appeared to be to outsiders.

Of course, one might object that the Green Knight’s potential antagonism of the court in the first Fitt challenges the view of him as a temperate or courtly persona.<sup>19</sup> However, the natural symbols associated with his entry highlight precisely the balance that I argue he exemplifies in the poem as a whole between nature and man’s stewardship of it. He introduces himself to

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<sup>15</sup> Lynn Arner, “The Ends of Enchantment: Colonialism and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” in *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* (2006): 79-101, outlines how different aspects of the character can speak to different aspects of cultural debate in her reading of the Green Knight as a political hybrid addressing colonialist tensions between the English and Welsh. The notion of hybridity is equally instructive for parsing through the varying attitudes toward nature in the poem.

<sup>16</sup> Michael J. Bennett, in *Community, Class, and Careerism: Cheshire and Lancashire Society in the Age of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 7, posits that the poet’s patrons were from the region and possessed these characteristics.

<sup>17</sup> Bennett, *Community, Class, and Careerism*, 8-9.

<sup>18</sup> Michael J. Bennett, “The Historical Background,” in *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, eds. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997), 72-3.

<sup>19</sup> The Green Knight unceremoniously throws open the hall doors (l. 136), while holding an ax in his hand (l. 208), calls the knights beardless children, “berdlez chylder” (l. 280), and challenges them to a Christmas game, “Crystemas gomen” (l. 283) that is typically assumed to be the beheading game.

Arthur's court while holding a holly branch in one hand and an ax in the other. Some have seen these items as delivering a mixed signal—the holly is a symbol of peace and the ax is a weapon of war.<sup>20</sup> The *spetos sparþe* (l. 209) is usually translated as the “wicked ax”; however, while *spetos* can indeed mean “cruel” or “malicious,” it can also refer to something “fierce.”<sup>21</sup> The ax does not necessarily imply war, for it can also denote the preferred tool of the forester. Some medieval foresters asserted that using a saw to cut a tree was detrimental to the possibility of regrowth, and they favored the cleaner cut of the ax.<sup>22</sup> As ecological historian Oliver Rackham explains, people in the Middle Ages were concerned with the conservation of trees and knew they had to keep their resources on a renewable basis; as early as 1250 woods were maintained with the assumption that felled trees would be replaced by new growth if properly cut down.<sup>23</sup> In this light, the Green Knight's ax becomes a symbol of conservation rather than destruction when in the hands of a steward of nature. However, a court inattentive to the practices of land management would easily misread the symbol.

Bertilak/the Green Knight mediates between court and nature, but his identities are not as split as they might initially appear. Rather, as Bertilak's attention to his estate shows, he straddles the realm of the man-made and that of the nature-made, and he functions properly in each, as can be ascertained by the poet's praise. Bertilak oversees a court that, despite its

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<sup>20</sup> Henry L. Savage, in *The Gawain-Poet: Studies in His Personality and Background* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1956), 15-16, discusses the well-established custom of carrying a holly-bob to signify peace in the Lancashire region.

<sup>21</sup> MED, s.v. *spitous* (adj.) def. 2.a and def. 2.b, respectively. All citations of *Sir Gawain* derive from Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, ed., *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2002). Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own.

<sup>22</sup> Roland Bechmann, *Trees and Man: The Forest in the Middle Ages*, trans. Katharyn Dunham (New York: Paragon House, 1990), 254.

<sup>23</sup> Oliver Rackham, *Trees and Woodland in the British Landscape* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1981), 69.

distance from the center of the realm, rivals Camelot, and he oversees fertile green grounds during the dead of winter.<sup>24</sup> He embodies the balanced example of a courtly lord cognizant of his role in maintaining and caring for his environmental surroundings.

### *I. “þis Bretayn watz bigged”: Camelot’s Built Spaces and the Indoors*

The political elements of the poem point to the poet’s deep interest in English politics and the behaviors of the aristocracy. But embedded in the early Fitts of the poem we also find references to cultural construction and the limited role of natural elements in the Arthurian court. The first line of *Sir Gawain* establishes that a human-built and human-destroyed society is at the center of the initial Fitts. At first, the poet references a particular location temporally and geographically far removed from England, situating readers momentarily at *þe sege and þe assaut* at Troy, the siege and the assault at Troy (l. 1).<sup>25</sup> He focuses attention on Troy’s destroyed cityscape—where, *þe borȝ brittened and brent to brondez and askez*, the city was demolished and burnt to cinders and ashes (l. 2).<sup>26</sup> When the poet moves the tale to English shores, the stress remains on man-made creations by drawing on the cultural commonplace, long established by

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<sup>24</sup> Although there is clearly a magical element to Hautdesert, through the presence of Morgan le Fay, my argument focuses on seeing the region as a theorized real. Aside from the contrast between winter/spring that Gawain witnesses upon his approach, and the instances of shape-shifting (Bertilak and Morgan), the running of the estate itself is very realistic and follows contemporary practices in hunting and household management. For a discussion on magic in *SGGK*, see Albert B. Friedman in “Morgan le Fay in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” *Speculum* 35. 2 (1960): 260-74; T. McAlindon in “Magic, Fate, and Providence in Medieval Narrative and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” *The Review of English Studies* 16.62 (1965): 121-39; Martin Puhvel in “Snow and Mist in ‘Sir Gawain and the Green Knight’: Portents of the Otherworld?” *Folklore* 89. 2 (1978): 224-28; and Geraldine Heng in “Feminine Knots and the Other Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” *PMLA* 106.3 (1991): 500-14.

<sup>25</sup> All translations are my own. My focus has been on literal rather than poetic translations.

<sup>26</sup> MED s.vv. *burgh* (n.) def. 1.a shows the term also referring to walls, but also to “a town, a city; also, a small village,” implying a stronger sense of separation from the wilderness.

Nennius, Geoffrey of Monmouth, and others, that the destroyed civilization of Troy has been rebuilt in England and that London constitutes a “New Troy.” The poet provides a brief “history” lesson of the hereditary link by which Brutus, the great-grandson of Aeneas, becomes the founder of the English nation: *þis Bretayn watz bigged bi þis burn rych*, this Britain was established by this baron great (l. 20). Although many translators render *bigged* as “built” (MED, s.v., *biggen* (v.), def. 2.a), there are other meanings equally relevant: as a derivative of *biggen*, *bigged* in def. 2.a of the MED, relates to the building up of a country, while 3.a pertains to the establishment of a city or kingdom. “Built,” “built up” (as a country), or “established as a kingdom” may appear similar on the surface, but the political implications vary by definition. In the politicized context of the Trojan saga, it is logical to understand *bigged* as the establishment of a kingdom, a direct link to London as New Troy and with the reign of the contemporary monarch—King Richard II.<sup>27</sup>

In his account of the establishment of Britain, the poet introduces King Arthur not only in relation to Brutus but also to the kings who have come before him. Specifically, he focuses on what they all have constructed: *Bot of alle þat here bult, of Bretaygne kynges, / Ay watz Arthur þe hendest, as I haf herde telle*, But of all that here built, of British kings, / Arthur was the [most] skilled, as I have heard tell (ll. 25-6). The term *hendest* incorporates both senses of literally building a place *and* founding a particular culture because it certainly evokes courteous courtly or chivalric qualities, but it also pertains to being skilled, clever, or crafty.<sup>28</sup> The subsequent definition relates to the concept of building/establishing a kingdom, for in speaking “of all that

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<sup>27</sup> Bennett explains that, “... *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is more evocative of the court of Richard II than of his grandfather. ... The challenge of ‘nature’ to ‘nurture’ in the poem gives some credence to the idea of a vigorous regionally-based aristocratic court in some sort of opposition to an effete, royal court,” in “The Historical Background,” 85.

<sup>28</sup> MED s.v. *hendest* (adj.) def. 1.a, and 3.a, respectively.

here built” the one with the most skill in creating man-made *buildings* and more abstract social mores would thus be Arthur—making him the “best” king at constructing a cultural location in a built place.

The poet’s initial focus is the construction of civilization in both its concrete and abstract forms, but there is also a strong undercurrent of destruction and regeneration. The poet reminds readers that man-made things are temporary and perishable through the past destruction of Troy and the future destruction of Camelot (for certainly, like readers of today, the poet’s audience would anticipate the eventual demise of the Arthurian court). But the entrance of the Green Knight into Arthur’s court is a challenge from a world of regeneration—nature can revive, just like the Green Knight does after losing his head. The poet calls attention to the division between an impermanent world and a world of renewal, where the Green Knight has the skill to successfully mediate the two sides.

The outdoor natural environment that immediately surrounds Camelot obviously exhibits nature’s ability for regeneration, but the *Pearl*-poet emphasizes harshness and decay rather than the stages of rejuvenation. The first associations that the poet draws on relate to the unwelcoming cold that might be expected around All Hallows’ Day, when, *þe weder of þe worlde wyth wynter hit þrepez*, the weather of the world with winter battles (l. 504). While we see a brief glimpse of flowers blooming and fleeting green grass as the seasons change, the poet focuses on the ephemerality of such joys, with birds who, *busken to bylde and bremlych syngen / For solace of þe softe somer þat sues þerafter*, prepare to build [their nests] and happily sing / For comfort of the mild summer that follows after (ll. 509-10); where a plant must endure the *drozt* (drought), *þe dust* (the dust), and the *wroþe wynde* (angry wind) (ll. 523, 525); and where eventually, *al grayes þe gres þat grene watz ere*, all grey is the grass that was green before (l. 527). While he mentions

other seasons in his description, the poet focuses on the staleness of winter so as to create a stronger contrast with Bertilak's domain once Gawain travels to Hautdesert and witnesses the lord's interaction with his land. While other Arthurian narratives contain extensive descriptions of outdoor activities, the poet represents the *Sir Gawain* society as exclusively focused on their indoor courtly activities rather than the outside natural world.

The *Pearl*-poet provides a prime example of this society's focus on courtliness above outdoor nature with the use of exotic birds, not in their natural context or even as live birds inhabiting a constructed display, but as simply a two-dimensional fashion statement to be worn by knights. The *vrysoun* on Gawain's helm (l. 608), which attaches the *aventayle* to the lower back of the helmet, in this case is a band of silk bordered with, *papjayz paynted peruyng bitwene*, popinjays painted preening between [their wings] (l. 611).<sup>29</sup> A *papejaie* is specifically an "ornamental representation of a parrot," and alludes to the parrot's beauty and rarity.<sup>30</sup> Chaucer describes the popinjay in *The Parliament of Fowls*, as "ful of delicasye" (l. 359).<sup>31</sup> This, however, does not imply a "delicate" state, but instead either something delightful or luxurious.<sup>32</sup> Consistently, popinjays are emblematic of self-centered beauty and concern for personal appearance as an exhibition of prestige, wealth, and status. The *Pearl*-poet's usage is particularly

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<sup>29</sup> The *aventayle*, a chain mail curtain that hung from the helmet protecting the back of the neck, was commonly attached with rivets, rings, or with a leather strap that made it removable. For more details on armoring see Jim Bradbury, *The Routledge Companion to Medieval Warfare* (London: Routledge, 2004), 261. Since Gawain's *vrysoun*, however, is a broad silk band (l. 610) that took seven winters to embroider (l. 613), its importance within Gawain's armor is preeminent. Elizabeth Porges Watson, in "The Arming of Gawain: Vrysoun and Cercle," *Leeds Studies in English* 18 (1987): 33, argues that Gawain's *vrysoun* must have been closer to a scarf than a band, based on its description and on his need to untie it without a squire; a scarf-sized *vrysoun* would more easily catch people's attention.

<sup>30</sup> MED, s.v. *papejaie*, (n.) def. 1.b.; and OED, s.v. *popinjay*, (n.) def. 2.a, from ca. 1325 to 1525.

<sup>31</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Parliament of Fowls," *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 383.

<sup>32</sup> MED, s.v. *delicaci(e)*, (n.) def 1a. – delightfulness; 1b. – luxuriousness, sumptuousness.

suggestive of a state of luxury by describing Gawain's popinjays as *peruyng*. This term can refer to both birds—"to trim the feathers with the beak, preen,"—and persons—"to dress or groom oneself carefully, preen, prink."<sup>33</sup> It describes a bird's careful maintenance of its feathers for display, or a person's efforts at improving his/her appearance potentially with the implication that he/she desires others' admiration as a result.<sup>34</sup> This second sense suggests that the term connoted a heightened pursuit of beauty over usefulness.<sup>35</sup> In other words, Gawain's helm is decorated with beautiful birds that are preoccupied with enhancing their own appearance by further grooming themselves. As an emblem the popinjay underscores beauty—they are beautiful animals removed from a natural context and appropriated for decoration by a court that is concerned with appearances. As ornamentation on battle armor, these birds send a very different message than did the Anglo-Saxon customary decoration of jewelry and armor with birds of prey, identified by their curved beaks and prominent claws.<sup>36</sup> In some examples from the Christian Anglo-Saxon period the birds even appear with their prey or confronting another bird.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> MED, s.v., *proinen*, (v.) def. a and c, respectively.

<sup>34</sup> The OED, s.vv. *preen*, (v.) def. 1.a, includes the implications of pride or desire for admiration in the definition of the term.

<sup>35</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien and E.V. Gordon first understood *pernyng* to refer to "preening," in their first edition of the poem, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925), 182, but later changed their reading to *peruing*, indicating a form of "periwinkle" as both a color and a term that evoked beauty, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 204. This coincides with Norman Davis' similar understanding of the word, in "SGGK 611-12" *NoQ* 21(1966): 448-51. The MED, defines the term as "*fig.* a paragon; the most beautiful" in s.v. *pervink(e)* (n.) def. 1.b. Andrew and Waldron acknowledge that *peruyng* refers to "preening."

<sup>36</sup> Examples of predatory birds in Anglo-Saxon metalwork are the Chessel Down brooch from the Isle of Wight, and the Bifrons and Finglesham brooches from Kent dated from the sixth century. See Carola Hicks, "The Birds of the Sutton Hoo Purse," in *Anglo-Saxon England vol. 15*, ed. Peter Clemons, Simon Keyes, Michael Lapidge, et. al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 157.

<sup>37</sup> Examples are the Faversham gilt-bronze buckle and the Sutton Hoo purse plaques. See Hicks, "The Birds of the Sutton Hoo Purse," 158-9.

For Anglo-Saxon armor in general, but specially shields, the eagle or the raven are the most common depictions.<sup>38</sup> Even contemporary fourteenth-century heraldry often opted for the more aggressive birds, such as the popular image of the eagle, to symbolize courage rather than the decorative beauty of pretty birds that were available only as pets for the aristocracy.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, his helm suggests that pride in appearances symbolizes both Gawain and the court he represents.<sup>40</sup>

Moreover, the popinjays on Gawain's helm represent a stylized nature, an idealized beauty constructed by humans, based on a human romanticized view of nature, and for humans' visual pleasure. The popinjays evoke nothing of the harshness of the real outdoor world beyond the walls of Camelot—a harshness that can be cold, where food may be sparse, and where predators roam. During Gawain's journey he travels through a region that conveys the real effects of nature on land and birds. He encounters *Hiȝe hillez on vche a halue, and holtwodez vnder*, high hills on each of the two sides, and hoar woods underneath (l. 742), and it is no wonder that *mony bryddez vnblyȝe vpon bare twyges, / Þat pitosly þer piped for pyne of þe colde*, many birds unhappy upon bare twigs / That piteously peeped for pain of the cold (ll. 746-7). These joyless, freezing birds offer a stark contrast to the popinjays that decorate Gawain's

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<sup>38</sup> Eagles or ravens appear in the Sutton Hoo shield, the shield from Shelford Farm, in Hackington, and the shield from Gilton, in Kent, for example. See George Speake, *Anglo-Saxon Animal Art and its Germanic Background* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 81-5.

<sup>39</sup> The eagle is the most frequently occurring bird in medieval heraldry. See Thomas Woodcock and John Martin Robinson, *The Oxford Guide to Heraldry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 199.

<sup>40</sup> The author seems to support such a reading of the court elsewhere, for example, when the Green Knight names *pride* as Camelot's principal fault, and his reason for challenging Arthur: "Ho wayned me vpon þis wyse to your wynne halle / For to assay þe surquidré, ȝif hit soth were / Þat rennes of þe grete renoun of þe Rounde Table" (ll. 2456-8) [Who guided me in this guise to your goodly hall, / To assay the pride, if it accurately were / That is rumored of the great renown of the Round Table]. However, such an accusation comes directly from Morgan le Fay who does not look favorably upon Arthur's court.

helm. The author makes no comment on their beauty, and they do not have the luxury to be preoccupied with preening themselves; instead, the harsh conditions of the outdoors are apparent in their bare, cold existence.

The outdoor, pitiable birds register a parallel to Gawain as he faces similar struggles from the weather and potential predators. When he journeys through the *wyldrenesse* in search of the Green Chapel many a *foule foo* (foul foe), from *wormes* (dragons) to *wolues* (wolves), and from *wodwos* (wild men of the woods) to *bullez* (bulls), *berez* (bears), and *borez* (boars) (ll. 720-2) threaten and attack him. Gawain responds to the antagonistic wild beasts in a *duȝty* (valiant) and *dryȝe* (strong) manner (l. 724). In this setting, as Gillian Rudd points out, Gawain is the outsider as a representative of Arthur's court.<sup>41</sup> As someone accustomed to an indoor life, he soon feels the full effects of the outdoors on his body and his constitution, not only from the beasts and wild men but from the weather also: *For werre wrathed hym not so much þat wunter nas wors*, For wars vexed him not so much [as] winter [which] was worse (l. 726). While not referring to any war in particular, the poet implies that the concept of war in general is as undesirable as the harsh brutal winter:

When þe colde cler water fro þe cloudez schadde,  
 And fres er hit falle myȝt to þe fale erþe;  
 Ner slayn wyth þe slete he sleped in his yrnes  
 Mo nyȝtez þen innoghe in naked rokkez,  
 Per as claterande fro þe crest þe colde borne rennez,  
 And henged heȝe ouer his hede in hard iisseikkles.  
 Þus in peryl and payne and plytes ful harde

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<sup>41</sup> Rudd, "The Wilderness of Wirral," 56.

Bi contray cayrez þis knyzt, tyl Krystmasse Euen,  
 Alone. (ll. 727-35)

When the cold clear water from the clouds shed,  
 And froze before it might fall to the unmindful earth.  
 Near slain by the sleet he slept in his irons  
 More nights than enough among naked rocks,  
 There as clattering from the crest the cold stream ran  
 And hung high over his head in hard icicles.  
 Thus in peril and pain and dangers severe  
 Through the country travels this knight, until Christmas Eve,  
 Alone.

Gawain faces harsh conditions, which seem even direr when we consider that he would have been wearing his cold plate armor. In this case, as Ralph Elliott points out, for Gawain the weather is “more perilous than any living antagonists.”<sup>42</sup> While he was still in Camelot, Gawain seemed more like the stylized popinjays, concerned with beauty, appearance, and avoiding the harsh realities of winter and the prospect of his quest to meet the Green Knight. By contrast, in the wilderness, he is like the birds peeping in the cold, as he prays repeatedly for protection. The choice of happy “pretty little birds” preening themselves highlights the court’s predilection to cast nature as merely an appealing decoration. The popinjays on Gawain’s *vrysoun* represent the court’s control and appropriation of nature into a civilized world that lacks the balanced relationship produced by the management of wildlife. In this poet’s particular representation of

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<sup>42</sup> Ralph Elliott, “Landscape and Geography,” *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, ed. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997), 105.

Camelot, the knights lack any direct personal connection with the natural world outdoors except passive viewing through artistic representations or active interaction with predators and harsh weather. For his Arthurian knights, there is no balanced relationship.

## II. “*þe lorde of þe londe*”: Bertilak’s Sustainable Green Space

When Gawain leaves the security of Camelot, *meryly he rydes / Into a forest ful dep, þat ferly watz wylde*, briskly he rides / Into a forest very deep, that was marvelous [and] wild (ll. 740-1).<sup>43</sup> Although it is unclear, as some critics like Rudd have pointed out, whether the forest Gawain rides into is Wirral or a separate wilderness, the *Pearl*-poet’s words highlight the difference in the region Gawain enters.<sup>44</sup> While *ferly* can be defined as something “terrifying or terrible,” it can also refer to something “strange, marvelous, miraculous.”<sup>45</sup> If we accept the first definition as being applicable, then the forest indeed becomes something fearsome; alternatively, if we apply the second definition, then we see the liminal space that surrounds Hautdesert as something foreign, unfamiliar, and remote to a traveler such as Gawain; alternatively, it can encompass both meanings and be terrifying precisely because of its strangeness.<sup>46</sup> Additionally, the word *wylde* appears in the same line, as an adjective describing *forest*. The term *wild(e)* can refer to vegetation that is “growing unchecked, overluxuriant.”<sup>47</sup> When used for land or fields, it can refer to an area that is “uncultivated, undeveloped.”<sup>48</sup> *Wylde* does not necessarily denote a

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<sup>43</sup> The term *meryly* did not necessarily imply joyfulness, but could also refer to moving briskly or quickly. MED, s.v. *mirili*, (adv.) def. 3.

<sup>44</sup> Rudd, “The Wilderness of Wirral,” 61

<sup>45</sup> MED, s.v. *ferli*, (adj.) def. 1.a, and 1.b, respectively.

<sup>46</sup> MED, s.v. *straunge* (adj.) def. 2.a.

<sup>47</sup> MED, s.vv. *wild(e)*, (adj.) def. 6.a.a

<sup>48</sup> MED, s.vv. *wild(e)*, (adj.) def. 7.a.

negative connotation but can instead simply describe the unchecked vegetation growth that would be characteristic of an uncultivated and undeveloped area. Such a view, in fact, fits with the legal terminology of *forest*. According to medieval law and custom, a *forest* is a very particular geographical location. As Robert Pogue Harrison explains,

The word “forest” in fact originates as a juridical term. ... The word *foresta* appears for the first time in the laws of the Longobards and the capitularies of Charlemagne, referring not to woodlands in general but only to the royal game preserves. ... A “forest,” then, was originally a juridical term referring to land that had been placed off limits by a royal decree. Once a region had been “afforested,” or declared a forest, it could not be cultivated, exploited, or encroached upon. It lay outside the public domain, reserved for the king’s pleasure and recreation.<sup>49</sup>

The term *forest* is a deliberate choice associated with these specific issues. Gawain has stepped into an area that has been “reserved for the king’s pleasure and recreation,” but in this poem King Arthur’s pleasure and recreation is found indoors. Bertilak’s castle of Hautdesert is *in þe wod* (l. 764) rather than a *forest*, or any other type of tree-covered area—an important geographical and political distinction in a poem where, as Elliott points out, *forest* only appears twice.<sup>50</sup> An alternate term might be *wood*, but as Bechmann explains, *wood* was used for “spaces covered with trees, but smaller than forests,” with *forest* primarily used to describe larger areas of tree-covered land.<sup>51</sup> When we apply this specialized medieval terminology to *Sir Gawain*, it becomes clear that Gawain moves from a larger area—the forest, belonging to the King—to a

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<sup>49</sup> Robert Pogue Harrison, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 69.

<sup>50</sup> Elliott, “Landscape and Geography,” 107.

<sup>51</sup> Bechmann, *Trees and Man*, 14.

smaller area—the wood surrounding Hautdesert. But the important distinction is that Hautdesert is not a royal forest but instead a separate woodland.

A marked liminal divide separates Hautdesert from the forest region around it. However, unlike the heavily man-made environs of Camelot, the boundary around Hautdesert helps solidify a balanced link between the man-made and the nature-made. The dense forest that Gawain traverses is abundant with *hore okez ful hoge a hundreth togeder / Þe hasel and þe hazþorne were harled al samen, / With roze raged mosse rayled anywhere*, hoar frost oaks very huge by the hundred together, / The hazel and the hawthorn were all twisted together / With rough shaggy moss that decorated everywhere” (ll. 743-5). The significant vegetation in this area is the hazel and the hawthorn. The *corylus avellana*, or common hazel, a shrub that typically grows 3-8 meters in height, is a key component in the traditional hedgerows used to delineate boundaries in lowland England.<sup>52</sup> So, too, is the hawthorn. Growing to a height of 8 meters, the *crataegus laevigata*, also known as the midland hawthorn, receives its name because—although found in certain parts of continental Europe—in England its growth is most abundant in the Midland region.<sup>53</sup> This forested area, then, with “hazel and hawthorn intertwined,” works as a large hedgerow that encloses a particular location (Bertilak’s woods), and divides and protects Hautdesert from the overgrown wilderness. The *Pearl*-Poet shows that both man-made and natural barriers can function in similar manner by separating spaces.

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<sup>52</sup> There is documentary evidence that the Anglo-Saxons used hedgerows as boundary markers. Max Hooper has developed a method of assessing the date of hedgerows by the variety of shrubs that can be found within it. See Della Hooke, *The Landscape of Anglo-Saxon England* (London: Leicester University Press, 1998), 81; also, Keith Rushforth, *Trees of Britain and Europe* (London: Harper Collins, 1999).

<sup>53</sup> J.B. Phipps, et. al., *Hawthorns and Medlars* (Cambridge: Royal Horticultural Society, 2003), 75-7.

As Gawain first approaches Hautdesert, the poet reverses the audience's viewing position by contrasting the scene with the Green Knight's arrival in Camelot. When he pushes through the main doors in Camelot and enters the enclosed court's space, the initial view that the poet gives us of Camelot begins indoors. However, when Gawain penetrates through the enclosure surrounding Hautdesert he is outdoors, and the poet directs the scene towards the beauty of the sight. The audience sees through Gawain's eyes:

Er he watz war in þe wod of a won in a mote,  
 Abof a launde, on a lawe, loken vnder boʒez  
 Of mony borelych bole aboute bi þe diches,  
 A castel þe comlokest þat euer knyʒt aʒte,  
 Pyched on a prayere, a park al aboute,<sup>54</sup>  
 With a pyked palays pyned ful þik,  
 Pat vmbeteʒe mony tre mo þen two myle. (ll. 764-70)

Then he was aware in the wood of a castle in a moat,  
 Above a glade, on a hill, secure amid boughs  
 Of many a stout tree trunk about by the ditches,  
 A castle the comeliest that ever a knight possessed,  
 Pitched on a meadow, a park all about,  
 With a staked palisade enclosed very thick  
 That surrounded many trees for more than two miles.

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<sup>54</sup> *Prayere* here has a subtle double entendre: the castle is set up either on a meadow or has been set up in a prayer. MED *praiere* (n.) def. A meadow; *preie/prai(e)* (n.) def. 1.a. A request; 1.b. A prayer.

The castle grounds are a visually striking sight—especially after stepping out of the desolation of the liminal forest. Here there are no bare branches or any hoar frost to be found. Instead, there are numerous large trees growing on green grass near fresh water. The sight of this medieval park appears meticulously designed. Just as the garden is an example of a domestic complex influenced by medieval art and literature, as can be seen in Chaucer’s *The Knight’s Tale*, medieval estates and parks also shared an aesthetic quality with the arts.<sup>55</sup> The West Midlands were not devoid of influential estates during the *Pearl*-poet’s time. As A.S.G. Edwards surmises, the MS Cotton Nero A.x may have been written for the Stanley family—a claim supported by the fact that they were from the Lancashire and Cheshire region, they were interested in vernacular literature, and the family crest includes a holly tree.<sup>56</sup> Additionally, the Stanleys enjoyed the hereditary responsibility of being chief Foresters for Wirral until the region was deforested in 1376; and they owned a number of manor homes, including Bidston and Neston in Wirral.<sup>57</sup> With the Stanleys’ strong ties to the region and interest in societal advancement, one can surmise an influential connection between the Stanleys’ attentiveness to estate management and the *Pearl*-poet’s depiction of stewardship in Hautdesert.

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<sup>55</sup> For the influences in medieval garden design, see Marilyn Stokstad, “The Garden as Art,” *Medieval Gardens*, 9<sup>th</sup> Dumbarton Oaks Colloquium on the History of Landscape Architecture (1983): 175-85, and John Harvey, *Medieval Gardens* (Beaverton, OR: Timber P, 1981). Stephen Miles, in *Parks in Medieval England* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009), 82-3, and Robert Liddiard, in *Landscapes of Lordship: Norman Castles and the Countryside in Medieval Norfolk, 1066-1200* (London: BAR, 2000), 118, also strongly believe that medieval lords planned out estates to accord with images in literature and art.

<sup>56</sup> A.S.G. Edwards, “The Manuscript,” *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, ed. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson (Cambridge: Brewer, 1997), 198.

<sup>57</sup> For more on the connections between the Stanley Family and *Sir Gawain*, see Edward Wilson, “*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the Stanley Family of Stanley, Storeton, and Hooton,” *The Review of English Studies* 30.119 (1979): 308-16; for the Stanleys’ control over Wirral, see Stephen Roberts, *A History of Wirral* (London: History Press, 2002), 77-80; and for the Stanleys’ political power, see Michael J. Bennett, “‘Good Lords’ and ‘King-Makers’: The Stanleys of Lathom in English Politics, 1385-1485,” *History Today* 31.7 (1981): 12-7.

But more importantly for our purposes, the landscaping within Hautdesert appears very deliberate and showcases Bertilak's attention to greenery and his interest in the world outdoors. In the first of the three hunts, the poet attracts our attention to the landscape by referring to Bertilak as *bis lorde by lynde-wodez*, the lord by the linden-wood (l. 1178). While oak trees surround Hautdesert (l. 743), within its boundaries the linden tree takes center stage. During the Middle Ages, the natural woodland cover was mainly made up of oak, birch, and alder.<sup>58</sup> Traditionally, the linden tree is used to provide deep shade, but, significantly, it is recommended as an ornamental tree.<sup>59</sup> The *wode* can also denote specifically a forest of oak and linden trees—which are the two primary trees mentioned when the *Pearl*-poet repeatedly refers to Bertilak's domain as a wood.<sup>60</sup> While the predominance of linden trees hints at deliberate landscaping for aesthetic purposes, it also indicates the possibility of a significant amount of reforestation. The linden tree is also known for its vigorous regrowth, for its production of both underwood and timber depending on how the shoots develop from the trunk stool, and for its reputed longevity.<sup>61</sup> For someone concerned with using natural resources in a sustainable manner these are valued qualities.

Bertilak is attentive to and selective of the greenery on his lands, but his role in managing the wildlife in Hautdesert is even more involved. In the three hunts, the *Pearl*-poet depicts Bertilak as a noble attempting to maintain his estate in environmental balance, both through

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<sup>58</sup> Leonard Cantor, "Forests, Chases, Parks and Warrens," *The English Medieval Landscape* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), 62.

<sup>59</sup> Harriet Keeler, *Our Native Trees and How to Identify Them* (New York: Charles Scriber, 1900), 24-31.

<sup>60</sup> MED, s.vv. *wode* (n.) def. 2.c

<sup>61</sup> Oliver Rackham, *Ancient Woodland: Its History, Vegetation and Uses in England* (1980; rpt. Colvend, UK: Castlepoint Press, 2003), 242-3.

selective hunting and by modeling proper lordly behavior.<sup>62</sup> His actions bring to mind Leopold's "land ethic." As Don Worster explains,

Every person or nation has a right to derive a living from the earth and to participate in the processes of natural creativity; but no one, no matter how desperate his condition or elevated his ambition, has any right to diminish the complexity, diversity, stability, fruitfulness, wholeness, beauty—in short, the order of the natural world. Everyone has the responsibility, whether acknowledged or not, to get his living in such a way as to preserve that order. In so many words, that was what Leopold called the idea of a "land ethic."<sup>63</sup>

For Worster, living by Leopold's "land ethic" entails collecting resources from the land while not reducing their presence on the earth. It is being cognizant of working toward a sustainable yield—extracting from the land without diminishing the ecosystem.

Bertilak's hunting and land management practices adhere to the concept of a sustainable yield for the Middle Ages. For each hunt, Bertilak leaves early in the morning, accompanied by a large group of beaters, bowmen, and other lords, as well as a vast number of hounds. He remains at the hunt for most of the day in each case, returning with a kill every time. While these kills end on one that seems of diminished importance (that of the fox), each hunt is a viable contribution to strengthening Bertilak's role as steward of the land, and, whatever relationship

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<sup>62</sup> The complex practice of medieval hunting in *Sir Gawain* is also found in Gaston de Foix's *Livre de Chasse* (c.1387). While the *Livre* is a record of contemporary hunting practices in continental Europe, when Edward of Norwich, 2<sup>nd</sup> Duke of York, translated the book as *The Master of Game* (c.1406-1413) he kept 31 of the original chapters because these reflected English hunting practices. Edward, who in the 1390s was Richard II's favorite hunting companion, also added some material that specifically incorporated practices with which he was familiar.

<sup>63</sup> Don Worster, *The Wealth of Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 183.

the animals of the hunt may have to the bedroom scenes, the hunt in and of itself establishes his interest in maintaining his estate.<sup>64</sup>

In the first hunt, the fact that Bertilak and his men do not hunt the hart is particularly compelling as evidence of Hautdesert as a land of environmental awareness, in the hands of a lord with conservationist leanings:

Pay let þe herttez haf þe gate, with þe hyȝe hedes,  
 Þe breme bukkez also with hor brode paumez;  
 For þe fre lorde hade defende in fermysoun tyme  
 Þat þer schulde no mon meue to þe male dere. (ll. 1154-7)

They let the harts have the gate, with their high heads,  
 The quick bucks also with their broad antlers,  
 For the free lord had protected [them] in the close season,  
 That there should no man confine the male deer.

The *Pearl*-poet chooses the adjective *fre* to describe *lord* and his relationship with the land. While *fre* can refer to a noble and/or generous person, it can also refer to being “free in rank or condition, having the social status of a noble or a freeman ... [and] holding one’s land in free tenure.”<sup>65</sup> Either definition attests to Bertilak’s high rank, but the second one can give insight into Bertilak’s control of the land. If he has “free tenure” over it, then he likely has something closer to permanent tenure, through rent or other services, and more say regarding land and wildlife management. Bertilak enforces the hunting practices and only hinds are available for

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<sup>64</sup> For the connections between the hunting scenes and the bedroom scenes, see Savage, *The Gawain-Poet: Studies in His Personality and Background*, 214-18; and Anne Rooney, “The Hunts in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, ed. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997), 157-63.

<sup>65</sup> MED, s.v. *fre* (adj.) def. 1a.a

hunters because it is unlawful to hunt stags during close-season, *fermysoun tyme*—a period, in this case September 14 through June 24, when a particular animal cannot be hunted in order to protect the species.<sup>66</sup> However, he takes the hunt limitation one step further by only selecting barren hinds: *And ay þe lorde of þe londe is lent on his gamnez, / To hunt in holtez and heþe at hyndez barayne*, And the lord of the land travels to his hunting / To hunt in holt and heath the barren hinds (ll. 1319-20). Bertilak practices a form of sustainability by managing the deer population and by eliminating only those that do not contribute to the preservation of the species. Although there is no indication that he marks the animals, as a modern rancher might mark cattle, he is a skilled hunter who is clearly well aware of the hunting laws and natural cycles on his land: if deer are in heat in September, by late December the gestating deer would show signs of their condition.<sup>67</sup>

The detail with which the poet describes Bertilak's choice to hunt specifically barren female deer indicates a rationale commensurate with what we today would call sustainability. By hunting the hinds rather than the hart, he is eschewing the glory and honor of a hart-hunt because it is not in season, and he is an assiduous follower of hunting guidelines. Instead, he conducts what is known as the deer drive or "king's hunt."<sup>68</sup> It is perhaps politically convenient that Bertilak avoids hunting the hart, which was Richard II's emblem and might be deemed an unwise object of the hunt.<sup>69</sup> But his choice highlights his commitment to his land and to his

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<sup>66</sup> Andrew and Waldron, ed., *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, 250.

<sup>67</sup> Deer hunters can successfully determine if a deer is gestating after the first few months, but only when the hunter is well familiarized with the animals. Lloyd Fox, Wildlife Biologist and Big Game Program Coordinator, Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism, Personal Interview, 6 Sept. 2013.

<sup>68</sup> Anne Rooney, *Hunting in Middle English Literature* (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 1993), 166.

<sup>69</sup> Richard II's emblem can be seen in the Wilton Dyptich, ca. 1395.

people, as Bertilak's deer drive not only helps keep the animal population in check but also provides a supply of meat for his people—further underscoring the proper balance of sustainable land management. The detailed description of the “breaking of the deer” shows that the hunting party collects every usable resource from the deer, from the *rybbez* (l. 1343) to the *blod* (l.1361) fed to the dogs. Also, the amount and the quality of venison that Bertilak brings back for his court is impressive, as Gawain notes, *here is wayth fayrest / þat I sez þis seuen zere in sesoun of winter*, this game is the fairest / that I have seen this seven years in the season of winter (ll. 1381-2). It is of course probable that Gawain courteously lauds the venison's quality out of reverence for his host. But the specific reference to seven years can allude to the famine endured by the Egyptians in the Bible and can be taken as an allusion that indicates how far removed the residents of Hautdesert are from scarcity.<sup>70</sup> Camelot is not going through a famine, as witnessed during the Christmas time feast, but neither is it the “land of plenty” that Hautdesert has become.<sup>71</sup>

While the first hunt is a sustainable one, the second hunt serves to contrast the quality of Bertilak's and Arthur's leadership. Primarily, the boar hunt exhibits Bertilak's hunting prowess and contrasts his behavior with that of Arthur's. In the absence of war, the hunt was a symbolic measure of an aristocratic man's prowess and masculine abilities. In Middle English literature, depictions of boar hunts were particularly meant to “amplify the bravery and strength of the hero,” so heroic hunters would consistently kill the boar with a sword while on foot even though

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<sup>70</sup> Gen. 41.54, *Douay-Rheims Bible*, (drbo.org) Web 25 July 2013.

<sup>71</sup> Also of note is the fact that the people of Camelot are far removed from dealing with live animals and hunting; instead, they are served meat in sumptuous dinners after it has been prepared, further exacerbating their disconnection from the land.

contemporary practice called for the use of a spear while on horseback.<sup>72</sup> Even the *Livre de Chasse* praises the sword above the spear as the nobler instrument when dispatching a boar, yet acknowledges the danger of such an encounter.<sup>73</sup> By facing the boar up close, the text underscores Bertilak's masculinity, his nobility, and his strength in the face of danger, as it affirms his power over his land.

Precisely in order to be a skilled and successful hunter, medieval lords looked for role models—not only in the text but also from the monarch's example.<sup>74</sup> However, in *Sir Gawain* Bertilak and Arthur exhibit reversed roles: the poet never depicts Arthur as a hunter, or in fact anything but a spirited and perhaps capricious youth.<sup>75</sup> Arthur spends his time indoors waiting (and holding up the feast) until others entertain him. By contrast the poet showcases Bertilak's hunting prowess, as in the boar episode, against Arthur's passivity (who waits to be entertained). Bertilak appears unafraid and faces the boar alone, after his huntsmen have either been injured by the boar or are wary of approaching it. Bertilak appears confident in his strength as he deftly

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<sup>72</sup> Rooney, *Hunting in Middle English Literature*, 82.

<sup>73</sup> See Gaston Phebus, *Livre de Chasse*, ed. Gunnar Tilander (Johanssons: Karlshamn, 1971), 231, and Rooney, *Hunting in Middle English Literature*, 82-3.

<sup>74</sup> Richard Almond, *Medieval Hunting* (Gloucestershire: Sutton, 2003), 9-10, identifies the monarch as an essential model for other aristocratic hunters.

<sup>75</sup> The poet highlights Arthur's boyishness as they await for the feast to begin: "He watz so joly of his joyfnes, and sumquat childgered. / His lif liked hym liȝt; he louied þe lasse / Auþer to longe lye or to longe sitte, / So bisied him his ȝonge blod and his brayn wylde. / And also anoþer maner meued him eke, / Þat he þurȝ nobelay had nomen: he wolde neuer ete / Vpon such a dere day, er hym deuised were / Of sum auenturus þyng, an vncouþe tale / Of sum mayn meruayle þat he myȝt trawe" [He was so jolly and cheerful, and somewhat boyish; / His life he liked cheerful; he loved the less / Either to long lie or to long sit, / So busied him his young blood and his brain wild. / And also another matter moved him, / That for a point of honor taken on himself: he would never eat, / Upon such a dear day, before he were entertained / Of some adventurous thing, an unusual tale, / Of some marvel of strength, that he might discern] (ll. 86-94).

leaps off his horse, sword in hand, and *bigly forth strydez*, “boldly advances” (l. 1584).<sup>76</sup> With great skill he kills the boar with a single thrust of his sword, as he *Set sadly þe scharp in þe slot euen, / Hit hym vp to þe hult, þat þe hert schyndered*, Sets steadily the edge of the blade in the slot, / Hits him up to the hilt, that the heart shattered (ll. 1593-4). Bertilak is fearless and skillful, easily leads and defends his men while he exhibits the admired qualities of a lord. However, when the Green Knight enters Camelot and challenges the court, Arthur accepts very unwillingly and acquiesces quickly once Gawain takes his place. The Green Knight, who embodies “unknown nature” but also embodies the lordly ideas advanced by Bertilak, intimidates Arthur. Bertilak steps in and faces the dangers of the wilds before him without a seemingly second thought—nothing seems to intimidate him.

In light of evidence from the *Master of Game* and the French *Livre de Chasse*, it becomes apparent that Bertilak exemplifies a medieval ideal huntsman. Edward, Duke of York, credits his source author Gaston Phebus with the following views: “And also he saiþe in the forsaide (book) þat he neuere segh man þat loued trauaile and lust of hundes and of hawkes þat he ne had mony good custummes in hym for þat cometh to hym of grett nobilness and gentilnesse of hert, of what asstaat that the man be of, or a greet lord or a lityl or a poor or a ryche.”<sup>77</sup> Gaston’s exalted opinion of the hunter is likely representative of contemporary views and particularly interesting when applied to Bertilak. If a skilled and successful hunter must be a man of “grett nobilness and gentilnesse of hert,” then accordingly Bertilak, a skilled and successful hunter exemplifies

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<sup>76</sup> MED, s.vv. *bigli* (adv.) def. 1.a. – of actions: vigorously, firmly, stoutly.

<sup>77</sup> “And also he said in the aforementioned book that he never saw a man that loved the work and pleasure of hounds and hawks, that had not many good qualities in him; for that comes to him of great nobleness and gentleness of heart of whatever estate the man may be, whether he be a great lord, or a little one, or a poor man or a rich one.” See *Master of Game*, 9.

nobility and gentleness of spirit and can accordingly subdue the wild side of nature, as he does with the boar and in maintaining his woods separate from the *wylde woods* outside his realm.

Bertilak's first hunt stresses sustainability, the second hunt highlights proper leadership, and the third depicts practicality. His hunting party dedicates a full day to the chase of the fox, and it is not a coincidence or an accident that Bertilak hunts such a small prey; rather, it shows his concern for the wellbeing of his estate, since smaller beasts, "such as the fox, wild cat, badger, marten, otter and squirrel were hunted mainly because they were regarded as harmful to deer, crops or domestic animals."<sup>78</sup> Even though there is no grandiose glory in hunting a fox—as Bertilak makes clear when he meets Gawain that same evening—there is a utilitarian side to it that concerns itself with environmental well being. Superficially, the focus on the fox can be seen as unintentional based on Bertilak's words to Gawain upon his return—*For I haf hunted al þis day and nozt haf I geten / Bot þis foule fox pelle -- þe Fende haf þe godez!* For I have hunted all this day and nought have I got / But this foul fox pelt—the fiend have the goods! (ll. 1943-4). However, Bertilak's comment is disingenuous because the poet shows his intent to hunt the fox. When the hunt begins, the focus of the hunting party is to pursue the fox: *Summe fel in þe fute þer þe fox bade, / Traylez ofte atraueres bi taunt of her wyles*, Some fell on the scent of the fox / [And] followed often aslant by the cleverness of her rejoinder (ll. 1699-1700). Even though Middle English hunting manuals traditionally ignored vermin population control,<sup>79</sup> the *Pearl*-poet appears to deliberately focus on it. On one level, the third hunt may have symbolic implications for Gawain who is yet to prove his worthiness when he faces the Green Knight, and

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<sup>78</sup> Cantor, "Forests, Chases, Parks and Warrens," 82; see also Henry L. Savage, "The Significance of the Hunting Scenes in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 27 (1928): 2-5.

<sup>79</sup> Rooney, *Hunting in Middle English Literature*, 3.

thinning the herd of knights of worthless ones is equally important, but the immediate, non-allegorical significance is that the fox hunt removes vermin from the lord's estate. Bertilak's practicality exhibited through hunting the fox—safeguarding his crops and domestic animals—is on par with his attention to game management in the deer hunt.

A lord such as Bertilak, however, is not merely a literary invention. Harrison argues that medieval “hunter-kings” were the first conservationists in history.<sup>80</sup> Monarchs established forests as a kind of nature preserve where animal population was maintained at certain levels and where trees were not cut down in order to keep the animals' habitat. These restrictions helped curtail the exploitation of the land by imposing fines and sometimes more severe penalties on those who disobeyed.<sup>81</sup> The populace had to respect the king's forested lands. In Gaston's *Livre de Chasse*, when he commends the hunter as a gentle and noble man, he adds, “tant vaut seigneur, tant vaut sa gent et sa terre.”<sup>82</sup> A translation of the line yields, “the lord is worth as much as his people and his land.” However, Edward's translation differs in *Master of Game* as he adapts it for English customs. He writes, “The lord is worth what his lands are worth.”<sup>83</sup> The people have been removed, to emphasize the relationship between the lord and his land above all else—a relationship that Bertilak particularly nurtures.

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<sup>80</sup> Harrison, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization*, 70. See also Miles, *Parks in Medieval England*, 33.

<sup>81</sup> Cantor, “Forests, Chases, Parks and Warrens,” 56-9.

<sup>82</sup> Gaston Phebus, *Livre de Chasse*, 57.

<sup>83</sup> Edward Duke of York, *Master of Game*, 9.

### *III. Conclusion*

During Richard II's reign the royal court began to change. There was less involvement in war and more commitment to the arts and the cultivation of a sophisticated lifestyle.<sup>84</sup> The court's acceptance and inclusion of poets led to the nobility's disposition to receive advice through the poets' art.<sup>85</sup> In my view, *Sir Gawain* constitutes the *Pearl*-poet's opportunity to urge reform and warn a court about the dangers of isolating itself indoors, abstracting civilization from the surrounding natural world, which not only provides sources of sustenance and outdoor visual splendor but sometimes also needs man's attentive rather than exploitive hand. If the poet meant to use the Arthurian court as an allusion to Richard II's court, then the literary commentary has a real-life application.<sup>86</sup> However, in the poem he does not vilify King Arthur; the criticism directed at Arthur is constructive advice to recognize the outside world—especially the green world—as key to achieving a sustainable reign attainable through a balance between culture/society and nature. Such constructive advice would be beneficial to Richard as a less warring king when compared to his father, Edward, the Black Prince.<sup>87</sup> Although Bertilak is not a king, and although he is from a region of the country at times considered a provincial frontier, he is able to balance his courtly life with his responsibilities to his natural environs. His knowledge and familiarity with his woodland and the animals within it exemplify his interest in maintaining a sustainable estate for himself and for his people.

In his work on the pastoral, ecocritic Terry Gifford states that,

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<sup>84</sup> Nigel Saul, *Richard II* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 332-3.

<sup>85</sup> Richard Firth Green, *Poets and Princepleasers: Literature and the English Court in the Late Middle Ages* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1980).

<sup>86</sup> Bennett, "The Historical Background," 85.

<sup>87</sup> Contemporaries saw the Black Prince as the ideal of a brave, chivalrous knight and the model warrior, while Richard was of a "different temper and outlook." See Saul, *Richard II*, 9-10.

From the beginning of its long history the pastoral was written for an urban audience and therefore exploited a tension between the town by the sea and the mountain country of the shepherd, between the life of the court and the life of the shepherd, between people and nature, between retreat and return.<sup>88</sup>

While Gifford focuses on ancient Greek pastorals, the same divide between the London court and provincial country estate is relevant to *Sir Gawain*. For the poet, Hautdesert illustrates a land balanced between the court and nature, and its conscientious lord becomes a model of environmental awareness for the English ruling class that formed the poem's audience.

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<sup>88</sup> Terry Gifford, *Pastoral* (London/New York: Routledge, 1999), 15.

## Conclusion

Dig deeply into the past to illuminate the present.

~ Don Worster<sup>1</sup>

The focus of my study has been broad by necessity. In order to interrogate the relationship pre-modern writers presented between nature and culture, I have reached back to the Anglo-Saxon period before examining Middle English literature at length. Beginning with the earliest documented English concerns about land in *Beowulf* (c. tenth century), and then focusing on selections from Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* and the anonymously-authored *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (both late fourteenth century), I trace the extent to which medieval attitudes toward land delineation, landscape beautification, land commodification, and land stewardship appeared in English literature. Such a transhistorical framework allows me to challenge the still-dominant assumption that environmental awareness is a relatively recent development. I argue instead that medieval attitudes constitute a crucially important pre-history to our modern views regarding the use, exploitation, and sustainability of the environment.

In this project, I contend that the *Beowulf*-poet constructs a view of Anglo-Saxon society's understanding that the world of nature was a formidable threat, the dwelling place of the monstrous races, and a force difficult to overcome.<sup>2</sup> The poet shows that in order to cope with the environment around them, communities establish boundaries and require the presence of a "bestly man" to dominate certain aspects of nature, although, in the end his control of the

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<sup>1</sup> Don Worster, *The Wealth of Nations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 208.

<sup>2</sup> While my project has focused on *Beowulf*, there are other poems from the extant corpus of Old English literature that present the extreme power of the elements, like "The Wanderer" and "The Seafarer."

environment also alienates the humans from his homeland. By the fourteenth century, medieval authors instigated a change regarding the representation of nature in contemporary literature. In Chaucer's work, nature, through the *hortus conclusus*, or enclosed garden, ceases to be threatening and becomes a space of aesthetic order and healing amidst the chaos of the Black Death. However, Chaucer is critical of society's attempted mastery over the land (particularly deforestation, deterritorialization, and enclosure) and gives voice to his concerns by conflating nature and the plight of medieval women. By shifting his attention toward the land, the anonymous poet of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, I argue, shows the politically and geographically marginalized Green Knight implementing a program of stewardship. The author juxtaposes the Green Knight's environmental interactions to the frivolous behavior of the Knights of the Round Table who, in other Arthurian texts, would represent social ideals, in order to set forth a new model for contemporary aristocratic attitudes towards the treatment of outdoor spaces and wildlife.

Each of these chapters has shown various stages of environmental awareness in works from the Middle Ages; such an ecological genealogy helps establish a pre-history of environmentalism in later periods in England—a country that remains tied to its woodland regions. The woods, indeed, are intricately bound up in English history and English consciousness, showing strong interconnections between nature and culture. For centuries, the island of Britain has been one of the least wooded places in Europe.<sup>3</sup> However, since the Middle Ages there has been a focus on conservation. As Oliver Rackham explains,

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<sup>3</sup> Oliver Rackham, *Trees and Woodland in the British Landscape* (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1981), 15.

By the thirteenth century A.D. woodland management was a fully-developed art with conservation as its chief objective; its success is measured by the many medieval woods known to have lasted, often with the same boundaries, for 700 years or more. In many areas more than half the woods named in medieval documents survived into the twentieth century and are either still there or have only recently succumbed to the less conservative land-uses of our own period.<sup>4</sup>

In other words, some English woods still exist today because of the conservation practices implemented by people from the Middle Ages. The “fully-developed art” that Rackham mentions pertains to the tradition of “woodmanship,” which refers to getting material from a wood while preserving the actual vegetation.<sup>5</sup> England had once been mainly *wildwood*, thick woods untouched by humans, but by 1086 only 15% of the country was *woodland*, less dense than wildwood and with more of a human presence.<sup>6</sup> By the medieval period, almost all lands were woodland rather than wildwood.<sup>7</sup> Also, in the Middle Ages private ownership and boundaries, through the practice of enclosure, were established more forcefully than before between lands that belonged to the nobility (parks and forests) and those that were for the

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<sup>4</sup> Oliver Rackham, *Ancient Woodland: Its History, Vegetation and Uses in England* (Colvend, UK: Castlepoint Press, 2003), 1.

<sup>5</sup> Rackham, *Ancient Woodland*, 3. One example of woodmanship helping preserve trees is that of the ash tree. An unattended ash tree can collapse after about 200 years. When coppiced properly it can still be alive after 500 years (7).

<sup>6</sup> Jeffrey S. Theis, *Writing the Forest in Early Modern England: A Sylvan Pastoral Nation* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 2009), 9.

<sup>7</sup> Rackham, *Trees and Woodland*, 45-8.

commoners (commons).<sup>8</sup> Although attempts at conservation were carried out in previous centuries, human interference with the woods reduced their size by the sixteenth century and raised their value as possessions.

For the *Beowulf*-poet, establishing boundaries on the land pertained to enforcing the divide between nature/culture, but for Chaucer land delineation went hand-in-hand with aristocratic ownership and control. Similar issues regarding the land continue to surface in English texts, and earn graphic depiction in Aaron Rathborne's *The Surveyor in Four Bookes*, from 1616 (see Fig. 1). A prominent engraver and professional surveyor, Rathborne's treatise on land surveying reflects the English aristocracy's interest in controlling their property. The popularity of surveying one's land, during the early modern period, allowed landowners to turn "chaotic space into representable, controlled places."<sup>9</sup> Books on land surveying were a booming genre in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It made land, and all things on it, quantifiable and easily delineated.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Theis, *Writing the Forest*, 9, and Rackham, *Ancient Woodland*, 5.

<sup>9</sup> Theis, *Writing the Forest*, 100.

<sup>10</sup> For other popular surveying books, see Arthur Hopton, *Speculum Topographicum, or the Topographicall Glasse* (London, 1611); William Leybourn, *The Compleat Surveyor: Containing The whole Art of Surveying of Land, by the Plain Table, Theodolite, Circumferentor, and Peractor* (London, 1653); J. Eyre, *The Exact Surveyor: or, The whole Art of Surveying of Land* (London, 1654); George Atwell, *The Faithful Surveyor* (London, 1658); and Vincent Wing, *Geodaetes Practicus: or, The Art of Surveying, Surveyed and laid out in a more Accurate, Plain and Expeditious Plat, then hath hitherto been performed* (London, 1664).

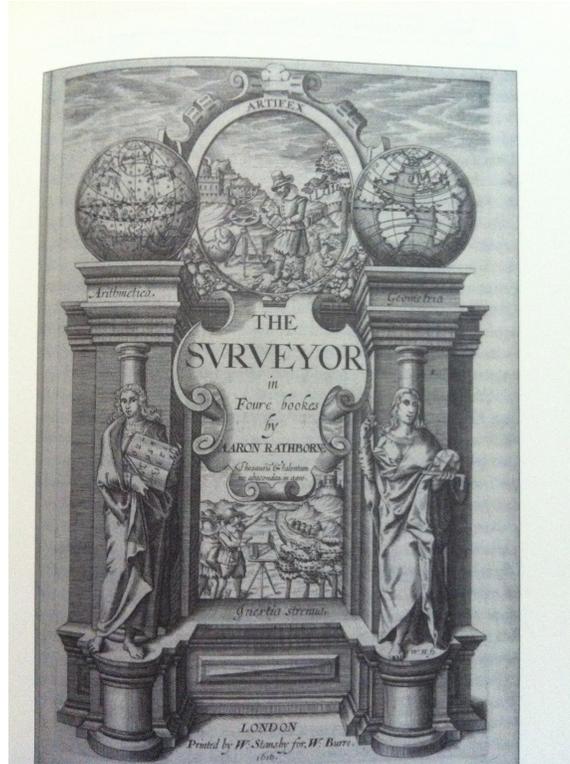


Fig. 1<sup>11</sup>

Rathborne's book is of particular interest because the use of visual rhetoric in the engraving reflects issues of mastery. Through a close up of the top of the page, it is easier to see that the surveyor is standing over a faun and a man wearing a coxcomb and presumably of a lower social class (see Fig. 2). This indicates a hierarchical relationship between the landowner or surveyor, the faerie or supernatural world, and the common man. The faun has closed eyes in the engraving, which may indicate that he is dead, obliterated by the advancement of technology and reason that the surveyor is using through the surveying apparatus. But the common man is raising his arm toward the surveyor, with his eyes and mouth open, as if he were attempting to get his attention. The surveyor in the image, though, appears unaware of or unconcerned with what/whom he stands over—just like Theseus, in *The Knight's Tale*, is unaware of the forest

<sup>11</sup> Frontispiece, *The Surveyor in Four Books*, 1616, London, British Library, (photo British Library).

residents he dislocates, and of how landlords might have disregarded the plight of their tenant farmers during the expansion of enclosure practices in the fourteenth century.

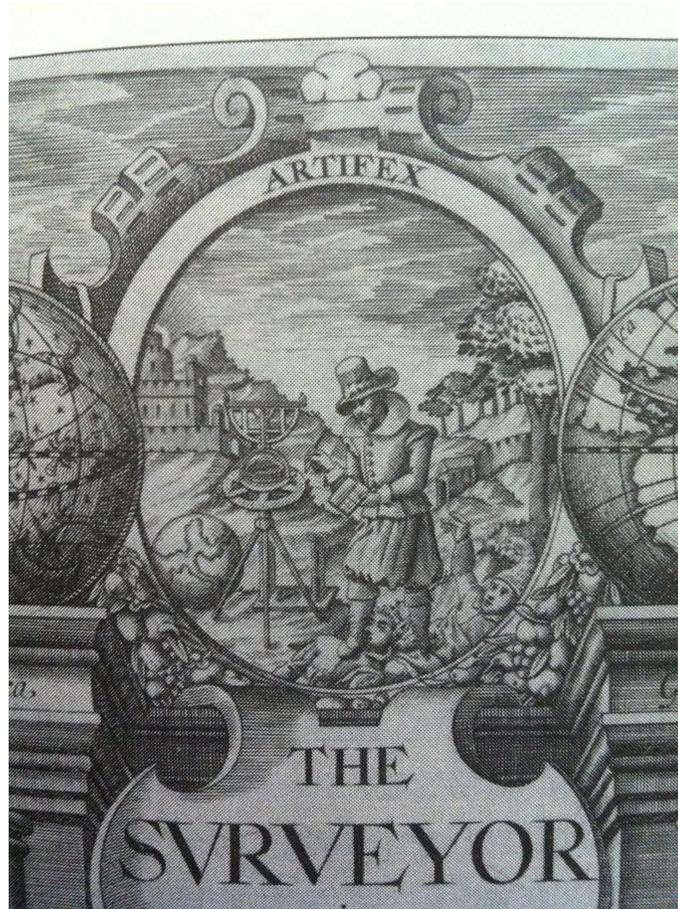


Fig. 2

As can be seen from this frontispiece, the aristocratic view toward land ownership (hierarchy, order, and human control over nature) did not necessarily decrease in the centuries following the Middle Ages. However, authors continued to question it. In William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a woodland space central to the plot reflects the intensely hierarchical and status-conscious society of the Early Modern period, particularly as it pertains to ownership and control of the land. Shakespeare uses non-human figures to question the authority of the aristocracy over the land: the faeries in the forest have more power over the land than

Duke Theseus who legally owns the land.<sup>12</sup> Shakespeare both recognizes and problematizes the issue of ownership of forested lands, by transferring control back to creatures of nature.

However, rather than being a dangerous threat, like the monsters from *Beowulf* who act as “herdsmen” delineating boundaries in the land, Shakespeare creates non-human figures whose playfulness further undermines authority from the landed gentry.<sup>13</sup> The concerns medieval authors exhibited regarding land commodification and sustainable use is palpable in their texts, where they brought environmental concerns to light, as later authors have done so since.

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<sup>12</sup> I use *non-human* to refer to figures we would now consider “supernatural,” but which, for the Middle Ages and Early Modern periods, were seen as a part of nature: faeries and sprites.

<sup>13</sup> In recent years there has been extensive critical work done on Shakespeare and ecocriticism (see Jeanne Addison Robert, *The Shakespearean Wild* (1991); Gabriel Egan, *Green Shakespeare* (2006); Jeffrey Theis, *Writing the Forest in Early Modern England* (2009); Simon C. Estok, *Ecocriticism and Shakespeare: Reading Ecophobia* (2001); and Lynne Bruckner and Dan Brayton, eds., *Ecocritical Shakespeare* (2011)). However, these past works have not examined land ownership in Shakespeare’s plays, and the repercussions this may have on issues of mastery over nature and the land.

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