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Of Wilderness, Forest, and Garden: An Eco-Theory of Genre in Middle English Literature

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OF WILDERNESS, FOREST, AND GARDEN: AN ECO-THEORY OF GENRE IN
MIDDLE ENGLISH LITERATURE

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DEDICATION

In loving memory of
Mary Williamson Bolt
1926 – 2013

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation is the natural result of the combination of my two great interests: nature and literature. My best memories growing up are of being out in the woods with my mother and sisters. It is not surprising that the love of nature weaves its way through many aspects of my life and that I feel most at home in the natural world. I am both blessed and lucky to be part of several supportive and loving ecosystems.

This project has been nurtured by a gracious and encouraging committee—Holly Crocker, Esther Richey, Ed Gieskes, and Myra Seaman—who have liberally shared their time and expertise. I cannot thank them enough for all of their guidance and assistance. I am especially appreciative of my director, Holly Crocker, who demonstrated the patience of Grissel throughout this process, and Esther Richey, who always had good advice and wine on hand.

My ecosystem of friends sustains me with their encouragement, and I suffer from an embarrassment of riches in this arena. I especially appreciate Lew Oliver, Jenn Martinsen, Jamie Boyle, Emily Rendek, and Bethany and Errol Tisdale for their friendship and always being there for me. Katherine Upton, Lindsay McManus, and Graham Stowe provided much-needed writing assistance.

Finally, I am grateful for the love and support of my family ecosystem: my sisters and their families. Thanks for always taking me in, letting me influence your children, and cracking the whip when needed. You have been with me every step of the way, and I *and* this dissertation are better for it.

ABSTRACT

“Of Wilderness, Forest, and Garden: An Eco-Theory of Genre in Middle English Literature” proposes a new theory of genre that considers the material elements of the natural environment in Middle English literature composed between 1300-1450 CE. Instead of treating the setting as just a backdrop for human activity, I posit that the components of the environment play a role in the deployment of the narrative by shaping the characters and influencing the action. More than an acknowledgement of the particular natural features, this study explores the role that these components play and how they give us a deeper understanding of the text. This project presents a view of the text that both engages and augments the traditional genre classification, offering a way to study a lesser considered subject in medieval literature—the material world of the setting—by reassessing the genre classification of the texts. By teasing out the material details of the setting, an eco-theory of genre cuts across conventional genres and offers another way to connect medieval texts. I argue that, instead of romance, Breton Lai, ballad, and fabliau, the texts examined in this dissertation are wilderness, forest, or garden poems. The eco-theory of the genre wilderness sees the adversarial elements in an untamed environment. The forest genre is a space of rules and regulations that circumscribe the environment and, in turn, manage the resources found there. The genre of the garden focuses on the conflict between what is manmade and what is natural and considers which of these is more real. By thoroughly investigating the representations of material nature within certain Middle English texts, such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *The Geste of Robyn Hode*, and “The Franklin’s Tale” from *The Canterbury Tales*, it is the aim of this dissertation to demonstrate that medieval people negotiated the divide between the philosophy of nature and the lived experience of nature through literature.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

THE CASE FOR AN ECO-THEORY OF GENRE

In the Middle English *Yvain and Gawain*, the knight Colgrevice of King Arthur's Round Table seeks a magic spring. When he finds it, he triggers a storm that rivals any he has ever seen:

The weder wex than wonder-blak,
And the thoner fast gan crak.
Thare come slike stormes of hayl and rayn,
Unnethes I might stand thare ogayn;
The store windes blew ful lowd,
So kene come never are of clowd.
I was drevyn with snaw and slete,
Unnethes I might stand on my fete.
In my face the levening smate,
I wend have brent, so was it hate,
That weder made me so will of rede,
I hopid sone to have my dede;
And sertes, if it lang had last,
I hope I had never thethin past. (369-82)

All of the phenomena that Colgrevice lists are naturally occurring: rain, sleet, snow, thunder, and lightning, and anyone who has been caught out in the open during a severe thunderstorm recognizes the drama Colgrevice describes. A conventional critique of this episode as part of a medieval romance poem considers how Colgrevice exposes his vulnerability to the elements of very foul weather to see if he can survive and therefore affirm his identity as a knight in that survival.

This dissertation project proposes a new theory of genre that considers the material elements of the natural environment in Middle English literature composed from 1300-1450 CE. Instead of treating the setting as just a backdrop for human activity, I posit that the components of the environment play a role in the deployment of the narrative by shaping the characters and influencing the action. More than just an acknowledgement of the particular natural components, this study explores the role that these components play and how they give us a deeper understanding of the text. Instead of a genre based on theme, this project puts forth an eco-theory of genre based on the natural components of the setting and presents a view of the text that both engages and augments the traditional genre classification. By teasing out the material details of the setting, an eco-theory of genre cuts across conventional genres and offers another way to connect medieval texts. I argue that, instead of romance, Breton lai, ballad, and fabliau, the following texts are wilderness, forest, and garden poems. The eco-theory of the genre wilderness sees the adversarial components in an untamed environment. The forest genre is a space of rules and regulations that circumscribe the environment and, in turn, manage the resources found there. The genre of the garden focuses on the conflict between what is manmade and what is natural and which is the more real.

During the Middle Ages, the material world of nature pervaded every aspect of life from the agricultural cycles to the calculation of the Church calendar. Yet, nature manifested itself in two opposing ways. On one side was the image of nature as represented by people textually, visually, and philosophically. On the other side was the lived experience of nature in the material world. Often, what was espoused as a truth

about nature was different from the lived experience. For example, Scripture sanctioned the attitude that all of nature's bounty was for the benefit of humankind. The medieval reality, however, included famine and disease. The medieval philosophy of nature argues for dominion and utilization, as God tells Adam in the book of Genesis that Adam is to subdue the earth and have dominion over it. But, the lived experience of nature is unpredictable and uncontrollable. How can one have dominion over harsh weather, crop failures, and predatory animals? Conflict is inherent even in the word *nature*. According to the *MED*, the first definition of *nature* includes both "the universe as a divine creation" and "the universe as a fallen creation in need of divine grace" (sense 1.a). *Nature* is also "of God" (sense 4.a), as well as "of man" (sense 4.b). *Nature* is its own person in the form of *Natura* (sense 7). It is interior, "right morality" (sense 3.a); it is exterior, "the genitalia" (sense 6.c); it is a source for organization, "type, species, sort" (sense 5). It is my contention that humans' relationship to nature is one of paradox that stems from the very nature of nature itself, and this tension is present in both literary and nonliterary medieval texts.

Written during the twelfth century by cleric and theologian Bernardus Silvestris, the philosophical *Cosmographia* illustrates this tension and uses elements of literature, such as allegory, to explain the creation of the universe.¹ Even though Bernard's text is philosophy, it is still a text with a narrative, and he exerts an authoritative sense of control by spinning a tale that attempts to explain why things are the way they are in the natural world. In the text, the figurative Noys (divine Providence) creates the elements of the universe from *Silva* (matter). The narrator explains that *Silva*, while divinely created, has

¹ Bernardus Silvestris *Cosmographia*, trans. Winthrop Wetherbee (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973).

the potential for disorganization, or what could be understood as disobedience. If the matter that comprises all things is divinely created yet has the potential for disobedience, then the very essence of what we call the *natural world* also carries this dualistic nature. Natural areas provided resources for survival: game for food, lumber for building, plants for medicines. Yet, medieval people had an innate fear of natural areas: unfamiliar territory, the lack of home comforts, and potential encounters with the unknown “Other.” The natural areas were endowed with abundance but were very scary at the same time. Other writers before and after Bernardus struggled with the divide between nature as imagined in philosophy and nature as lived day-to-day. Even non-literary texts, such as chronicles, bestiaries, and law statutes, speak to this relationship, which demonstrates its importance to medieval society at large. The literary texts chosen for this project, ranging from canonical works by Chaucer and the *Gawain*-poet to lesser known ballads, give access to this paradox surrounding the medieval experience with material nature. This dissertation examines the tension created by the dichotomy of nature as both philosophy and lived experience, as well as how the literature of the Middle Ages negotiates this divide as evidenced in certain Middle English texts.

This project enters the literary conversation by way of ecocriticism. Early ecocritical studies focused on literature written during the periods of British and American Romanticism, American Transcendentalism, and the modern environmental movement from the 1960s forward. Considered the first instance of the modern ecocritical movement, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis” by Lynn White, Jr., actively argues for the exploration of and literary engagement with the relationship

between humans and nature.² As editor of the groundbreaking text *The Ecocriticism Reader*, Cheryl Glotfelty takes a wide perspective on the definition of ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment.”³ She goes on to point out that “*eco-* is favored over *enviro-*” because of the association with ecology, which is the study of the interrelationships between living things. Medievalist ecocritic Rebecca Douglass defines ecocriticism as “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.”⁴ By carefully considering the representations of nature within medieval texts, it is the aim of this project to demonstrate that medieval people negotiated the divide between the philosophy of nature and the lived experience of nature through literature. This eco-theory of genre offers a way to study a lesser considered subject in medieval literature—the material world of the setting—by reassessing the genre classification of the texts.

This dissertation explores the material environment of the setting, and in this endeavor traditional forms of genre are limiting and restrictive. The notion of genre is rooted in ancient Greece and Rome and, according to Rosalie Colie, “cultural transfer was achieved by generic means.”⁵ By attending to the material environment, this project expands the traditional notions of genre and broadens our understanding and

² Lynn White, Jr., “The Historic Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” *Science* 155.3767 (10 March 1967): 1203-07.

³ Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, eds., *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), xviii. This text also contains a reprint of White’s article giving it honor of place among the growing ecocritical movement of the time.

⁴ Rebecca Douglass, “Ecocriticism and Medieval Literature,” *Studies in Medievalism* 10 (1998): 138.

⁵ Rosalie Colie, *The Resources of Kind: Genre-Theory in the Renaissance*, ed. Barbara K. Lewalski (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 12.

interpretations of the texts. Viewing these texts through the dual lenses of ecocriticism and genre theory enhances our reception of not only the texts themselves but their cultural underpinnings as well. In the chapters that follow, I argue that medieval people saw their relationship to the natural world as one fraught with anxiety on one hand and nourished with abundance on the other. An eco-theory of genre considers the materiality of the natural world and how it contributes to the paradoxical relationship between medieval humans and the natural world. More importantly, examining these Middle English texts by way of eco-theory opens them up to all sorts of new connections that are not possible under traditional genre classifications. What I call *making connections* is akin to Colie's *cultural transfer*:

I would like to present genre-theory as a means of accounting for connections between topic and treatment within the literary system, but also to see the connection of literary kinds with *kinds* of knowledge and experience; to present the kinds as a major part of that *genus universum* which is part of all literary students' heritage. The kinds honor aspects and elements of culture and in their conjunction help make up culture as a whole.⁶

An eco-theory of genre, one that delineates specific characteristics of different environments, provides a new and different avenue along which to travel and investigate these texts.

The genre of medieval romance is probably one of the most familiar in all of English literature. The conventional romance at its most basic involves a knight-hero on some kind of adventure that leads to challenges that culminate in a victory for the knight, such as the defeat of a foe, the love of a lady, or the reaffirmation of status. Traditional views of romance utilize the external action as a foil or mirror to the interior changes the knight experiences as result of quest. In *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye states, "The

⁶ Colie, *The Resources of Kind*, 29, emphasis in original.

quest romance is the search of the libido or desiring self for a fulfillment that will deliver it from the anxieties of reality, but it will still contain that reality.”⁷ Fredric Jameson contradicts Frye in “Magical Narratives: Romance as Genre” and sees romance as a socio-historical construct that contains a “code of good and evil which is formulated in a magical, rather than a purely ethical, sense.”⁸ While Frye and Jameson both concentrate on the individual, Helen Cooper sees the genre of romance as an expression of community:

Medieval literature shares with earlier writing from the Hebrew Bible to *Beowulf* the function of recording the ideology of an entire community, the values by which it represents itself to itself. Romance, as the dominant secular literary genre of the period, was at the heart of such self-representation, a means by which cultural values and ideals were recorded and maintained and promulgated.⁹

Like Frye and Jameson, Cooper’s assessment is valid and valuable as part of the broader, conventional take on romance as a genre. This project places the traditional romance poems *Ywain and Gawain* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Fitt II, in the wilderness genre because of their representations of uncontained and uncontrollable nature in a wilderness environment and the challenge of adventure. *Sir Gawain*, Fitt III, is considered a forest genre poem due to the depiction of management of the forest resources via the hunting scenes. I argue that *Sir Gawain* is both a wilderness and a forest poem because both habitats are present and clearly delineated in the text. Furthermore, precisely because both habitats are present, an eco-theory of genre based on particular environment settings allows us to get beyond strict demarcations of categories. By

⁷ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 193.

⁸ Fredric Jameson, “Magical Narratives: Romance as Genre,” *New Literary History* 7.1 (1975): 158.

⁹ Helen Cooper, *The English Romance in Time: Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the Death of Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 6.

considering *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as a wilderness and a forest poem, this project recognizes the complexities of the natural world that eco-theory emphasizes.

Colie states that even though there are genre conventions, “they are also metastable.”¹⁰

The genre of Breton lai is also found in two different eco-genres: the wilderness and the forest. Originally meant to be accompanied by a harp, Breton lais are similar to, but shorter in length than, many romances in that they both typically discuss issues of love and chivalry and involve some kind of conflict that must be resolved. According to Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury, the conventional Breton lai contains a “journey to the Otherworld,” a “man who loses his wife or lover,” a “rash boon,” an “exile-return pattern,” and the “testing of a steward’s loyalty.”¹¹ These characteristics reflect the wilderness genre’s parameters of adventure and challenge. Laskaya and Salisbury claim that the Middle English *Sir Orfeo* is a “Breton lay on a classical theme,” but it is a wilderness genre poem in light of the wild environment into which Sir Orfeo flees. The second Breton lai explored in this project, Geoffrey Chaucer’s “The Franklin’s Tale,” does not exhibit the exact characteristics as outlined by Laskaya and Salisbury. Instead, as Katherine Hume points out, “a concern with love and with what the Franklin calls ‘gentillesse,’” “the frequent use of magic (both fairie and other) as a plot device,” and “an a-Christian ethic” exemplifies this tale.¹² Unlike the wilderness poem *Sir Orfeo*, the pivotal action of “The Franklin’s Tale” takes place in a garden setting, and the characters

¹⁰ Colie, *The Resources of Kind*, 30.

¹¹ Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury, “*Sir Orfeo*: Introduction,” in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, eds. Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995), para. 5.

¹² Katherine Hume, “Why Chaucer Calls ‘The Franklin’s Tale’ a Breton Lai,” *Philological Quarterly* 51.1 (1972): 366.

are swayed by the natural, yet artificial, atmosphere. Because the garden environment greatly influences the narrative, “The Franklin’s Tale” is a garden poem.

Similar to the lai, the traditional genre of the ballad was often accompanied by music and quick in its episodic action. Very often, socio-economic issues are the topics in a ballad—questions concerning fair taxes, laws, status—as evidence of medieval society negotiating societal changes, such as the shift from a feudal to a mercantile structure. Stephen Knight and Thomas Ohlgren, in discussing the Robin Hood ballads, state: “Set as they are in forests close to towns, and resisting consistently what are felt to be the incursive forces represented by sheriff, abbot, and the urban market, these ballads clearly value the natural, the communal, and what is felt to be the organic against aspects of the new centralizing and legislating world.”¹³ I argue that *A Gest of Robyn Hode* and *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* are forest genre poems because the eco-theory of the forest provides insight into these works in regards to laws, success, and determining one’s destiny.

The medieval fabliau is often a parody of romance. Instead of exploring themes about love, honor, and chivalry, however, the fabliau revels in bawdy action and language and mocks middle class aristocratic pretensions and characters that pretend to be something they are not. Commenting on the type of humor in a fabliau, Michael McClintock states, “The humor itself in fabliaux is not ambivalent. The joke is always clearly on some character, and never on the audience.”¹⁴ Much of the humor for the

¹³ Stephen Knight and Thomas Ohlgren, “Introduction,” in *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*, eds. Stephen Knight and Thomas Ohlgren (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997), sec. 5, para. 3.

¹⁴ Michael McClintock, “Games and the Players of Games: Old French Fabliaux and the ‘Shipman’s Tale,’” *Chaucer Review* 5.2 (1970): 113.

audience, then, stems from knowing the true identity/purpose/qualities of a character, on being “in” on the joke. “The Shipman’s Tale” and “The Merchant’s Tale” are conventional fabliaux with lovers’ triangles, trickery and deception, and double entendres. But, because actions fundamental to the understanding of the tales occur in gardens, and the eco-theory of the garden speaks to the artifice of that environmental setting in its artificial naturalness, I argue that both the “Shipman’s Tale” and “The Merchant’s Tale” are garden poems.

To consider medieval romance, Breton lai, ballad, and fabliau through the lens of ecocriticism opens up the possibilities for further investigation of the environmental setting of the narrative. Nature in this view, instead of signifying other concepts, signifies about itself. In this way, abstract concepts do not have to remain in the philosophical realm but are anchored to the material and concrete. More importantly, ecocriticism foregrounds the idea that nature is more than a backdrop to the action of a given text and recognizes that the narrative is shaped by the environment. Richard C. Hoffman states, “Rather than viewing Nature as the passive recipient of human actions, we should acknowledge Nature as an active participant in history, understood as a process of *co-adaptation* of human societies with cultures in their changing environments. Nature changes human society. Human society changes Nature.”¹⁵

The chosen texts for this project show a continuum of containment and control in relation to the natural world, and through these texts I argue that human attempts to control and contain nature manifest in three specific ways: the response to the wilderness;

¹⁵ Richard C. Hoffman, “Homo et Natura, Homo in Natura,” in *Engaging with Nature: Essays on the Natural World in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, eds. Barbara Hanawalt and L.J. Kiser (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 13.

the creation of the forest; the cultivation of the garden. Instead of calling these romance texts, I propose that each text be categorized according to the main environment(s) in the text: wilderness, forest, and garden. It is not the goal of this project to show a teleological progression of an awareness of the environment. Instead, I intend to demonstrate that the chosen texts contain examples of how medieval people negotiated the natural world and their place in it. The construction and naming of spaces, even broadly defined ones like *wilderness*, give the creators of those spaces a deceptive sense of control. As the environments become progressively controlled and contained along the continuum, the people's sense of control over the environments as a whole, as well as the components within the environments, increases. But, because all matter has the tendency to be disobedient, including human matter, a person's control over nature (matter) is illusory. For example, the presence of a garden in a story represents a place for respite, sport, or lovemaking. But episodes in certain texts, such as in "The Merchant's Tale," demonstrate that a garden can be made too inviting—Silva becomes disobedient, if you will—and people are no longer in control of the situation even though the "natural environment" is manmade. The tension created by humans' lack of control over their environment—the components given to them by divine Providence—is evidence of the struggle of people to comprehend the natural world around them.

Because an eco-theory of genre allows for the classification of texts by their environmental settings, each setting provides an opportunity to investigate the texts in a new way. This project delineates and describes certain marking characteristics to distinguish each environment. Terrain, weather conditions, level of containment, presence of specific populations, as well as other conditions contribute to the

identification of each environment. Furthermore, I pose overlying questions regarding the characters' interactions within each environment and formulate the answer based on modern ecological concepts anchored in the material world. First, how does the extent to which the protagonist integrates with the environment of the wilderness enhance our understanding of the concept of *hero*? Second, in the forest, how does the management of one's resources determine success or failure? Third, how does the environment in the garden shape the perceptions of what is sincere versus what is pretend? By demonstrating the ways in which the material natural world is integral to the understanding of these narratives, I argue that these texts, as wilderness, forests, or garden poems, are more than just romance texts because they clearly bridge the imaginary to the material.

Chapter 1 explores the wilderness as represented in the Middle English texts *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Sir Orfeo*, and *Ywain and Gawain*. By the time these texts were written the truly wild areas in England were limited. Defined as trackless, boundless, and the habitat of all manner of creatures, the wilderness best demonstrates the paradoxical relationship between humans and nature. The wilderness is where one goes to be tested physically in feats of strength and prowess in extreme conditions. To lose the wilderness would be to lose the most natural proving ground. Yet, there is fear of what is in there: giants, dragons, ogres, trolls, the world of fairy, and the supernatural. The knight of medieval romance partially defines himself by means of his accomplishments in this topography. But it is in the wilderness that humans have the least sense of agency. Although people often willingly enter the wilderness, it is with the knowledge that they are not in control. These texts demonstrate this willingness to subject oneself to these extreme conditions. A traditional reading of the romance knight in the

wilderness considers him a hero who is there to test his bravery and strength in arms. But eco-theory privileges the elements of the natural world and unpacks the narrative from the perspective of those natural elements. A wilderness text evaluates the hero by his degree of integration with the wilderness environment.

The knight Ywain flees to the wilderness in his grief over a broken promise and becomes a wild man of the woods. He forgets his identity as a knight and lives on subsistence hunting, interacting with no one except a hermit. Ywain almost fully integrates with the wilderness. The king Sir Orfeo exiles himself to the wilderness for ten years following the abduction of his wife. Unlike Ywain, Orfeo keeps a firm grip on his identity, in thanks mostly to the harp he loves to play as a reminder of better days at court. Orfeo only moderately integrates with the wilderness: where Ywain thrives, Orfeo only survives. Sir Gawain integrates the least with the wilderness. On his quest to find the Green Knight, he leaves a path of destruction through the wilderness of Wirral as he fights all foes before him. Questions this chapter considers include: How did the authors of such texts as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Ywain and Gawain*, and *Sir Orfeo* create spaces for adventure that seemed real enough for the audience? Was there enough wilderness left for there to be even the hint of the Other in existence? In an era of increasing control over the outside environment, what was the importance of writing about places where human beings had no control?

From the wilderness, the next environment on the continuum of containment is that of the forest. Unlike the wilderness, which no longer existed in England at the time the texts were composed, the medieval forest was a dominating factor in the medieval landscape. Chapter 2 considers the forest texts *A Gest of Robyn Hode*, *The Wedding of Sir*

Gawain and Dame Ragnelle, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. After the invasion of the Normans in 1066, in a process called afforestation, most of the wilderness areas were cut and managed into forests for the principle purpose of facilitating the hunting of deer. To people of the Middle Ages, the word *forest* had very specific connotations. Unlike today's generalized definition, a medieval forest denoted a delineated area with its own law, officers to enforce the law, and courts to adjudicate the law. A forest had specific boundaries and activities that could take place within those boundaries. People could live within the forest, but their activities were highly regulated. The medieval forest represents the first shift in agency on the part of humans to control nature within its own environment. Most, but not all, royal forests consisted of a patchwork of open grassy areas, areas with significant overstory but cleared understory, and denser brushy areas. Each zone had its purpose for the management of the wildlife therein. There was little to no agricultural cultivation inside the forests, but small industries were active, such as charcoal making, firewood cutting, and timbering.¹⁶ As "controlled" wilderness, the forest is where one could find the "good" things of nature: clean air, pure water, and an abundance of resources. Because forests were managed to enhance wildlife habitat, the populations of game animals were high. As humans' agency increased in this environment, the benefits were obvious, and the crown readily reaped these benefits.

However, the forest was not entirely the civilization of town or court. Although more tame than the wilderness, the forest still held dangers. The abundance of resources

¹⁶ *The Royal Forests of Medieval England* by Charles Young (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1979) is a superb source for all things forest of the time. However, *Forests and Chases of England and Wales c.1500-c.1800*, edited by John Langton and Graham Jones (Oxford: St. John's College Research Centre, 2008), gives a quantified picture of what was left of the forests by the end of the Middle Ages. Taken together, these texts provide a wealth of information regarding the material forest of the time in which this project is concerned.

tempted those who were declared outside the law of the land. These outlaws found a refuge in the forest: with plenty to eat, water to drink, and shelter to be had, a resourceful person could live well enough as long as he could escape capture. Along with the outlaws hiding in the forest, one could also find normally law-abiding citizens taking from the resources what they considered should be free for one and all.¹⁷ But all game animals, timber, and even the harvesting of medicinal plants fell under the crown's pleasure for use and regulation.

The hunting scenes of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* speak to the ritualization of the hunt in the forest as a way to show man's dominance over nature. *A Gest of Robyn Hode* and *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* take up in one way or another the king's laws regarding the use of the forest resources and the fairness of those laws. The official law was not the only influence on the forest, as popular texts, such as the Duke of York's *The Master of Game*, outlined the proper rules and etiquette for the hunt. These hunting manuals influenced the literature in which hunting was depicted. Keeping the strict forest regulations firmly in mind and employing ecological concepts regarding the interconnectedness of the components of the natural environment, I argue that a character's success or failure in the forest can be determined by how he manages the resources available to him.

The third manifestation of people's attempt to control their environment—the cultivation of the garden—is the subject of Chapter 3. This chapter considers three tales from Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*: "The Shipman's Tale," "The Franklin's

¹⁷ Barbara Hanawalt in *Of Good and Ill Repute: Gender and Social Control in Medieval England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) explores poaching in the Middle Ages as an expression of gender identity. She notes also that the forest law was so despised because "it encroached on one of the perceived rights of medieval men of all classes and status groups: freedom to exploit the natural environment," 146.

Tale,” and “The Merchant’s Tale.” The function of the medieval garden is to bring the outside world in, and the medieval garden, either attached to the castle or estate house grounds or surrounded by its own high walls, provided its owner with the opportunity to enjoy the abundance and beauty of nature within safety and privacy. Yet, the safety and privacy of the garden is illusory according to the selected texts. While it has been argued by many that every garden in literature looks back to a desire to recapture the prelapsarian Garden of Eden, this chapter will explore the idea that the garden is human kind’s expression of agency over nature in their attempt to control a natural environment. Where the forest allowed people to manage the natural resources but was still a site for potential danger and political and social conflict, the garden is completely under the thumb of its owner with its high walls, laid out pathways, deliberate plantings, and designated areas for sitting or observing nature.

While the specter of the *Roman de la Rose* hovers over every medieval garden poem, I argue that there is more than allegory occurring within the garden walls. Like the environment of the forest, the garden materially existed alongside the texts, and medieval people had intimate knowledge of how the garden looked, smelled, sounded, and worked. Popular texts about the benefits of a cultivated space for respite and relaxation influenced the creation of these artificially created natural spaces. Through consideration of the impact of the material medieval garden on the imaginary garden spaces in literature, an eco-theory of genre emphasizes these texts as garden poems.

The simple pleasures provided by a garden on a material level – sweet aromas, beautiful sights, and the peace and room in which to enjoy them – take on special significance if juxtaposed against any conflict that occurs within the garden. The three

garden poems examined from *The Canterbury Tales* demonstrate how the garden space can be more than a place to take in the fresh air and admire the flowers. The garden in “The Shipman’s Tale” functions as an office in which to conduct a business arrangement by the lady of the house. In “The Franklin’s Tale,” the garden is a playground for nobles and provides a space to escape the cares of their lives through dancing, playing games, and flirting. The intimate atmosphere of the garden encourages behavior that might not take place outside the garden walls. The garden of “The Merchant’s Tale” reaches new heights in terms of design and components and is meant to be a personal paradise on Earth, but the secure stone walls belie the garden as a paradise when those walls are breached by an outsider. This environment shows that even though a garden may be human kind’s best attempt at a totally contained and controlled nature, representations of nature within these garden texts reveal that nature may never be totally contained nor controlled.

The chapters of this dissertation project propose and endorse a new theory of genre based on ecological concepts that help to bridge select imaginary medieval literary texts and the material medieval world. This genre of eco-theory both deepens the understanding and opens up new interpretive possibilities of romance, Breton lai, ballad, and fabliau texts as specifically wilderness, forest, or garden poems. By closely considering the natural components of the environment as depicted in the text, we gain an insight into how medieval people negotiated the divide between their understanding of the natural world and their lived experience of it.

CHAPTER 2

BRIARS AND THORNS: THE HERO IN THE WILDERNESS

When confronted with a text defined as a *romance*¹⁸, one generally knows what to expect: a knight accepts a challenge that leads to a quest away from his known environs; he experiences perilous adventures along the way, as well as some kind of psychological or spiritual growth. Finally, the knight, improved in some way, returns to his original, known environment. The action of a romance is often episode after episode of combat, scary beasts, beautiful maidens, magical happenings, and near-escapes. A traditional view of a romance text focuses on the interior journey of the hero with the environment as backdrop. In one of the fundamental explorations of romance as a genre, “The Knight Sets Forth,” Erich Auerbach sees romance as a cultural paradigm for maintaining a set of values for the ruling class. The knight’s adventure, or *aventure*, is the “means by which [courtly virtues] are proved and preserved” and “the real meaning of a knight’s existence.”¹⁹ For Auerbach, a knight enhances his chivalric cachet by participating in adventures. In this view, how the knight performs to code under the stress of the adventures and what the knight learns about himself in the process are at the core of the romance narrative. The environment in which the action takes place is secondary to the

¹⁸ *Middle English Dictionary* (sense 1a): “Written narrative of the adventures of a knight, nobleman, king, or important ecclesiastic; a chivalric romance.”

¹⁹ Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953), 134-35.

interior, psychological space of the hero. But what if we were to consider the wilderness environment as a specific, tangible place in the narrative—a place that can be defined by particular characteristics that delineate it from other types of outdoor environments? What if wilderness was a genre, which affected the poem and/or the hero? What does close consideration of the wilderness offer to the interpretation of certain Middle English narratives? In “Literary Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis,” Cheryl Glotfelty states that ecocriticism highlights that “human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it.”²⁰ This project argues that ecocriticism—the view that the natural world influences and is influenced by human activity—can present a different approach to medieval romance texts. The dominate interpretation of romance, for example, focuses on how culture shapes the internal, the emotional, the spiritual—all focus is on the human hero apart from any material particularity. An ecocritical interpretation can shed light on how the outside environment—in this case, the wilderness—shapes the hero and, in turn, reconfigures how we view the hero. While not all medieval texts could be classified as wilderness texts, there are some in which the wilderness environment plays a major role—a role that has been treated mostly as superficial, if considered at all. The following chapter examines how characteristics of the wilderness environment provide another way to assess the hero of three well-known Middle English texts: two romances, *Ywain and Gawain* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and one Breton lai, *Sir Orfeo*. If genre is a classification or category based on

²⁰ Cheryl Glotfelty, “Literary Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis,” in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, eds. Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1996), xix.

similar characteristics, common modes of expression, or definable and recognizable traits, then the examined texts show that wilderness is a genre and that these texts belong to the genre of wilderness poems.

In what follows I argue that an ecocritical reading provides a different, nuanced interpretation of these poems that might deepen or even alter the conventional reading. In a traditional view of romance, for example, the tension created from the dialectic relationship between knight and wilderness—a place to prove oneself vs. the potential hazards therein—supplies the impetus for the narrative. Ecocriticism, however, highlights the ways human beings influence and are influenced by the natural world. How one interacts with the natural environment is at the heart of ecocriticism, and the exploration of the extent to which one integrates with the natural world reveals an alternative take on the hero. For example, the notions of both strength and weakness are slightly altered if they are measured against the hero's ability to integrate with the natural world around him. From this point of view, a knight's success is measured by his skill of working with the natural world instead of against it.

The knight of medieval literature partially defines himself by means of his accomplishments in the wilderness. But it is in the wilderness where characters have the least sense of agency. Although they often willingly enter, they do so with the knowledge that they are not in control of the environment. *Ywain and Gawain*, *Sir Orfeo*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* provide a range of integration with and reaction to the wilderness by the main characters. This chapter will examine the protagonists and their status as hero of the narrative in relation to their integration with the wilderness environment.

To focus on environment, we need to broaden our perception about the status of different landscapes in the Middle Ages. What was a wilderness, and how did people encounter this landscape in the fourteenth century? In truth, the wilderness was mostly a literary landscape, an environmental imaginary, a place that only existed in the imagination. By 1200 CE, the truly wild areas in England were gone, victims of clearing for cultivation and Norman afforestation practices, so the wilderness of medieval England was found mostly in story.²¹ The authors of medieval texts purposefully employed a nonexistent environment as a setting for their narratives to create tension by placing a character outside his normal *milieu*. The elements of the wilderness environment provide circumstances that appear exotic and dangerous, and therefore, exciting. A clerk on the back of a mule plodding the well-worn ruts between London and Oxford cannot capture the imagination in the same way that a knight astride a warhorse and lost in the deep, dark wilderness can. But even though the real environment of the wilderness was nowhere to be found when these texts were composed, the material details of a naturalistic setting were still important, because the basic components of a natural setting are found in both environments, (e.g., shrubs, trees, rocks, rivers, etc.). The difference between the real natural world and the imaginary literary one is that within the wilderness, characters have encounters beyond the usual and everyday.

The *Middle English Dictionary* defines *wilderness* as “wild, uninhabited, or uncultivated territory; trackless, desolate land” (sense 1a). A wilderness is different from a forest by virtue of its lack of human intervention in the landscape, as expressed in the

²¹ Afforestation: “The action or result of converting into forest or hunting-ground.” *OED*.

MED definition. While previous critics have used *wilderness* and *forest* interchangeably, I draw specific distinctions to define the wilderness environment. For the purposes of this project, a wilderness 1) is trackless and seemingly boundless, 2) presents extreme or harsh living conditions, 3) is home to the Other, and 4) can provide a refuge. A knight in the wilderness often has no paths to follow; can experience hunger, thirst, and dangerous weather conditions; and may encounter creatures of supernatural origin. Peril is a knight's constant companion in this setting. These four characteristics or markers are found to greater or lesser extent in the texts examined in this chapter; as a consequence, these criteria provide an avenue for exploring the hero's integration with the surrounding wilderness environment.

To call an environment *wilderness*, it must be removed from the familiar for both the characters and the audience. The wilderness must exist in some "other where" and give the impression of being vast and without the inroads of civilization or culture. By the middle of the fourteenth century, there were no areas of unexplored territory left in all of the British Isles. Oliver Rackham contrasts English and North American settlements:

In England there is nothing to compare to the impact of European settlement on America, nor the distinction between settlers and Native Americans. American terms such as "wilderness" or "old-growth forest" had no application in medieval England, and little in Europe, because the Middle Ages were a late stage in the development of the English cultural landscape. The Middle Ages had more in common with the present than with aboriginal times. The big changes had already taken place, and much of the present infrastructure already existed.²²

²² Oliver Rackham, "The Medieval Countryside of England: Botany and Archeology" in *Inventing Medieval Landscapes: Senses of Place in Western Europe*, eds. John Howe and Michael Wolfe (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2002), 31.

In other words, the waves of invaders from the Angles, Jutes, and Saxons to the conquering Normans did not find pristine virgin wilderness when they arrived. In fact, Rackham states, “Contrary to popular belief [i.e., modern day], England was well provided with roads: about half of the present roads are of medieval or earlier date.”²³ Roads and the settlements and towns they led to were firmly ensconced in the medieval English topography. So how did the authors convincingly portray a trackless and boundless environment that no longer existed? How did they evoke features of the material world (e.g., stands of trees, patches of briars), but render those as wild, uncontained, and dangerous? First, the wilderness topography is a traditional motif that provides a set of material conditions and circumstances, such as traveling alone in a desolate area, against which the narrative develops. What Helen Cooper calls a “meme,” here a meme of the wilderness,²⁴ is easily recognizable in romance texts. Consider the introduction to a tale the knight Colgrevice relates to his fellow knights in *Ywain and Gawain*:

I rade allane, als ye sal here,
 Obout for-to seke aventurs,
 Wele armid in gude armurs.
 In a frith I fand a street
 Ful thik and hard, I yow bihete,
 With thornes, breres, and moni a quyn.

²³ Rackham, *Medieval Countryside*, 29.

²⁴ Referring to Richard Dawkins’ *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), Helen Cooper in *The English Romance in Time: Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the Death of Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) defines *motif* as, “a unit within literature that proves so useful, so infectious, that it begins to take on a life of its own. There is a word for such things now: a ‘meme,’ an idea that behaves like a gene in its ability to replicate faithfully and abundantly, but also on occasion to adapt, mutate, and therefore survive in different forms and cultures” (3). See also Susan Blackmore *The Meme Machine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). Cooper states that “romance motifs fulfill precisely [Blackmore’s] criteria of replication with fidelity, fecundity, and longevity” (3).

Nerehand al day I rade thareyn, (154-160)²⁵

Colgrevice is the traditional knight errant, and this description, along with Colgrevice's action, is conventional. A *frith* is a wooded area or wilderness (*MED*, sense 2.b.), and the way itself is difficult with briars, thorns, and dense undergrowth. This is not a path through a well-tended park, and it alerts the audience that the speaker is traveling outside the familiarity of court and into the wilds where anything can happen. He seeks a place away from court where he can test his psychological fortitude, such as his bravery and cunning, as well as his external abilities, such as his strength and accuracy in arms. He rides alone and armed, ready to face whatever he comes upon: the greater the difficulty and the challenge, the greater the rewards.

Secondly, authors were able to write about the nonexistent wilderness because of a general lack of geographic knowledge and the absence of true maps in the period. According to Alexander Murray, people in the Middle Ages had "no clear idea of anything outside their own immediate geographical area, or earlier than their great-grandfathers...."²⁶ The *mappaemundi* of the Middle Ages resembled encyclopedias more than true maps. The main purpose of these, according to Evelyn Edson, "went far beyond the purely physical representation of space that we assume to be the function of a map today, instead, the *meaning* of space was its ambitious program."²⁷ The Hereford Cathedral map is an excellent example of the encyclopedic nature of medieval maps. Like

²⁵ All quotations for *Ywain and Gawain* are from *Middle English Romances*, ed. Stephen H. A. Shepherd (New York: Norton, 1995).

²⁶ Alexander Murray, "Nature and Man in the Middle Ages," in *The Concept of Nature*, ed. John Torrance (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 32.

²⁷ Evelyn Edson, *The World Map, 1300-1492: The Persistence of Tradition and Transformation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 2007) 31.

most maps of the period, it is oriented with East and Eden at the top, and Jerusalem (Rome in later maps) is in the center of the world.²⁸ Rivers that never meet in the real world are joined or flow in the wrong direction, and the edges are filled with strange creatures that are supposedly found in the farthest lands.

Ptolemy's *Geographia*, his master work on time and space, was not available to Western medieval audiences until a copy arrived in Florence in 1397 and was translated into Latin. It is hard to imagine today that one person's work could be so important on a global scale. But without the concept of longitude and latitude as the basis for location, there was no systematic approach to pinpointing the location of places. As Edson explains:

Neither the concept nor the necessary data were available to the medieval mapmaker. The Arabs maintained charts of the locations of cities by latitude and longitude, but for centuries used these for horoscopes, rather than for mapmaking. It took the conjunction of the concept of the locational grid and the data to transform mapmaking in the later Middle Ages.²⁹

During the Middle Ages, travel for most people was measured in time towards a certain direction, as in, it took so many hours or days to walk or ride to a given location.³⁰ What lay beyond the end of the usual route to market or to court was anyone's guess. The

²⁸ See Kathy Lavezzo, *Angels on the Edge of the World: Geography, Literature, and English Community, 1000-1534* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), who argues that the English, by virtue of their position on the edge of the world, saw themselves as natural conquerors of the rest of the space beneath them.

²⁹ Evelyn Edson, *Mapping Time and Space: How Medieval Mapmakers Viewed Their World* (London: British Library, 1997), 9.

³⁰ Edson, in *Mapping Time and Space*, states that some mapmakers "worked in painstaking concern for the accurate representation of spatial relationships, taking into account distances, in the form of days' journeys" (10). Edson's claim that medieval society, "much less literate than our own," often relied on "the assistance of human guides" must speak to longer distances, such as those traveled during pilgrimage (13). See also Cooper, *The English Romance in Time*: "Topography was linear, familiar in so far as it formed the line of travel, but whatever lay to the side remaining largely unknown" (68).

reports provided by religious pilgrims and soldiers who had traveled to other places only enhanced the exotic qualities of such faraway locales. Authors of the medieval wilderness poems relied on the audiences' willing belief that unexplained wonders occur beyond the known borders and that anything could happen in these unknown places.

A main source for medieval wilderness can be found in the deserts of the Judeo-Christian ethic. Like the wilderness, a place for challenge and refuge, the desert of the East is multivalent in nature. According to Jaques LeGoff, going into the desert could be "a second baptism" or a "place where one met Satan and his demons."³¹ Both desert and wilderness environments are defined by their lack: of resources, comforts, and protection from harsh conditions and life-threatening elements. More relevant to our wilderness texts is the notion that "the desert to which positive value is ascribed in the Old Testament is a place not of solitude but of trial and above all *rootless wandering*."³² All three protagonists wander about the wilderness: Gawain because he does not know exactly where to look for his quarry; Ywain because he is not in his right mind; and Orfeo because he has abdicated all responsibility and holds no occupation. As each man determines his course of action (i.e., he is no longer wandering interiorly), the wilderness environment gives way to a different, more structured environment. The wandering in the wilderness signifies the inner struggle, which is given texture by the environmental details, such as harsh weather conditions, difficult terrain, and/or the presence of threatening wild animals, and his physical wandering stops once the character makes a

³¹ Jaques LeGoff, *The Medieval Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 51.

³² LeGoff, *Medieval Imagination*, 48, my emphasis.

decision to act. While specifically referring to Sir Orfeo, Michael Bristol could be speaking about any of the three protagonists:

His wandering has prepared him for the recovery of an imprisoned soul. As an extension of Scriptural myth, the events in the wilderness are not concerned with the exposition of temptation and sin but with the identification of a purpose. Christ wanders the desert in order to liberate Adam from his exile; Israel endures forty years in the desert in order to free itself from past bondage. Orfeo's trial eventuates in the release of Heurodis.³³

I take Bristol's idea one step further and assess the wandering as more than an interior struggle because of the influence of the material world that interprets "rootless wandering" as a failing because of its lack of productivity. According to the MED, *desert* (sense 2) and *waste* (sense 1)—landscapes typified by empty places—are defined using words such as *barren*, *unproductive*, and *desolate*. Barren places, such as the desert, are to be avoided unless one has a specific purpose for being there, such as the ones mentioned in Bristol above. From God's admonition in Genesis to "Go forth and multiply" to the clearing and settlement of wilderness areas by religious communities for the glory of God, anything barren, such as uncultivated land, had negative connotations.³⁴

Ywain, Orfeo, and Gawain participate in rootless wandering, because they are unable to fulfill their respective roles as knight, husband, or champion. Each protagonist in the narratives performs some kind of productive act to begin his journey out of the wilderness environment. Once Ywain establishes a pattern of regular or interaction with

³³ Michael Bristol, "The Structure of the Middle English *Sir Orfeo*," *Papers on Language and Literature* 6 (1970): 346.

³⁴ Regarding religious communities as wilderness settlers, see Corinne Saunders, *The Forest of Medieval Romance* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1993), 7. David Herlihy notes how the *Romance of the Rose* "exhorts the reader to maximum reproduction: 'Plow, for God's sake, my barons, plow and restore your lineages'" (19701) in "Attitudes toward the Environment in Medieval Society," in *Historical Ecology*, ed. Lester Kilsky (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1980), 112.

the hermit and has a purpose to his days, he is no longer a wild man; a damsel discovers him sleeping in the woods and takes him back to her court. Orfeo wanders in the wilderness for ten years or more (264), but when he declares his intentions to rescue Heurodis he is able to follow the supernatural creatures into their secret realm. In claiming the occupation of minstrel at the gate to the fairy court, Orfeo accesses the inner sanctum of the fairy kingdom and saves Heurodis (382). Gawain's wanderings in the wilderness come to an end with his desire to celebrate the Nativity Mass. His declaration, "'...With glad heart I would hear there the Mass; / Your matins tomorrow I meekly request. / Thus promptly I pray my Pater and Ave and Creed'" (755-57), focuses his energies on a particular activity, and the wilderness gives way to a park-like, manicured topography that allows Gawain to be "war in þe wod of a won in a mote" (764).³⁵ By making a decisive action, each hero forges his own path and moves from the wilderness to a non-wilderness environment. From the wilderness, Gawain, Orfeo, and Ywain arrive at a court that throws into relief the wilderness that each left behind.

The material wilderness of the sixth to tenth centuries consisted of large stretches of wild areas, heavily wooded and largely unpopulated, and these three wilderness poems harken back to this earlier era in their sense of place. David Herhily refers to this time period as "adversarial" between people and the environment: "small human communities were fighting for survival. Low technological skills gave them little confidence that they might ultimately prevail and no assurance that the wilderness might not in the end

³⁵ All quotations for *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are taken from *The Complete Works of the Pearl Poet*, eds. Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

reclaim their fields and their mead halls.”³⁶ The imagined wilderness environments in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Sir Orfeo*, and *Yvain and Gawain* are the successors of the material wilderness of the early Middle Ages. The harsh conditions depicted in the stories provide concrete challenges to be overcome that engender sympathy for the hero.

In the literary wilderness the rain is colder, the snow falls harder, the ice deeper. There is less to eat and nowhere comfortable to sleep. Food is often catch-as-catch-can or the basest of sustenance. The harsh conditions highlight the distance that the hero has traveled from court and provide an additional visceral challenge. It is not enough for the hero to risk his life on his quest; he must be cold, wet, and hungry as well. Where the conventional view of romance considers the hero, his adventures, and the interior changes he undergoes as he takes on the challenges before him, the ecocritical view examines closely the tangible presence of the wilderness and considers how the natural world challenges and shapes the hero and his capacity to adapt to and even integrate with the wilderness environment. The wilderness reshapes each character in some way. For example, the wilderness provides Yvain an arena in which to lose all sense of himself and who he is as a knight, which ultimately leads to his reconciliation with courtly society.

The third marker of the wilderness is the presence of the Other. In its broadest sense, the Other describes anything that is not part of the mainstream consciousness. In strictly human terms, the Other can be based on gender, racial, or socio-economic characteristics of difference. For the purposes of the current project, the Other stems from the perceived differences between the court or town and the wilderness. From the

³⁶ Herlihy, “Attitudes,” 109.

widest view, compared to the court or town, the physical landscape of the wilderness itself is considered the Other. At the same time, the wilderness is a place of the Other precisely because the wilderness is neither town nor court. This chapter considers the presence of the Other in the selected texts through the lenses of religion and the growing knowledge of the natural world.

Even though the authors of *Sir Orfeo*, *Ywain and Gawain*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* never experienced a real wilderness as I have defined it here, they populate the fictional wilderness environment in their narratives with situations and creatures they envision to be found there, such as the use of magic, dragons, fairies, and the like. Because the literary wilderness was fictional, it permitted fanciful imaginings on the part of the composer. The medieval lack of concrete geographical knowledge also benefits the author. To revisit the earlier discussion about medieval maps: strange creatures filled in the blank spaces on the edges of the known world, such as blemmyes, manticores, sciapods, and sea monsters. Pliny was one of the first to ascribe certain monstrosities to specific areas. In larger maps of the thirteenth century, “most of [the monsters] were neatly arranged on the southern edge of Africa, a *suitably remote* place.”³⁷ It was not just the tropical regions that captured the imagination of medieval mapmakers. An early fifteenth-century map drawn by Claudius Clavus, a Dane, “shows Greenland as a huge northern territory attached to Scandinavia and running along the northern and western edges of the map. In the farthest north, in those ‘*terrae incognitae*,’ he records the

³⁷ Edson, *Mapping Time* 16, my emphasis.

presence of the pagan Carelians, unipeds, maritime pygmies, and griffins.”³⁸ And this is *after* 400 years of Scandinavian dominance of the North Sea and the northern Atlantic. The same lack of geographic knowledge that allowed authors to depict limitless stretches of wild land “somewhere” also allowed them to portray creatures that many people had heard about but no one had ever seen.

There is a long Judeo-Christian tradition of viewing the wilderness as a void. The Israelites wandered the desert wilderness before gaining the Promised Land of Canaan. For the Christian church, going into the wilderness signified spreading the Gospel to places where it had not been heard. This often meant that Christian theology was at odds with the native belief system. Christian missionaries arriving in England found pagan religious practices and mythology well-entrenched, particularly those that centered on animism and nature worship. The Church absorbed those that fit into the larger Catholic belief system and demonized the rest. According to Roland Bechmann:

Catholicism attempted to firmly categorize the different myths inherited from the past and still very much alive—especially in the countryside—by placing the evil powers on one side and the good on the other. The evil powers, whose existence was recognized, were found, of course, far from the churches and far from the “civilized” places; in other words, in the country and particularly the [wilderness].³⁹

The Church needed the diabolical as a way to solidify Church beliefs and superiority and as a way to explain occurrences in nature before the advances in natural science gained ground in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.⁴⁰ Official recognition and condemnation by

³⁸ Edson, *World Map* 127.

³⁹ Roland Bechmann, *Trees and Man: The Forest in the Middle Ages*, trans. Katharyn Dunham (New York:Paragon House, 1990), 287.

⁴⁰ The 12th century universities in northern France gave rise to what Herhily refers to as the “collaborative” attitude toward nature. Because they were influenced by Plato, William of Conches, Bernard Sylvester,

the Church of supernatural phenomena only reinforced the people's belief in the existence of magic and Other creatures. Bechmann continues:

Many phenomena, unexplained at the time, that occurred in the forest – “fairy rounds,” those regular circles of mushrooms that sometimes grow in clearings, echoes, trees with spiral trunks, strange rock formations, and also mysterious disappearances, unexplained accidents, deaths without any apparent cause – confirmed the beliefs of the peasants in the existence of those mysterious creatures[...] and no one was surprised to learn that some people had met them or that magicians had dealt with them.⁴¹

If an occurrence did not have a concrete explanation, then it was considered a *marvel*.

The marvelous must have been fairly common for the average person in the Middle Ages.

Le Goff sees a definite shift as people became more aware of nature and its systems as being ambivalent, i.e., neither divine nor diabolical:

[The] marvelous is the system by which supernatural events were interpreted from the late twelfth until the sixteenth century. The “marvelous” was in a sense a natural form of the supernatural, a middle term between the divine supernatural (that is, the *miraculous*, which depends solely on God's saving grace) and the diabolical supernatural (or *magic*, governed by Satan's destructive activity). After the thirteenth century the marvelous seems to me to gain ground on the miraculous and the magical. Miracles become rarer, and magic is more hotly contested. Does it make sense to speak of the “secularization” of the supernatural?⁴²

It is my contention that the loss of the wilderness environment is a direct cause of this shift in perception and the ascendancy of the marvelous over miracles and magic.

Without the material wilderness, there were not as many opportunities to experience the unknowable or the unfamiliar in the natural world. But the imagined wilderness contained elements of the miraculous and the magical, as well as the marvelous, such as

and Alan of Lille were “particular[ly] interested in the relative contribution to cosmological formation of three operators: God, nature, and man.” “Attitudes,” 111.

⁴¹ Bechmann, *Trees and Man*, 285-86.

⁴² Le Goff, *Medieval Imagination*, 12.

fairies and dragons. The deployment of the Other in the texts studied in this chapter serves the purpose of emphasizing the figurative distance between the real, experienced world and the imagined environment. The Other rounded out the ecological imaginary: a topography constructed through the details of the narrative for a specific purpose.

Being lost in an unknown land while coping with bad weather and fearsome beasts would tend to make one think twice about entering the wilderness topography. And up to this point, the characteristics outlined as denoting the wilderness have mostly negative associations. But not all iterations of the wilderness were viewed as harmful or destructive. In some circumstances, medieval people viewed the wilderness as a potential refuge, particularly in stories regarding ascetics or saints who go wild in their quest for religious enlightenment. The wilderness was viewed as a place for penitence and revelation. Recorded saints' lives and hagiography contain many examples of the solitary figure living in the wilderness, either desert or woods, and thriving because of his or her simple way of life. St. John the Baptist is the archetype for this example during the Middle Ages. In all three texts, *Sir Orfeo*, *Ywain and Gawain*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the protagonists enter the wilderness and find a haven where each man can "consolidate his identity before completing his task."⁴³

Ywain and Gawain

The Middle English *Ywain and Gawain* depicts a boundless and trackless topography. Look again at Colgrevice's description of his way into the wilderness:

I rade allane, als ye sal here,

⁴³ Bristol, "Structure," 346.

About for-to seke aventurs,
Wele armid in gude armurs.
In a frith I fand a street
Ful thik and hard, I yow bihete,
With thornes, breres, and moni a quyn.
Nerehand al day I rade thareyn, (154-160)

The author of *Ywain and Gawain* does not stray very far from earlier models of the *descriptio loci*: a knight, dressed and armed for combat, rides alone through an inhospitable environment. According to R.W.V. Elliott, “It is in the Sophistic theories of post-classical rhetoric that medieval *descriptio loci* had its origins. Decorative description known as *ekphrasis*, whether of a landscape or a person, a banquet or a tempest, became one of the staples of post-classical writers.”⁴⁴ Knightly errantry in the wilderness could only lead to trials and adventure, because the wilderness environment provides challenges to be met and obstacles to be overcome in a variety of guises.

Later in the narrative, when Ywain takes to the wilderness in his distress over forsaking Alundyne, the initial description is very brief, but effective:

Unto the wod the way he nome;

No man wist where he bycome.
About he welk in the forest –
Als it wire a wilde beste
His men on ilka side has soght,
Fer and nere, and finds him noght. (1651-56)

It is important to note here that *forest* in this context means a natural area with trees, shrubs, and wild animals: an area in contrast to the court that Yvain has just fled. This forest is not the same as the late medieval forest, which was a closely regulated and controlled jurisdiction of the crown. Even though Ywain’s men seek far and near for him, the wilderness has swallowed him whole. The vastness of the wilderness topography

⁴⁴ R.W.V. Elliott, *The Gawain Country*, (Leeds: University of Leeds, 1984), 6.

allows for Ywain's stint as a wild man of the woods. This episode is important in Ywain's development as a knight, because Ywain must first totally lose himself—both literally and figuratively—before he can find himself again. He must lose the perfidious knight who valued tournaments and find the honorable knight he is supposed to be as part of King Arthur's court. Ywain accomplishes this by almost fully integrating with the wilderness by means of immersing himself in the environment. He sheds everything from his life at court, including his name, his clothes, and even his awareness of himself as a knight.

Ywain embraces the natural when he goes mad and flees into the wilderness. Le Goff notes that the mad man in the woods is a “common topos in medieval Latin literature” with the “prototype found in Monmouth's *Vita Merlini*.”⁴⁵ In Middle English, *wode* is a noun for a stand of trees (sense 2) or the hard fibrous substance of the trunk and branches (sense 3); *wōd* is an adjective to describe someone in the state of madness (sense 1). The two words are pronounced similarly. The text describes Ywain's response to his loss as “For wa he wex al *wilde* and *wode*. / Unto the *wod* the way he nome” (1650-51, my emphasis). As these two lines suggest, medieval thought closely related the woods as wild, and if someone was wild, then he was also wood, as in, out of his mind. Ywain's flight to and disappearance in the wilderness confirm his unsound state of mind.

Ywain's unstable mental condition allows him to function well in the harsh wilderness conditions. He seizes a bow and arrow from a hapless man in the woods (1658-62) and uses the weapon to hunt deer. Ywain was not so mad as to forget his hunting skills—or does being in a wild state enhance his skills?—as he “Fless he wan

⁴⁵ Le Goff, *Medieval Imagination*, 109.

him fule gude wane -- / And of his arows lost he nane” (1665-66). There were strict regulations regarding hunting during the Middle Ages (see Chapter 2 The Forest), and as a noble, Ywain would be fully aware of these rules. His focus on subsistence hunting—killing what he needs to eat to live without the rituals normally associated with a hunt—further demonstrates Ywain’s slippage into the wild man persona. With his hunting skills and supplements from the vegetation, Ywain seems to thrive in the wilderness in terms of food:

Thare he lifed a grete sesowne
With rotes and raw venysowne;
He drank of the warm blode,
And that did him mekil gode. (1667-70)

At this point in the narrative, the perspective shifts from viewing Ywain to viewing a hermit who is watching Ywain. The hermit becomes “war / A naked man a bow bare” (1673-74). Unlike Sir Orfeo who still had his cloak (and, we may assume, his other clothes because there is no mention of him as naked), “His sclavin he dede on also spac” (343)⁴⁶, Ywain is totally stripped of his knightly clothes. His state, understandably, unnerves the hermit:

He hoped he was wode that tide –
Tharfore no lenger durst he bide;
He sperd his yate and in he ran
Forfered of that wode man. (1675-78)

Ywain’s appearance—naked and armed—qualifies him as “wode,” i.e., mad. Yet his uncultured appearance—naked and armed with a bow—also qualifies Ywain as a “wode

⁴⁶ All quotations for *Sir Orfeo* are from *Middle English Romances*, ed. Stephen H. A. Shepherd (New York: Norton, 1995).

man,” i.e., a man of the woods not of the court.⁴⁷ Ywain’s nakedness echoes the prelapsarian Adam and Eve. Like them, Ywain exhibits no consciousness of his lack of clothing as he integrates with the wilderness and lives day-to-day fulfilling his basic needs for food and sleep. It is only after Ywain is found sleeping by the passing lady and healed of his madness that his naked state concerns him:

He loked up ful sarily
And said, “Lady Saynt Mary,
What hard grace to me es maked
That I am here now thus naked?
Allas, wher any have here bene?
I trow sum has my sorow sene!” (1791-96)

This episode reinforces the key difference between Ywain as wild man and Ywain as civilized man. As a wild man, Ywain has no concern as to what others might think of him. His self-consciousness is tied to being recognized as a man (i.e., as opposed to a wild man). In this iteration, wild men of the wilderness were thought of as less than human and closer to animal because of this lack of awareness.

According to LeGoff, in antiquity the contrast was between the city and the country: *urbs* and *rus*. In the Middle ages, the contrast was between

...nature and culture, expressed in terms of the opposition between what was built, cultivated, and inhabited (city, castle, village) and what was essentially wild (the ocean and [wilderness], the Western equivalents of the Eastern desert), that is between men who lived in groups and those who lived in solitude.⁴⁸

When Ywain chooses to follow his natural desire to continue competing in tournaments, he neglects the culture of knighthood vis-à-vis his broken promise to Alundyne. If we

⁴⁷ A knight would not use a bow. “From the time of Homer until the end of the fifth century the bow was the weapon of bastards,... traitors,... and foreigners... –in a word, of subwarriors.” Paradoxically, the bow was also “the weapon of superwarriors,” such as Heracles, Philoctetes, and Ulysses. Le Goff, *Medieval Imagination*, 111.

⁴⁸ Le Goff, *Medieval Imagination*, 58.

accept Le Goff's premise that people who live in groups are more civilized than people who live alone, then we can add *solitary existence* as one of the harsh conditions under which our protagonists operate. Ywain's madness physically separates him from other men. But the root of that madness—Ywain's inability to keep his word—is what separates him from the other “true” knights. He is not fit to be a knight and exiles himself from that community. Without the chivalric code, Ywain is less than a man (or, at least, the man he should be), and he easily adapts to the harsh conditions of the wilderness. In running away, Ywain is freed from the socially constructed rules of the court and reduced to doing only what it takes to survive. Because of his uncivilized state, Ywain thrives in this environment.

As there is no place or need for socially constructed rules in the wilderness, individuals who are outside socially accepted norms find a home there, whether human, animal, or something in-between. There are several examples of the Other in *Ywain and Gawain* that Ywain must fight, including a dragon, a giant, and various other foes. The *Ywain* narrative also includes a different use of the Other, that of helper. During his adventure in the wilderness, Colgrevice comes across a very large man in a clearing:

I saw sone whare a man sat
On a lawnd, the fowlest wight
That ever yit man saw in sight.
He was a lathly creature,
For fowl he was out of mesure. (244-48)

Colgrevice considers the man ugly and loathly because he is “out of mesure” or out of proportion for a normal human being. The description continues:

His hevyd, me thought, was als grete
Als of a rowncy or a nete.
Unto his belt hang his hare,
And efter that byheld I mare.

To his forhede byheld I than;
 Was bradder than twa large span.
 He had eres als ane olyfant
 And was wele more than geant.
 His face was ful brade and flat;
 His nese was cutted als a cat;
 His browes was like litel buskes,
 And his tethe like bare-tuskes.
 A ful grete bulge opon his bak
 Thare was noght made withowten lac. (251-64)

The man is not only large, but “more than [a] geant,” with features in proportion to the rest of his large body. It is interesting to note that though he is physically in harmony with himself, he is still “out of mesure” compared to the rest of humanity. Even the man’s clothes mystify Colgrevice: “Nowther if wol ne of line / Was the wede that he went yn” (269-70). The narrative is silent as to what covered the large man, but the point is that he is wearing clothing made from neither cultivated fibers nor domesticated animals. We assume his clothing is from a wild source, such as the fur from wild beasts. This large man is emblematic of the wilderness in his size, his unknowability, and his Otherness.

The giant carries a mace, for which the *MED* offers three distinct definitions: (a) a club used in warfare; (b) a ceremonial mace, a rod of office; and (c) some kind of agricultural implement. Colgrevice assumes the mace is a weapon and offers to fight the extra-large man, who offers only silence in reply. Because the giant does not speak, Colgrevice believes that the man is stupid and *cannot* speak. Weighed down by cultural court baggage, Colgrevice tries a friendly approach that results in an exchange that highlights the mistakes that occur when one assesses someone else using only his own experience as a guide:

To him I spak ful hardily
 And said, “What ertow, belamy?”
 He said ogain, “I am a man!”

I said, "Swilk saw I never nane."
"What ertow?" alsone said he.
I said, "Swilk als thou here may se." (277-82)⁴⁹

The wilderness topography—and each man's experiences in it—provides a backdrop as the knight and the giant attempt to discern each other's physical natures. Colgrevice has already described the giant in his story as having a head, hair, ears, face, nose, eyebrows, and teeth: all recognizable human features. But because the giant does not fit Colgrevice's predetermined concept of a man (i.e., male persons who look and act like him), then the giant must be something else, an Other. When the giant inquires the same of the knight, Colgrevice's answer is ambiguous at best, unless one understands the physical nature of the knight. "Such as you may here see" reveals a certain level of expectation on the part of the knight. To Colgrevice, his physical nature, including the horse, armor, weapons, and his very presence in the wilderness should indicate to anyone that he is a knight errant.

Colgrevice looks for a link between seeming and being to further sound out the creature. If Colgrevice seems to be a knight, then that must be what he is. His knightly accoutrement and perceived physical prowess augment the seeming-to-being link. Yet, for Colgrevice, for whom all aspects of the wilderness are confrontational, the giant's presence in the clearing and his possession of the large mace do not match his passive demeanor. Colgrevice questions the giant further:

I said, "What dose thou here allane?"
He said, "I kepe thir bestes ilkane."
I said, "That es mervaille, think me;

⁴⁹ I must call attention to how Colgrevice addresses the giant as "belamy," fair friend or good friend. As a chivalrous knight who faces an indeterminate foe, Colgrevice errs on the side of caution to avoid any offence. I believe this supports my argument that the large man's "otherness" is only his size. His abilities to manhandle the bulls also stem from his size and should not be looked on as an extraordinary power.

For I herd neverof man bot the,
In wilderness ne in forestes,
That keeping had of wilde bestes
Bot thai war bunden fast in halde.” (283-89)

The giant controls the beasts through physical intimidation and his “fingers that er strang,” so that no beast “That remu dar, bot stil stand / When I am to him cumand” (300; 297-98). He claims to be “maister of tham all” (312). To the giant, his own physical nature—great size and strength, natural covering and appearance, and the mace—makes obvious his connection to his job and to the wilderness in the same way that the knight sees his own physical appearance—horse, armor, and weapons—as connected to the wilderness by way of errantry.⁵⁰ The level of comfort, even nonchalance, exhibited by the large man shows his comfort in what Colgrevice views as a dangerous topography. To the giant’s credit, he recognizes Colgrevice as a man; he’s just not sure what kind of man:

Than [the giant] asked onone right,
What man I was. I said, “A knight
That soght aventurs in that land,
My body to asai and fande;
And I the pray of thi kownsayle,
Thou teche me to sum mervayle.” (311-18)

Like the giant, the knight provides a description of what he does as an explanation of what he is, and once Colgrevice determines that the giant is neither mute nor stupid but very capable at his job, he asks the giant’s assistance in finding some adventure. In spite

⁵⁰I argue that the mace in the text is either sense (b) or (c) because the giant by his own admission uses only his hands to control the beasts. With (b), the mace is the symbol of the giant’s role as wilderness gamekeeper. With (c), the mace is a utilitarian tool of the herdsman’s occupation. My point is that Colgrevice reads the mace incorrectly as a weapon in his original estimation of the nature of the giant and his place in the wilderness environment.

of his fearsome appearance, the bull man, in his role as gamekeeper, is a force of order in what Colgrevice views as a dangerous environment, and the giant changes quickly from threat to helper in Colgrevice's narrative.

The giant's physical stature, his presence in the wilderness generally and in a clearing specifically, and his knowledge of a magic fountain all indicate his status as Other. The Other often operates on some level of liminality. The giant himself is a liminal figure.⁵¹ He has the features of a man and works with somewhat domesticated livestock, yet his size and abilities place him beyond an ordinary man. His presence in the clearing on the edge of the surrounding wilderness physically places him in a liminal space. Clearings, groves of trees, banks of streams, and other edge-type places are often associated with supernatural occurrences, because the intersection of different spaces mimics the intersection of the real world and the Other world. In ecological terms, an *ecotone* is the place where two habitats intersect, such as the edges of a clearing in the woods or the mouth of a river at the ocean. Ecotones are typically more biodiverse than each habitat separately because of the greater numbers of species that can adapt and survive in the ecotone zone. An ecocritical reading of the giant demonstrates his integration into his environment.

When viewed through Le Goff's delineation of *marvel* from both *miracle* and *magic*, the use of *marvel* in this passage is enlightening from an ecocritical standpoint.

The giant and his abilities with the bulls are marvels to Colgrevice, and when

⁵¹ On giants, see: Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Albrecht Classen, "Monsters, Devils, Giants, and Other Creatures: 'The Other' in Medieval Narratives and Epics, with Special Emphasis on Middle High German Literature," in *Canon and Canon Transgression in Medieval German Literature*, ed. Albrecht Classen (Göppingen: Kümmerle, 1993), 83-121; and M. L. Carter, "The Psychological Symbolism of the Magic Fountain and the Giant Herdsman in *Yvain*," *Mythlore* 11.3 (1985): 30-31.

Colgrevice asks to be directed to a marvel, the giant describes the well with its attendant storm:

The well es under the fairest tre,
That ever was in this countré;
By that well hinges a bacyne
That es of gold gude and fyne,
With a cheyne, trewly to tell,
That wil reche into the well.
[. . .]
By the well standes a stane;
Tak the bacyn sone onane
And cast on water with thi hand,
And sone thou sa; se new tithand;
A storme sal rise and a tempest
Al about, by est and west. (325-38)

Nowhere in the full description is *miracle* or *magic* used to describe the well or any of the events that happen there. The tempest and the birdsong that follow it are events that occur in nature, though Colgrevice finds them to be extreme. As a helper, the giant directs Colgrevice to a beautiful spot in the wilderness where he can have an experience that is *supernatural*, as in, nature that is more intense and larger than life, yet truly natural, without divine or diabolical interference.⁵² In this instance, the Other character, through his knowledge of the wilderness, assists the protagonist of the episode to experience nature in a way he would not have if on his own.

The final wilderness-marking characteristic, a place of refuge, stands out from the other three markers because of its positive connotation. That the wilderness environment can be both forbidding and sheltering speaks to the medieval view of the duality of nature as divinely created out of potentially disobedient materials. Earlier, this chapter discusses

⁵² Granted, the impetus that causes the storm – tossing water into the basin – is a bit problematic in terms of this argument, but it does not change my point about the use of *marvel* in the exchange between Colgrevice and the giant and the events that happen at the well.

Ywain's immersion into and almost full integration with the wilderness. These conditions are possible because, for Ywain in his madness, the wilderness becomes a refuge from his shame and guilt. Ostensibly, his madness stems from grief over losing Alundyne. A closer examination, however, exposes other possible, more deeply rooted, cultural reasons. While feasting with Arthur and the other knights, Ywain realizes that he has missed the day he promised to be home to Alundyne. At that precise moment in the narrative, an unnamed lady from Alundyne's court rides into the hall. She greets Arthur by name but verbally snubs Ywain. In front of everyone, she accuses him of the crimes done to her mistress: "He es ateyned for trayture, / A fals and lither losenjoure" (1601-02). She accuses him of "treson and trechery" (1609), and questions his knighthood: "It es ful mekyl ogains the right / To cal so fals a man a knight" (1611-12). Finally, the unknown lady voices uncertainty about Ywain's noble lineage: "Certainly, so fals a fode / Was never cumen of kynges blode" (1621-22). There can be no refutation of the charges on Ywain's part because he is standing in Arthur's hall past the appointed day for his return to Alundyne. The loss of Alundyne is great, but the messenger's exposure of Ywain's unchivalrous behavior before the whole of Arthur's court is more than he can endure.

When Ywain flees into the wilderness and rapidly changes into what the medieval audience would recognize as a wild man, the wilderness acts as a place of refuge. He participates in "aimless wandering;" he is "mute or incomprehensible, unable to communicate with other humans;" and he "forages for food, eating uncooked whatever he does find."⁵³ Ywain fully embraces his wild man persona by eating roots and raw

⁵³ David A. Sprunger, "Wild Folk and Lunatics in Medieval Romance," *The Medieval World of Nature: A Book of Essays*, ed. Joyce Salisbury (New York: Garland: 1993), 158.

venison and aimlessly running through the woods naked (1668-74). His treatment of Alundyne is evidence that Ywain is lacking in knightly behavior, and the wilderness provides the refuge for him to behave as he truly is: something more than an animal but also less than a human. If offending *only* Alundyne was all that Ywain was mourning, he could have journeyed to her to ask for forgiveness. But I believe that Ywain's grief, and therefore his madness, is caused by his humiliation before Arthur and the court. Because Ywain does not act like a knight in his treatment of Alundyne, he does not deserve to interact with the other knights. If no longer a knight, he must be less than a man. If less than a man, then he does not belong at court. In Ywain's wild state, the wilderness is a welcome refuge and where he belongs.

Sir Orfeo

Like Ywain, the grieving king Sir Orfeo enters the wilderness to lose himself, and Orfeo's time in the wilderness sets him up for a return to his normal state of affairs. Unlike Ywain, Orfeo does not fully integrate with the wilderness, but exists in a kind of stasis as he survives day-to-day. In response to his wife's abduction, Orfeo assigns a caretaker for his throne and flees to the wilderness instead of trying to recapture her. *Sir Orfeo* is a wilderness poem because the protagonist enters an environment that stands in stark contrast to his normal *milieu*, and an eco-theory of genre offers a way to understand this complex character.

In *Sir Orfeo*, the description of going into the wilderness is very short: "Thurth wode and over heth / Into the wilderness he geth" (237-38).⁵⁴ The wood that Orfeo

⁵⁴ All quotations for *Sir Orfeo* are from *Middle English Romances*, ed. Stephen H. A. Shepherd (New York: Norton, 1995).

passes through and the heath he must scramble over are enough to perceive his remove from the world of the court. Instead of a detailed rendering of a trackless wilderness, the author demonstrates the wilderness aspects of the environment by highlighting the comforts that Orfeo gives up. This list includes castles, towers, and land, and all adhere to definite boundaries and delineate the physical space of Sir Orfeo as ruler. The trackless and boundless wilderness is the antithesis of the court in terms of defining space.

Similarly, the narrative of *Sir Orfeo* conveys the harsh conditions of wilderness living by deploying a *decsriptio loci* of sorts to depict both Orfeo's miserable present and his comfortable past. The relentless back and forth between Orfeo's privileged life as a royal and his wretched life in the wilderness vividly illustrates his current misfortunes better than describing the harsh conditions alone:

He that hadde y-werd the fowe and griis,
And on bed the purpe biis –
Now on hard hethe he lith,
With leves and gresse he him writh.
He that hadde had castels and tours,
River, forest, frith with flours,
Now, thei it comenci to snewe and frese,
This king mot make his bed in mese.
He that had y-had knightes of priis
Bifor him kneland, and levedis,
Now seth he nothing that him liketh;
Bot wilde wormes bi him striketh.
He that had y-had plenté
Of mete and drink, of ich deynté,
Now may he al day digge and wrote
Er he finde his fille of rote.
In somer he liveth bi wild frut
And berien bot gode lite;
In winter may he nothing finde
Bot rote, grases, and the rinde. (241-260)

The conventional depiction of the wilderness is manifested through bad weather and fearsome beasts. This litany of the wilderness in *Sir Orfeo*, however, includes clothing,

beds and bed coverings, property holdings of buildings and real estate, winter *and* summer weather, prepared food, and esteemed retainers. Not only are the court objects portrayed as more comfortable and pleasurable, they also privilege the manufactured or constructed over the unprocessed and the raw. The summer weather may yield fruit to eat, but its quality is not very good when compared to the delicacies at court. Even the people at court are manufactured: knights are trained in warfare and chivalry and ladies-in-waiting learn court etiquette. In the wilderness, Orfeo has to leave behind the human-controlled culture of the court and enter into the world of uncontrollable nature. He must abandon the affected and work with the organic for his own continued existence. Ecocritically, the description of the wilderness speaks to Orfeo's inability to integrate with that environment. It is as if he can only relate to his self-imposed surroundings by approximating their lack or by focusing on what is missing or difficult.

A traditional view of Orfeo's wilderness experience maintains humans as dominate over nature. From this perspective, Orfeo not only keeps himself alive, but even enjoys a certain limited rapport with the wild animals by playing his harp for them. When he plays, "alle the wilde bestes that ther beth / For joie abouten him thai teth" (273-74). This view sees Orfeo's music as a way to integrate with the environment vis-à-vis the animals. As satisfying as this image is of Orfeo playing music for the animals, we must also acknowledge the corresponding image of the animals who "bi him abide nold" once Orfeo stops playing (280). In his wilderness exile, his harp is "al his gle," but it is also a manufactured instrument of the court, as is the music Orfeo plays to console himself (267). The music produced from the harp is not of nature and is an intrusion into the natural environment. Even though Orfeo's harp and his music keep him from fully

integrating with the wilderness environment, they are the means by which he gains access to the fairy kingdom hall to rescue Heurodis. The text conveys a sharp sense of loneliness within Orfeo, and his solitary existence compounds the harsh conditions. Occasionally Orfeo glimpses the Fairy King and his subjects through the woods, but they do not acknowledge his presence at all (281-302). Unlike Orfeo the Royal who is accustomed to “knightes of priis / Bifor him” kneeling, Orfeo the Exile is shunned by one audience—the animals—and ignored by the other—the fairies. Orfeo can exist in the wilderness, but is not recognized as a part of it. Where Ywain, in his madness, does not seem to miss human companionship and is able to almost fully integrate with the wilderness, Orfeo cannot abandon himself to the wilderness because of the memories of his life as king, memories that are reinforced through the playing of his harp.

By not acknowledging Orfeo, the members of the Fairy Court emphasize their alterity. The brief views they afford Orfeo of their existence function on two levels in the narrative. First, Orfeo’s isolation is underscored when he witnesses their communal activities such as hunting and dancing. Second, the Fairy Court embodies a version of what Orfeo abandoned when he went into self-exile. As the representation of the Other in this wilderness, the Fairy Court is both very different from and yet similar to a normal court. The tension between the similarities and differences of the two courts is very dynamic and is what drives the narrative.⁵⁵ The main difference: members of the Fairy Court have supernatural powers and live in a secret realm that includes the wilderness. Because they are supernatural beings, the Fairy King and his retinue do not devolve into

⁵⁵ The kingdoms of both monarchs are described with the exact same words. Heurodis’ description of the Fairy kingdom includes “...castels and tours, / Rivers, forestes, frith with flours” (159-60). Orfeo’s land holdings include “...castles and tours, / River, forest, and frith with flours” (245-46). One could argue that this description is conventional, but I believe that the repetition is intentional.

or exhibit the wild man characteristics that allowed Ywain to survive the wilderness. To the contrary, the fairies themselves appear to look human, but they are so beautiful to be otherworldly. Describing her dream of the Fairy King to Orfeo, Heurodis states, “I no seighe never yete bfore / So fair creatours y-core” (147-48). The use of the word *creatures* might be misleading, but Heurodis has already named the visitors as “knights” and “damisels” (135, 144). By describing the fairies as both fair and as creatures, Heurodis gives voice to her inability to categorize the visitors: if they are too beautiful to be human, then what are they? Their supernatural powers that allow them to bridge the gap between the real world and their own realm, as when the Fairy King accesses Orfeo’s kingdom via the “ympe-tre” to abduct Heurodis, enable the Fairy Court to exist in both worlds.⁵⁶

There are similarities between the two courts. Orfeo witnesses the Fairy Court participating in activities typical of a royal court in their home space. Orfeo sees them hunting with hounds:

Oft, in hot under-tides,
 The King o Fairy with his rout,
 Com to hunt him al about
 With dim cri and blowering,
 And houndes also with him berking; (282-86)

Later, Orfeo sees the knights of the Fairy Court equipped for battle and performing military exercises against unseen foes:

...a gret ost bi him te,
 Wele atourned, ten hundred knightes,
 Ich y-armed to hi rightes,

⁵⁶ See Curtis R.H. Jirsa, “In the Shadow of the Ympe-tre: Arboreal Folklore in *Sir Orfeo*,” *English Studies* 89.2 (2008): 141-51. Jirsa argues that the ympe-tre is the doorway between the two courts. The ympe-tre is the product of grafting, and therefore, a bit of unnatural nature. Lying beneath such a tree during liminal times of the day (such as at noon or twilight) leaves one vulnerable to visitation by the Fairy Court.

Of cuntenaunce stout and fers,
 With mani desplaid baners,
 And ich his swerd y-drawe hold –
 Ac never he nist whider thai wold. (290-96)

Orfeo also observes entertainments of the Fairy Court:

Knichtes and levedis com daunceing
 In queynt atire, gisely,
 Queynt pas and softly;
 Tabours and trunpes yede hem bi,
 And al maner menstraci. (298-302)

In their manifestation as the Other, the Fairy King and his court provide the motivation for Orfeo's self-exile into the wilderness, as well as the stimulus for him to find his way back. I argue that the role of the Other in *Sir Orfeo*, as portrayed by the Fairy Court, is to remind Orfeo of who he is and what his responsibilities are as monarch.⁵⁷

But these three activities, hunting with hounds, military exercises, and courtly dancing, do not initially resonate with Orfeo. Because he is not at home in the wilderness, he does not recognize the activities as ones he used to participate in. He continues in his miserable state of exile and isolation. But everything changes when he sees a group of ladies hawking by a river:

And ich a faucoun on hond bere,
 And riden on haukin bi o rivere.
 Of game thai founde wel gode haunt:
 Maulardes, hayroun, and cormeraunt.
 The foules of the water ariseth;
 The faucouns hem wele deviseth:
 Each faucaoun his pray slough.
 That seighe Orfeo, and lough"
 "Parfay!" quath he, "ther is fair game!
 Thider Ichil, bi Godes name –
 Ich was y-won swiche werk to se!"
 He aros, an thider gan te. (307-18)

⁵⁷ When he goes into exile, Orfeo places the Steward in charge of the kingdom instead of allowing the election of a new king, and the parliament may not meet until they have sure news of Orfeo's death (205-18). The abdication of responsibility alongside the desire to remain in power is reminiscent of King Lear.

An eco-theory of genre highlights how the Other is at work on several levels in this passage, by considering the material elements of the environment as they function within a fictional framework. First, the fairy ladies, representations of the Other, perform a real activity, hawking. Next, the ladies, and Orfeo too since he is near enough to view them, are located in one of the liminal spaces mentioned earlier where the barrier between the two worlds is thinner: a river bank. Finally, it is the Other of the falcon—the beauty of a wild animal doing what it naturally does—that jolts Orfeo into an awareness and recognition of what he once was.⁵⁸ Watching the flight of the falcon as he stands in a liminal space on the river bank awakens in Orfeo the desire to be part of civilized activity again. He remembers what it was like to be part of a royal party hawking for pleasure.

Unlike hunting deer, boar, bear, or fox, which use dogs to chase or corner the quarry for the hunter who then kills the animal, hawking relies on the natural instincts of a bird of prey to stalk and make a kill on its own. Hawking, a common royal pastime, can be seen ecocritically as a more natural way to hunt. In admiring the “fair game” of the falcon as it hunts, Orfeo revels in the rightness of a creature doing what it is meant to do (315). It is natural for a falcon to hunt; it is natural for a king to rule. It is at this point that Orfeo evolves from the rootless wandering exile into a man with a productive purpose: to join the action. Once this change occurs, Orfeo recognizes Heurodis. Their brief reunion spurs him on to further purposeful activity: rescuing her from the realm of the Fairy King.

When Orfeo originally loses Heurodis, he actively seeks a life away from courtly society. He could not protect his wife, the Queen of the realm, from being taken by the Fairy King. Like Ywain, Orfeo flees to the wilderness because he cannot live with the

⁵⁸ I draw a distinction here between the falcon as a trained wild animal and a domesticated animal, such as a sheep. The falcon is trained to return to its human handler, but its actions in hunting are still pure instinct.

knowledge that he has failed in his responsibilities as King. Leaving his Steward in charge, Orfeo declares, “Into wildernes Ichil te / And live ther evermore / With wilde bestes, in holtes hore” (212-14). The loss of his wife makes him less of a man, and therefore, he will make a home in the wilderness with the beasts. But Orfeo never turns into a wild man of the wilderness, even in his grief over Heurodis. His anchor is his harp, which is “al his gle” and a reminder to him of what he had before (267). His harp is a vestige of culture in nature, and it is the one thing that Orfeo takes with him when he abandons his royal life. Michael Bristol sees Orfeo’s harping as the balm for the disorder that is nature: “Music then is the source not only of civil order but also of gentleness and mercy. Understood literally the image suggests the reconciliation in nature of predator and prey.”⁵⁹ Bristol’s assumptions that predator and prey need to be “reconciled” and that only civilization has order are troubling from an ecological standpoint. Nature, in its systems of checks and balances including predator-prey relationships, has an order and symmetry all its own.

Because Orfeo does not turn into a wild man of the wilderness, he has his wits about him once he sees Heurodis and is able to follow her into the fairy realm. It is in the refuge of the wilderness, not in the culture of the court, where Orfeo transforms from the king of a country who lost his wife to a totally isolated man barely eking out an existence to a man able to appreciate the beauty of a falcon in the flight of the hunt, “Parfay!” quath he, “ther is fair game!” (315). It is in the refuge of the wilderness where Orfeo is finally set free from his grief, yet, because the music from his royal harp reminds him of his former life, Orfeo refrains from fully integrating with the wilderness environment.

⁵⁹ Bristol, “Structure,” 346.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

More so than the poems *Ywain and Gawain* and *Sir Orfeo*, the poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* demonstrates the activity that characterizes traditional medieval romance: a knight on a quest. Despite this affinity, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is nevertheless a wilderness poem because it typifies the conventional challenges a questing knight faces, such as dangerous conditions, fierce beasts, and skirmishes with foes. *The Gawain*-poet is very purposeful in his description of Gawain's entry into the wilderness. When Sir Gawain leaves the comforts of Camelot for the wilderness of Wirral, the narrative provides a vivid account by using details from an actual landscape. Gawain rides north through Logres to North Wales where the Anglesey Isles are to the west. Riding though the lowlands, he goes to Holy Head and on to the "wyldrenesse" of Wirral (691-701). Elliott notes the poet's use of *wyldrenesse* as referring to a "tract of country where forest jurisdiction did not apply, so that outlaws and robbers were freely lurking 'in þe wode and vnder bank' waiting for victims."⁶⁰ Prior to 1376, the wilderness of Wirral had been the Forest of Wirral with all of the royal forest laws and encumbrances. Disafforested by Edward III in that same year, Wirral reverted to a second-growth forest within a generation, and the absence of strict forest law would have attracted criminal elements. Elliott claims that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*:

...was probably composed some time after the disafforestation of Wirral, reference to 'the wilderness' might well be a general pointer to the whole district west of the Gowy...and even to the entire county of Cheshire beyond. The poet's allusion to this notoriously lawless corner of England follows immediately upon

⁶⁰ Elliott, *Gawain Country*, 27.

his mention of Wirral: "...wonde þer bot lyte / þat auþer God oþer gome with
goud hert louied."⁶¹

The text claims that along the way Gawain makes inquiries about the Green Knight of the few people he does find, but once in the wilderness of Wirral, he despairs of ever finding either knight or chapel:

Mony klyf he ouerclambe in contrayez straunge.
Fer floten fro his frendez, fremedly he rydez.
At vche warþe oþer water þer þe wyȝe passed
He fonde a foo hym byfore, bot ferly hit were,
And þat so foule and so felle þat feȝt hym byhode. (713-17)

The sense of the never-ending mountain cliffs Gawain must climb and the many streams he must cross gives the impression that this journey is no small progression from Point A to Point B, and Gawain faces more than human foes in the narrative. The poet emphasizes the wilderness aspects of the environment by introducing large wild animals: "Sumwhyle wyth wormez he werrez and with wolues als, /. . . / Boþe wyth bullez and berez, and borez oþerquyle" (720-22). As top predators, wolves, bears, and wild boar shun contact with humans and need large areas of land to hunt and forage. These specific creatures' brief presence in the narrative denotes the environment as wilderness: top predators occupying large areas of rough land with minimal human activity.

From a conventional standpoint, it is up to Gawain to prove his mettle against all types of creatures, and anything that stands in the way of his quest must be destroyed. An eco-theory of genre offers a different spin: As a man in the wilderness, Gawain is the interloper. He brings weapons and an anthropocentric view of the world. Instead of passing with the least amount of damage and disturbance possible, Gawain seems to slay everything in his path. Compared to Ywain, who only kills what he needs to eat, and Sir

⁶¹ Elliott, *Gawain Country*, 66-67.

Orfeo, who eats a vegetarian diet, Gawain leaves a trail of death and destruction through the Wirral. As the least integrated with the wilderness environment, Gawain perceives his relationship with the wilderness as an adversarial one that more often than not results in violence.

The miserable conditions of the wilderness, including the killer precipitation and threatening icicles, provide Gawain with another way to demonstrate his capability to rise to any challenge before him. Instead of the short bursts of power needed for hand-to-hand combat, the elements must be endured for hours on end. Even though his sojourn is relatively brief, he appears to be fairly miserable in the Wirral:

For werre wrathed hym not so much þat wynter nas wors,
When þe colde cler water fro þe cloudez schadde
And fres er hit falle myzt to þe fale erþe.
Ner slayn wyth slete he sleped in his yrnes
Mo nyzteþ þen innoughe, in naked rokkez
Peras claterande fro þe crest þe colde borne rennez
And hengeþ heze ouer his hede in hard iisseikkles. (726-32)

The *Gawain*-poet reaches for and achieves a “verisimilitude” that is unlike what other alliterative poets were writing at the time. Sebastian Sobecki claims that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a “forerunner of *magical realism*” because of its combination of “verisimilitude and fantastic elements.”⁶² According to Elliott, “[the poet’s] landscapes owe a debt to real landscapes unlike those of so many other poets where it is always spring, where native and exotic animals sport unashamedly side by side, where unseasonal flowers inexplicably bloom in May.”⁶³ If there are realistic elements in the

⁶² Sebastian Sobecki, “Nature’s *Farthest Verge* or Landscapes Beyond Allegory and Rhetorical Convention: The Case of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Petrarch’s *Ascent of Mount Ventoux*,” *Studia Anglica Posnaniensia* 42 (2006): 468, emphasis in the original.

⁶³ Elliott, *Gawain Country*, 42.

narrative, the tale is more accessible, easier to imagine, and allows for closer identification with the hero.

Instead of the beautiful surroundings of the *locus amoenus* as the set piece against which violent action may occur, as happens in most romances, the *Gawain*-poet insists on a setting that better reflects the action of the poem. Per Elliott: “What distinguishes the *Gawain*-poet is his apparent awareness of such incongruities and his consequent attempts to match the natural setting more fittingly with the mood and circumstances of his hero’s experience.”⁶⁴ What the poet creates is something that is reminiscent of Old English elegy in terms of the intertwining of scenery, atmosphere, character action, and introspection. Both the weather and Gawain are cold and miserable. Instead of happy, singing birds, Gawain hears “...mony bryddez vnblyþe vpon bare twyges, / Þat pitosly þer piped for pyne of þe colde” (746-47). He fears that he will miss the Mass of the Nativity and asks for divine guidance to some safe place out of the elements. Viewed ecocritically, Gawain’s cold, wet, and wretched plight is to be expected; it is winter in England, after all. Most tellingly, Gawain “...rode in his prayere / And cryed for his mysdede” (759-60). One does not imagine the flower of chivalry, the champion of Arthur and of Camelot, allowing the elements to so affect him. Compared to Ywain, who goes around naked, eating raw venison, and to Sir Orfeo, who manages to survive ten years in the wilderness, Gawain does not appear all that heroic.

⁶⁴ Elliott, *Gawain Country*, 39. Regarding the convention of pleasurable places as backdrops to the death and destruction of some romances, such as the *Morte d’ Arthur*, Elliott states that this convention is “designed to evoke certain expectations in the contemporary audience, like a gong announcing dinner. The sound of the gong is quite irrelevant to the courses about to be served” (39).

As a knight on a quest, Gawain would be expected to travel alone, but the narrative negatively emphasizes his solitary wanderings: “Oft leudlez alone he lengez on nyztez /. . . / Hade he no fere bot his fole bi frythez and dounez, / Ne no gome bot God bi gate wyth to karp” (693-96). Elliott states that Gawain’s “Achilles heel is revealed as soon as he sets foot in north Staffordshire.”⁶⁵ Gawain, the paragon of knighthood at Arthur’s court, suffers when he is removed from the court environment built on the *comitatus* bond, which is one of mutual respect, protection, and encouragement. In the wilderness of Wirral, no one is there to remind Gawain of his worth to the Round Table. Like Sir Orfeo before he admires the flight of the hawk and is taken outside of his current situation, Gawain is focused on himself and in survival mode. In this state, he is unable to integrate with the wilderness.

Convention dictates that a questing knight do battle with (and defeat) anything that presents itself as a challenge. The further the knight travels from the well-known and safe environment of the court, the greater the opportunity for encounters with more unusual challenges, such as with the Other in the wilderness. The representation of the Other in the wilderness episode in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is almost routine. As Gawain makes his way through the wilderness of Wirral, he is faced with numerous foes:

At vche warþe oþer water þer þe wyȝe passed
 He fonde a foo hym byfore, bot ferly hit were,
 And þat so foule and so felle þat feȝt hym behode
 So many meruayl bi mount þer þe mon fyndez
 Hit were to tore for telle of þe tenþe dole. (715-19)

The hyperbolic “I can tell you only about a tenth of what Gawain faced” style of the narrative voice succinctly conveys Gawain’s prowess and strength. But it is not enough to

⁶⁵ Elliott, *Gawain Country*, 42.

show that Gawain overpowered strength in numbers alone, he must also demonstrate his proficiency in dispatching a wide variety of wilderness Other creatures. The wild animals are interspersed with more mysterious beings:

Sumwhyle wyth wormez he werrez and with wolues als,
Sumwhyle wyth wodwos þat woned in þe knarrez,
Boþe wyth bullez and berez, and borez oþerquyle,
And etaynez þat hym aneled of þe heze felle. (720-23)

Wolves and bears are Other in that they are predatory and not domesticated. Normally considered domesticated, the bulls and boar are Other, because these particular specimens have gone wild in the wilderness. The worms represent dragons, a requisite on most knightly quests and very obviously a part of the Other. The *etaynez*, while human in form, achieve Other status because of their size and uncivilized habits. The big mystery in this list concerns the *wodwos*. Casey Finch translates *wodwos* as “crafty wood-creatures.”⁶⁶ Are they animals, like the bears and bulls? Are they human-like, just over- or under-sized like giants or dwarves? Or are they something else entirely? The only thing one can say for sure is that the *wodwos* are in the middle of a list of Other creatures that live in the wilderness. All evidence points to the *wodwos* as Others, too.

The manner in which Gawain reacts to his encounter with the Other is very matter-of-fact. The narrator states that Gawain’s foes were “so foule and felle” and that “Nade he ben duȝty and dryȝe and Dryȝtyn had serued, / Douteles he hade ben ded and dreped ful ofte” (717, 723-24). While the text does not directly state that Gawain slays everything that crosses his path, he *is* a knight on a quest. Conventionally, the role of the generalized Other is to provide a target and a foil for the chivalric character of the knight.

⁶⁶ *The Complete Works of the Pearl Poet*, trans. Casey Finch, eds., Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 243, line 721.

As the hero who is least integrated with the wilderness, it makes sense that Gawain's interactions with the denizens of the wilderness itself are limited and violent.

For the doughty and chivalric Sir Gawain of the Round Table, surviving the dangers of the wilderness—harsh conditions, fearsome beasts, and rough terrain—prove to be surmountable challenges. The greatest trial Gawain faces is the ability to maintain his faith in the face of certain death, and it is in that interior wilderness of doubt that he is lost.

In the texts that this chapter examines, the three protagonists are all considered the hero of the narrative, but the characters are not consistently heroic in the conventional sense throughout their stories. Yvain is a younger, less experienced knight whose youthful desire to compete at tournaments overrides his duty and obligation to his wife Alundyne. When Sir Orfeo's wife is abducted, he does not try to find Heurodis, but instead exiles himself to the wilderness for ten years. Sir Gawain, who has the reputation as Arthur's best knight, falls prey to a sleight of head trick that highlights his pride and lack of faith. All of these interpretations focus on the psychological. But an eco-theory of genre provides a new way to look at the hero of medieval romance and Breton lais, one that focuses on the material in addition to the psychological. Instead of measuring his worth against the number of foes slaughtered, maidens saved, or quests accepted, an eco-theory of genre considers the hero's integration with the environment. How does the natural world shape him? How does he engage the natural world? In the wilderness, man has the least amount of agency: the territory is unknown and difficult; the conditions are harsh; the presence of the Other can be a help, a hindrance, or deadly. While the wilderness can function as a refuge, no one in his right mind would willingly enter that

environment without thought, preparation, and an acknowledgement that anything can happen there.

For the ecocritic, the ability to integrate with the wilderness—not just survive it—is the true gauge of the hero. Adapting to the wilderness demonstrates a willingness to accept the environment on its own terms, as opposed to imposing court culture on the natural world. In each of the three texts, the hero integrates with the wilderness to a greater or lesser degree. In *Ywain and Gawain*, Colgrevice attempts to converse with a bull herder from his courtly perspective and has difficulties. Ywain as a madman of the woods fully embraces the natural world for a time. As a top predator in the ecosystem, Ywain kills only what he needs. The only manmade artifact on his person is his weapon of bow and arrows. In *Sir Orfeo*, Orfeo willingly enters the wilderness and endures for 10 years, but he is held in a kind of stasis until he remembers his duty as husband and king. On the midway point on the integration continuum, Orfeo lives simply, but he keeps the artificial sound of his harp in the wilderness. Gawain in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* integrates the least. His imposition of courtly culture on the natural world, in the form of slaying everything in his way, is disrespectful at best and destructive at worst from an ecocritical point of view.

From the wilderness environment this project moves next along the continuum of containment of nature into the forest environment. Where the wilderness is untamed, the forest is organized and regulated by law. In the wilderness, an eco-theory of genre provides a way to view the hero that is based not on his exploits but on his integration with the environment. By considering the forest environment and how it is a space of strict resource management, an eco-theory of genre addresses the wealth, status, and

success of the characters in this space through the consideration of how they manage the resources available to them.

CHAPTER 3

LIFE IN THE GREENWOOD: RESOURCE MANAGEMENT IN THE FOREST

The wilderness environment of medieval literature was not natural mainly because it was not real. The medieval forests, however, were very real but still not natural in that they were created by drawing legal boundaries around a large area of land that contained a variety of habitats. The medieval forests existed for two main purposes. First and foremost, the forests were the king's private hunting grounds. Second, the forests provided sources of revenue for the royal coffers through the sale or lease of resources, such as timber or land for farming. Those who broke the forest laws paid fines which were another source of income to the crown. The laws that governed the forest made this space one of legal jurisdiction with enforcement by wardens and courts to ensure punishment. Initiated by the Normans, the royal forest reached its height during the Angevin reigns of the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. A forest was created, managed, and regulated, and the persons performing these actions took power from this creation. If the wilderness is where anything can and will happen, then the forest is a place of structured existence. If wilderness texts provide insight into the heroic nature of a character by considering how well he integrates with the wilderness environment, then forest texts are about displays of power through the management of resources.

The following chapter explores three Middle English texts: one romance, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and two ballads, *A Gest of Robyn Hode*, and *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell*. Even though the entirety of each narrative does not

take place in a forest, there are particular episodes that do. These episodes are important because they illustrate a genre based on eco-theory, one that centers on the material aspects of the setting. Thinking through these narratives as “forest” stories illuminates the characters’ abilities to manage their resources and shows how this skill leads to or cements power. In these texts, the forest is more than just a backdrop to the action; it is an integral part of the unfolding of the narratives. It is a place for particular kinds of display, and it is where identity is solidified or confirmed through one’s ability to manage the resources at hand.

The wilderness and the forest could not be more different in their marking characteristics. Where the wilderness is boundless and trackless, the forest is finite and knowable; its legally drawn boundaries delineate woodlands, fields, and towns. Where the wilderness is dangerous, the forest is a site of commerce and exchange. Unlike the wild, untamed wilderness, the forest is a place of rules and laws. Men still go into the woods to prove themselves, but, unlike the random one-on-one contests against a mythical beast or giant found in the wilderness, the forest is the site of orchestrated hunts in a well-managed landscape. The most significant difference between the forest and the wilderness is one of lived experience: the wilderness existed only as an environmental imaginary, but the medieval forest existed contemporaneously with the texts. By the time *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *A Gest of Robyn Hode*, and *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell* were composed, the royal forests had been part of the landscape to a greater or lesser extent for almost 300 years. The forest laws and the legal machinery that upheld them were fixtures of medieval life. Corinne Saunders notes the importance of the forest’s reality in regards to the literature of the time:

To consider the forest simply as a classical literary topos, reworked by medieval authors, is, however, to ignore a significant element of the motif, that of its association with medieval reality. While the forest functions as a recurring literary topos with great symbolic power, it is also a “real” landscape, linked to the geographic, economic and legal concepts of the forest in the Middle Ages. As a motif, then, the forest must be considered not only in terms of its literary history and symbolic function, but also in terms of its cultural development and the interplay of the real and the symbolic.⁶⁷

The *MED* defines *forest* first as “A large tract of uninhabited, or sparsely inhabited, woodland; a wilderness” (sense 1.a). This is echoed in the *OED*, as the modern sense first states that a forest can be “an extensive tract of land covered with trees and undergrowth, sometimes intermingled with pasture” (sense 1.a). This particular project, however, necessitates a more specific definition. The *MED* contains “A wooded tract belonging to a ruler, set apart for hunting; a royal forest; also a wood enclosed by walls, a park” (sense 2.a). A more specific sense in the *OED* highlights the aspects of the forest that we recognize now as medieval resource management: “a woodland district, usually belonging to the king, set apart for hunting wild beasts and game, etc.; having special laws and officers of its own” (sense 2). This area is not only set apart, but it is set apart for a specific activity for a specific population with specific personnel to enforce specific rules.

The stem for *forest*, the Latin *foris*, means *outside* and is multivalent. *Outside* can mean *out of doors*, *out of bounds*, or *separate from others*. Thus, the very word for forest contains within its meanings the varieties of its uses. The forest was outside constructed buildings, outside the reinforced walls and battlements of a castle, and outside the palings of smaller holdings, but was still managed under royal jurisdiction. William Marvin’s

⁶⁷ Corinne J. Saunders, *The Forest of Medieval Romance: Avernus, Broceliande, Arden* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1993), x-xi.

definition acknowledges the importance of resource management as part of the value of the medieval forest: “a medieval forest was about certain wild animals on the hoof and their covert, whether this was to be found in woods or moor, heath or highland. What this means in one sense is that medieval forestry forms the beginning of wildlife and wilderness management: forest not simply as woods, but a segregated and policed environment.”⁶⁸ This definition is more comprehensive as it speaks to the variety of habitats, the importance of deer, and the active role people play in woodland management.

The first use of *forest* in regards to hunting rights was in a Carolingian charter for the monks of Kloster St. Bertin around 800 CE. According to Saunders, “During this period, the concept of the royal forest as an area in which the wild animals and lands were protected for the purpose [of hunting] was firmly established.”⁶⁹ In the British Isles, the eleventh-century laws of King Cnut (c. 985-1035 CE) decreed that any man may hunt his own land but the king may hunt wherever he likes: “And it is my will that every man is to be entitled to his hunting in wood and field on his own land. And everyone is to avoid trespassing on my hunting, wherever I wish to have it preserved, on pain of full fine.”⁷⁰ Apparently, this system worked well for the Anglo-Saxons as there are no records of strict penalties for poaching.⁷¹ This was not the case for the Normans and the Angevins

⁶⁸ William Perry Marvin, *Hunting Law and Ritual in Medieval English Literature* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2006), 12.

⁶⁹ Saunders, *The Forest of Medieval Romance*, 6.

⁷⁰ Qtd. in Charles R. Young, *The Royal Forests of Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1979), 4.

⁷¹ Marvin, *Hunting Law and Ritual*, 53.

that followed. The penalties for poaching were swift and severe and often included mutilation or execution.

William the Conqueror created the first royal forest, the New Forest, in southeast England around 1079 CE. Unlike Cnut, who allowed men to hunt their own land, William's forests were separate from the common hunting areas and may include lands outside the royal demesne. According to Marvin,

Afforestation was the process by which, through arbitrary decree, lands were laid under royal forest ban, but these lands were not restricted to the king's demesne land. Because of the technical nature of the concept *foresta*, not only woodlands were equated with "forest," for unwooded wasteland and populated areas could fall under the ban as well.⁷²

In the Middle Ages, a forest was not just a large stand of trees; a forest was a place that contained a variety of habitats that were maintained for the king's pleasure. The magnitude of the managed and regulated resources of the royal forest also demonstrated the king's power and status to his subjects. On the positives and negatives of afforestation practices, Marvin states, "On the one hand, the New Forest was conceived as the sportsman's dream of an isolate wilderness, a sanctuary free of common intrusion, the big payoff of conquest. On the other, the dispossessions it enforced and subsequent rumors it incited augmented the stern, even ruthless, self-image that Norman lords typically sought to project."⁷³

The thrill of the hunt was paramount for the aristocracy in their leisure time, and much energy and effort went into maintaining and managing not only the royal forests but also all of the accoutrements necessary for a successful hunt, such as the hounds,

⁷² Marvin, *Hunting Law and Ritual*, 46.

⁷³ Marvin, *Hunting Law and Ritual*, 50.

horses, and weapons. Anyone who could support and provide such resources—both natural and manmade—as needed by the royal hunt was powerful indeed. In this chapter, I argue that the Middle English poems examined in what follows are forest texts because the presence of the forest and the activities therein, including but not limited to hunting, provide opportunities for the characters to demonstrate their power through the proper management of their resources. In this chapter, I revisit *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* with an eye to the hunt episodes in Fitt III. In Chapter One, I argue that *Sir Gawain* can be both a wilderness poem and a forest poem since both of the environments exist in the one text. Furthermore, as a concept based on the interconnectedness of things (i.e., ecology), an eco-theory of genre encourages categories that show interconnectedness rather than isolation. Lord Bertilak's success in the forest speaks to his well-trained hounds and retainers and ordered hunting grounds. In *A Gest of Robyn Hode*, Robin proves that one does not have to be a royal to be powerful, as long as one properly manages his resources. By using the forest and his outlaw status to his advantage, Robin builds an avid following both near and far that allows him to live a free life in the greenwood. While many consider *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell* to be a fairy tale because of its Arthurian and supernatural elements, I argue that it too is a forest poem because of the way the characters manage their resources for good or ill within tightly prescribed laws.

Hunting with Lord Bertilak: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

In Fitt III of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Lord Bertilak rides to hunt on three successive mornings while Sir Gawain takes his ease in bed. Hunting was the prime activity for any man of noble blood as it prepared him for battle, provided good exercise

both physically and mentally, and assisted in “the avoidance of the idleness which nurtures bodily and spiritual evils.”⁷⁴ John Cummins notes that even the language of the hunt reflects the martial overtone: “At the mere semantic level, the military associations are conveyed unconsciously: the boar or bear is the ‘enemy’; the head-on encounter is a ‘joust’; the waiting archers form a ‘battle-line’.”⁷⁵ On a deeper level, being in the forest generally and participating in the hunt specifically taps into an aspect of primal human nature: his ancestral ability to survive in the woods. Again, Cummins: “Allied with the avoidance of sin is a more positive view: that the wild beasts retain something which man has lost, and which, by implication, he may somehow regain, or at least perceive, in studying, hunting and defeating them.”⁷⁶ As I argue in Chapter One, the wilderness provides a space where one can be tested against nature in all her fury. With its physical topography and presence of plants and animals, the forest is analogous to the wilderness. But, because the forest is a managed environment, it can be perceived to lack the dangerous elements of the wilderness. Yet, seeming a safe environment and actually being so are two different things when one participates in potentially dangerous activities such as hunting. Crane notes that hunting “has elements of unpredictability . . . due to its accretion around a practical effort to kill a wild animal. This practical accomplishment is less susceptible to formalization than marrying a couple or crowning a king, because the animal cannot be as fully recruited to the rules as humans can be.”⁷⁷ People may try to

⁷⁴ John Cummins, *The Hound and the Hawk: The Art of Medieval Hunting* (London: Phoenix P, 1988), 2.

⁷⁵ Cummins, *Hound*, 4.

⁷⁶ Cummins, *Hound*, 3.

⁷⁷ Susan Crane, “Ritual Aspects of the Hunt à Force” in *Engaging with Nature*, eds. Barbara A. Hanawalt and Lisa J. Kiser (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 67-68.

manage the forest resource through habitat management, laws, and ritual, but nature sometimes keeps the upper hand, as shown by the boar hunt in *Sir Gawain*. The following section will examine the act of medieval hunting and the influence of hunting treatises through the lens of ritual in order to explore how the forest is a managed space for displays of power. The hunting scenes in *Sir Gawain* feature Lord Bertilak, as he hunts with his retainers and huntsmen, and demonstrate his total command of his resources.

One of the forest markers in *Sir Gawain* is its finite and knowable space. The narrator describes the land immediately around the castle Hautdesert as “a park al aboute, / With a pyked palays pyned ful þik, / Þat vmbeteȝe mony tre mo þen two myle” (768-70).⁷⁸ Some critics view the use of the word *park* as designating the land around the castle and the land where Bertilak hunts as one and the same. Yet, on the morning of the first hunt, Bertilak and his company gear up and “With bugle to bent-felde” they go (1136). In the *MED*, *bent-feld* is “a field covered with a type of grass called bent(e; an open and uncultivated field” (sense 2.c). Uncultivated fields are more characteristic of forest land than the ornamental park that surrounds the castle. Also, more realistically, the lord of the castle would hunt the surrounding forest outside his immediate holdings of castle and park.

The park enclosure typically is reserved for the ladies to hunt, in what Cummins describes as a “garden party atmosphere.”⁷⁹ Through a series of gates and fences, the deer are able to get into the park but not escape. In terms of hunting, the park : forest ::

⁷⁸ All quotations for *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are from *The Complete Works of the Pearl Poet*, trans. and ed. Casey Finch (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

⁷⁹ Cummins, *Hound*, 7.

chamber : hall analogy holds up well. The park is a manageable, smaller space as compared to the forest in the same way that a chamber is a more intimate space as compared to a great hall. A.C. Spearing sees the hall as a male space: “The hall is where the household, the court, the civilized community assemble; it is also where the lord and his council exercise their public power, stating law, delivering judgment, presiding over the communal meal, [making] political decisions.”⁸⁰ The chamber is female space: “The chamber [...] is a private space; it contains a bed, usually itself enclosed by curtains, and it is the setting for intimate behavior, including sexual behavior.”⁸¹ The park, with its boundary palings and site of female fellowship, provides hunting on a more secure scale than in the forest. The ladies set up in an open area and safely shoot the deer as they are driven by the stands. One can only imagine that for an active man like Lord Bertilak, park hunting would be particularly dull. Discussing the importance of forest versus park in terms of the thrill of the hunt, Cummins states:

By confining the deer, the park radically altered both the ethos and the practice of hunting. For the literate aristocrat, hunting in the open forest must have retained something of the charm of Arthurian romance, in which the quarry led the mounted hero to an unknown destination and a new emotional environment. Hunting in the park, where the quarry can never outrun the hunter and there is a fence around them both, diminishes everything, and not merely physically.⁸²

More explicitly, once deer were enclosed in a park, they no longer embodied the spirit of pure wild animals because they could no longer roam free:

⁸⁰ A.C. Spearing, “Public and Private Spaces in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” *Arthuriana* 4.2 (1994): 140.

⁸¹ Spearing, “Public and Private Spaces,” 140.

⁸² John Cummins, “*Veneurs s’en vont en Paradis*: Medieval Hunting and the ‘Natural’ Landscape,” in *Inventing Medieval Landscapes*, eds. John Howe and Michael Wolfe (Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 2002), 45-46.

A deer was *res nullius*. While it was in a man's woods it was his to catch if he could; as soon as it left his boundaries it was someone else's. To enclose one's woodland, therefore, and to enable deer to enter it without being able to escape, was to acquire permanent possession of creatures formerly free-ranging and without a fixed owner.⁸³

Enclosed deer also would not provide nearly the level of sport for the hunter. In a confined area, an animal becomes habituated to the regular trespass of humans in its environment. Eventually, the deer cease to give good chase not only because of the limited space, but also because of the familiarity with human bodies, even if the humans keep their distance. The forest of Hautdesert provides a finite and knowable space for the members of the hunting party, but it is not as finite as the castle park inside the paling. For the best sport, Lord Bertilak's hunting needs a large area in which to pursue the quarry.

Another marker of the forest is the presence of concrete rules and laws that lead to ritualistic behavior. Hunting by the aristocracy during the Middle Ages often consisted of more than just stalking and killing game, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* contains what many consider to be some of the finest hunting scenes in Middle English literature. These episodes depict what Cummins refers to as "medieval hunting in its purest, and snootiest, form": *par force de chiens* or by strength of hounds.⁸⁴ Also called hunting *à force* in the literature, this type of hunting involves a variety of hounds, each with its own special duty during the hunt. Similarly, each person engaged in the hunt has his particular role. Crane contends that

. . . the hunt *à force* is a mimetic ritual designed to celebrate and perpetuate aristocratic authority. This kind of hunting defines a miniaturized cosmos within

⁸³ Cummins, *Hound*, 59.

⁸⁴ Cummins, *Veneurs*, 39.

which aristocratic ability, superiority, and governance are represented. In other words, this kind of hunting surpasses merely being another real-life *instance* of skill superiority, and governance. Instead, the ritualization of hunting *endorses and validates* aristocratic skill superiority, and governance. It sets up a performance space in which aristocracy mimes its own myth of itself.⁸⁵

The hunt *à force* is a display of power in a place designed for it: the forest environment.

Through the management of the forest resources, the gentlemen hunters, as guided by their Master of Game or chief huntsman, are able to participate in a fantasy of dominance over nature, a fantasy that is reinforced through the ritual aspects of the hunt.

To stage a day's hunting required numerous people and detailed planning. The Master of Game and his crew locate choice targets the day before the hunt using a scent hound called a lymer. This hound was especially trained to be silent in its movements and to not bark. On the day of the hunt, the hunting party—one could take the name literally—meets in an open area in the woods to break their fast and discuss the plan for the day. Edward, Duke of York, is very particular in *The Master of Game* (c.1410) about what this area should look like, stating that it “should be in a fair mead well green, where fair trees grow all about [. . .] and a clear well or beside some running brook.”⁸⁶

Cummins notes that this setting is very “similar to those of the conventional *locus amoenus* in which many allegorical narratives begin.”⁸⁷ At this gathering, the Master of Game displays the fewmets, or scat, from the choice animals, and the hunters decide which one to pursue by the quality of the scat.⁸⁸ A pack of scent hounds is released to

⁸⁵ Crane, “Ritual,” 68-9, emphasis in original.

⁸⁶ Edward, Second Duke of York, *The Master of Game*, ed. William Baillie-Grohman (New York: Duffield and Company, 1909), 136. All quotations for this text will be taken from this edition and abbreviated *MG* with the page number.

⁸⁷ Cummins, *Hound*, 9.

⁸⁸ One can tell a great deal about an animal from its droppings, see *MG* 133-34, 209-210.

flush the animal from its hiding place. Depending on the type of hunting and the game sought, the hunters can either follow the dogs on horseback or wait at their trysts to shoot the game as it is driven by. The game is taken down or held at bay by sight hounds and then killed by the hunter.⁸⁹

Every person involved with the hunt has his assigned job, from the young boys who keep the hounds to the Master of Game, from the men who beat the bushes to the woodsmen who carve up the carcass. They each have their own jargon that fits into the overall language of the hunt. The horn calls, the commands to the hounds, even the vocabulary for the breaking of the deer play a part of the hunting ritual that takes place in the forest environment. Crane sees the hunt *à force* as “a framed activity, set apart from the rest of daily life, in parks and preserves and by forest law” and an “ideologically charged event.”⁹⁰ The intricacies of the hunt can be seen to reflect not only the hierarchy of the aristocratic household specifically, but also the world at large: “The formalities of the hunt *à force* construct a microcosmic model of creation, in which creation’s hierarchy of humans over animals reinforces the human social hierarchy.”⁹¹

The forest is governed by laws; the hunt is bound by rules. Both of these combine to create a ritualistic atmosphere, and it is this ritual and its role in self-representation or display that is played out in the forest. This display of status could not take place on a blank landscape. Instead, the environment has to be managed and groomed to provide the best habitat—food, water, shelter, and the arrangement of these—for the quarry of the

⁸⁹ For detailed information about English medieval hunting, see Cummins, *Hound*; Richard Almond, *Medieval Hunting* (Gloucestershire, UK: Sutton Publishing, 2003).

⁹⁰ Crane, “Ritual,” 67, 66.

⁹¹ Crane, “Ritual,” 72.

hunt, whether that is deer, boar, or fox. This need for constant management necessitates regulations to maintain the forest habitat, and regulations require enforcement. Tracing the impact of resource management for hunting, Marvin states:

Habitat had to be warded against clearing and intrusion so as to offer covert to the woodland animals preferred as big game. This fundamental regard for prime hunting gave rise to the forest administration with its laws, courts, and forestry personnel; to poaching and the wars great and small that challenged the royal prerogative of afforestation; to the adoption of hunting privileges in smaller scale by the nobles; to the elaboration of courtly procedure and ritual in the context of these privileges; and hence to the dissemination of “courtly hunting” in elevated society and the literature it patronized for its self-representation.⁹²

Hunting treatises or manuals are an example of literature patronized by the ruling class and evidence that the hunt scenes depicted in *Sir Gawain* are not just an elite fantasy. The *Livre de Chasse* by Gaston Phoebus, a French work written around 1388, and *The Master of Game* fall into the category of hunting literature. *The Master of Game* is a translation of Phoebus’ work with additions that refer to specifically English practices.⁹³ Many critics believe these texts and others like them directly influenced the literature of the time, such as stories like *Sir Gawain*. According to Anne Rooney, “The manuals, though not specifically literary, reflect general social trends which undoubtedly influenced the authors who employed hunting either symbolically or as a narrative element in literary texts.”⁹⁴

The English hunting ceremony that develops through the Middle Ages looks back to the Franks via Norman influence. It was in Charlemagne’s reign that

forest law, the development of hunting as a professional craft, and bloodsport used for political spectacle, first came together in the medieval West. From this

⁹² Marvin, *Hunting Law and Ritual*, 11.

⁹³ For more on hunting treatises, see Cummins, *Hound*, and Almond, *Medieval Hunting*.

⁹⁴ Anne Rooney, *Hunting in Middle English Literature* (Rochester, NY: D.S. Brewer, 1993), 23.

nexus, and from the fact that medieval bloodsport remained above all a socially driven event, arose the enduring preoccupation with technical jargon, horn blowing, and meat sharing that lay at the heart of English *artes venandi*.⁹⁵

By the Middle Ages, hunting was no longer necessary for simple survival and was about a lot more than stocking the larder. Orme notes that the language of hunting was “precise, indeed pedantic”:

There were words for animals of different ages (brocket, hogster, pricket, and sore) and for different kinds of hounds (berniers, kenets, and limers). The place where the hunter awaited his prey was the “tryst.” Seasons for hunting were also recognized: the “time of grease” when harts and bucks were fattest (from May to September) and the “fermison” when hinds and does were taken (September to February).⁹⁶

This last example is obvious during Lord Bertilak’s hunt on the first day: “For þe fre lorde hade defende in fermysoun tyme / Pat þer schulde no mon meue to þe male dere” (1156-57). To understand this passage, the reader has to know what fermison time is and why it is important. To understand the lexicon of the hunt is to display a specific knowledge and, therefore, status. The hunting treatises promote the learning of the correct terms for all aspects of the hunt. Through the treatises, “Language [. . .] becomes not an instrument of communication but exclusion, acting as a code and a barrier.”⁹⁷ For the members of the hunting party, language is another resource to be managed, and this resource makes its way into the narrative literature because the audience would be in the know. Orme notes a connection between the hunting treatises, especially *The Master of*

⁹⁵ Marvin, *Hunting Law and Ritual*, 83-84.

⁹⁶ Nicholas Orme, “Medieval Hunting: Fact and Fancy” in *Chaucer’s England: Literature in Historical Context*, ed. Barbara Hanawalt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 139.

⁹⁷ Rooney, *Hunting*, 15.

Game which was in English not French, and a rise in the specifics of the hunt in literature:

[Hunting] technicality makes its way into narrative literature, which becomes more detailed than before about the way that hunting is done. Whether this reflects the fact that hunting was becoming more formalized or whether it is the result of narrative authors becoming more realistic is hard to say, but the change is evident.⁹⁸

Orme goes on to cite *The Knight's Tale* and *The Book of the Duchess* as examples, stating that "Chaucer expects that his audience will recognize these details and appreciate them."⁹⁹ The *Gawain*-poet also could "assume a proficiency in ritual and jargon in his readership, in English, and could textualize courtly ceremony in the ideological context of the hunting sanctuary to great effect."¹⁰⁰

Rooney does not "believe the *Gawain*-poet intended the hunts to be read symbolically, nor did he draw extensively on the love-hunt tradition. Instead, he belongs to, yet exploits and develops, a cohesive and well-established native English tradition of representation."¹⁰¹ The hunt scenes in *Sir Gawain* demonstrate that everyone has a role to play in the hunt, and they articulate a tangible portrayal of what a noble hunting party would be like. Through the accurate representation of the ritual of the hunt, the *Gawain*-poet depicts an activity that his noble audience would be privy to which enables them to place themselves more fully in the narrative. The poem gives material details about more than just the actual hunting of animals. Less anticipated elements of the hunting party,

⁹⁸ Orme, "Medieval Hunting," 140.

⁹⁹ Orme, "Medieval Hunting," 140.

¹⁰⁰ Marvin, *Hunting Law and Ritual*, 143.

¹⁰¹ Rooney, *Hunting*, 165.

such as the gathering in the morning, how people dress, and the busy-ness of preparation, are portrayed:

Ful erly before þe day þe folk vprysen.
Gestes þat go wolde hor gromez þay calden
And þay busken vp bilyue blonkkez to sadel,
Tyffen her takles, trussen her males;
Richen hem þe richest, to ryde alle arayde,
Lepen vp lyȝtly, lichen her brydeles,
Vche wyȝe on his way þer hym wel liked. (1126-32)

The forest is a version of the court: it has hierarchies, etiquette, and rules. The one additional element of the forest is the uncontrolled and unpredictable influence of nature that is to be found outside of the containing walls of the castle or manor house. For example, during the boar hunting scene in *Sir Gawain*, the members of the hunting party—from the hounds to the beaters to the archers—work in concert to corner a large boar. And even though the boar is antagonized and greatly outnumbered by dogs and men, he still is able to incite fear and embody danger: “Bot quen þe dyntez hym dered of her dryȝe strokez, / Þen, braynwod for bate, on burnez he rasez, / Hurtez hem ful heterly þer he forth hyȝez” (1460-62). Discussing the performance of chivalry, Crane states, “Literary characters express chivalric commitment through the poetics of a genre; historical knights are similarly engaged in a rhetoric of appearances. It is on this citational plane of performance that historical and literary instances of chivalric behavior meet and influence one another.”¹⁰² One can substitute *hunting behavior* for *chivalric behavior* and arrive at the same conclusion: the hunting treatises influenced both the fictional narratives and the real hunting behavior of the aristocracy.

¹⁰² Susan Crane, *The Performance of Self: Ritual, Clothing, and Identity During the Hundred Years War* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 2.

Scholars view the *Gawain*-poet as someone intimately knowledgeable about the intricacies of aristocratic hunting and the importance of the chase. According to Crane, “In ritual hunting, it is the process of hunting, not the size of the bag, that counts. [Hunting] nobly involves a long chase with a pack of hounds, horn calls, hunter-retainers, and mounted gentry.”¹⁰³ Pens, traps, and baiting are considered bad form, and the forest scenes in *Sir Gawain* celebrate the active-ness of the hunt.¹⁰⁴ First the deer run from the baying hounds to higher ground, but they are frightened back by the beaters pre-placed to keep them heading towards the trysts at the lower elevation in the dale:

At þe fyrst quethe of þe quest quaked þe wylde;
 Der drof in þe dale, doted for drede,
 Hized to þe hyȝe, bot heterly þay were
 Restayed with þe stablye, þat stoutly ascryed. (1150-53)

Next, as the deer are driven by the tryst stands, the hunters shoot as many as possible, in what many today consider an unsportsmanlike manner because of the carnage from the number of deer taken at once. This method, however, does not violate medieval hunting norms or expectations:

Þe does dryuen with gret dyn to þe depe sladeȝ;
 Þer myȝt mon se, as þay slypte, slentyng of arwes--
 At vche wende vnder wande wapped a flone--
 Þat bigly bote on þe broun with ful brode hedeȝ.
 What! þay brayen, and bleden, bi bonkkeȝ þay deȝen,
 And ay rachches in a res radly hem folȝes,
 Hunterez wyth hyȝe horne hasted hem after
 Wyth such a crakkande kry as klyffes haden brusten. (1159-1166)

¹⁰³ Crane, “Ritual,” 69.

¹⁰⁴ Even Lord Bertilak is active: in the deer drive, he “works his pack of hounds in preference to standing with a bow in his hand because he prefers it (and because, for literary purposes, he is quintessentially a man of action, in contrast to the misguidedly, and temporarily, inert Gawain).” Cummins, *Hound*, 55.

Finally, the swift greyhounds chase down the deer that are only wounded or completely missed by the hunters: “And þe grehoundez so grete, þat geten hem bylyue / And hem tofylched, as fast as frekez myȝt loke, þer-ryȝt” (1171-73).

Once the actual hunt is over, rules still govern the process of the breaking of the carcass and the division of the meat. Marvin notes that “And there is no little irony in the fact that the *Gawain*-poet has rendered the butchering of the quarry with a vividness that puts the teaching of contemporaneous treatises to shame. While a reader may naturally expect sanguinary detail in the treatises, in romance the poet’s indulgence in it strains the amorous decorum to the limit.”¹⁰⁵ The breaking of the deer demonstrates total control by Lord Bertilak (via his huntsmen) over the deer specifically and over nature generally through the final sharing out of the quarry’s parts. Lord Bertilak’s role as master over nature is just that: a role that he plays in an environment that is created for him in which to play, similar to when he appears as the Green Knight in Arthur’s Court at Christmas and is in charge of the beheading game. Through the successful management of the resources of the forest, Lord Bertilak is able to participate in the illusion that he is able to control nature. His success in the forest environment stands in stark contrast to Sir Gawain who “lys in his bedde, / Gawayn, grayþely at home in gerez ful ryche / Of hewe” (1469-71).

Perhaps the breaking of the carcass is the most ritualized aspect of the hunt as a whole, and in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* it reads like a butchering how-to manual:

Syþen þay slyt þe slot, sesed þe erber,
Schaued wyth a scharp knyf, and þe schyre knitten;
Syþen rytte þay þe foure lymmes, and rent of þe hyde,
Pen brek þay þe balé, þe bowelez out token

¹⁰⁵ Marvin, *Hunting Law and Ritual*, 132.

Lystily for laucyng þe lere of þe knot;
 Pay gryped to þe gargulun, and grayþely departed
 Þe wesaunt fro þe wynt-hole, and walt out þe guttez;
 Þen scher þay out þe schulderez with her scharp knyuez,
 Haled hem by a lyttel hole to haue hole sydes.
 Siþen britned þay þe brest and brayden hit in twynne,
 And eft at þe gargulun bigynez on þenne,
 Ryuez hit vp radly ryzt to þe byzt,
 Voydez out þe avanters, and verayly þerafter
 Alle þe rymez by þe rybbez radly þay lance;
 So ryde þay of by resoun bi þe rygge bonez,
 Euenden to þe haunche, þat hanged alle samen,
 And heuen hit vp al hole, and hwen hit of þere,
 And þat þay neme for þe noumbles bi nome, as I trowe,
 bi kynde;
 Bi þe byzt al of þe þyzes
 Þe lappez þay lance bihynde;
 To hewe hit in two þay hyzes,
 Bi þe bakbon to vnbynde. (1330-1352)

Not only is the deer broken into recognizable cuts of meat, but it is also divided among the members of the hunting party as to their station: “Vche freke for his fee, as fallez for to haue” (1358). Even the hounds get their share and are fed ceremoniously on the hide of the deer: “Vpon a felle of þe fayre best fede þay þayr houndes / Wyth þe lyuer and þe lyztez, þe leþer of þe paunchez, / And bred baped in blod blende þeramongez” (1359-1361). Some might view this scene of ritualistic practice of dismemberment and distribution as unnecessary detail, but if we consider the forest location as integral to the scene itself, then the inclusion of the ritual details makes sense. The forest is a place of strict management before, during, and after the hunt. The physical space of the forest is maintained for optimum hunting opportunities. Open areas are cut to provide the grassy habitat favored by deer. Wooded areas contain a mixed understory: open areas to allow for the chase and heavy brambles to provide cover for the animals out of season and for the hunter in season. The hunt itself is organized and orchestrated like troops going into

battle with each person and dog breed fulfilling a specific role. Therefore, it is not surprising, after so much energy spent in preparation, management, and execution, that the dénouement of field dressing the quarry is also an intricate and detailed operation. Every actor in the hunting ritual has his part to play, but also his reward to receive—including the hounds. Assigned roles enable the management of the resource, which in turn facilitates the fantasy of control.

The scenes of the confident Lord Bertilak in his role as lord-of-the-manor-out-hunting highlight the atmosphere of control found in the forest environment particularly when juxtaposed against the scenes of Gawain and Lady Bertilak in the bedroom. Gawain is caught in an undefined space between the roles of lover and houseguest, leaving him nervous and panicky. The narrative gives the impression that Lord Bertilak marshals his resources to a successful end, but that Gawain, without a defined role to play, is uneasy when faced with Lady Bertilak's advances in the bedroom. Does he insult the lady by ignoring her advances, or does he insult the lord by making love to his wife?: "He cared for his cortaysye, lest crapayn he were, / And more for his meschef ȝif he schulde maky synne / And be traytor to þat tolke þat þat telde aȝt" (1473-75). There has been much scrutiny of the bedroom scenes and how they relate, if at all, to the hunt scenes. Some critics compare Gawain to the specific animals that Bertilak hunts, while others see an opportunity to contrast the active life of Bertilak to the lazy or at ease life that Gawain exhibits.¹⁰⁶ For J.D. Burnley, "The intersection of hunting and temptation scenes functions, not in terms of any individual correspondences, but in terms of the audience's

¹⁰⁶ See H.L. Savage, *The Gawain Poet: Studies in his Personality and Background* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1956); Larry Benson, *Art and Tradition in 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight'* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1965); J.A. Burrow, *A Reading of 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight'* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1965).

reaction conditioned by the familiar motifs and techniques employed there.”¹⁰⁷ Anne Rooney refers to the seduction scenes in *Sir Gawain* as “the most sophisticated contrived use of the motif.”¹⁰⁸ Gawain’s lack of control of the bedroom setting stands in sharp contrast to Lord Bertilak and his actions in the forest.

In “Hunting to Teach: Class, Pedagogy, and Maleness in the *Master of Game* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” Trevor Dodman argues that the *Gawain*-poet highlights the role of the professional huntsmen and that they “offer performances of masculinity that undermine the chivalric code of noblemen such as Bertilak and Gawain.”¹⁰⁹ By separating the actions of the professional hunters from those of Lord Bertilak, Dodman’s gendered position challenges my claim of an eco-theory of genre. The claim that this text is a forest poem emphasizes instead the management of the resources themselves, resources that include the people and animals just as much as the components of the landscape. For Dodman, a close reading of the hunting scenes

foregrounds the skill and knowledge of the hunt professionals and other subordinates; most of the passages in each sequence are devoted to a description of their work and abilities. The action and exploits of Bertilak have a presence, to be sure, but our gaze during the bulk of the lines is on the bodies, the horns, the hands – even the hounds – of Bertilak’s hired men, rather than on Bertilak himself.¹¹⁰

I argue that Dodman’s claim only affirms the superiority of Bertilak as lord of the castle because those are *his* resources on display and under his control. He is successful in his

¹⁰⁷ J.D. Burnley, “The Hunting Scenes in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” *Yearbook of English Studies* 3 (1973): 1-9.

¹⁰⁸ Anne, Rooney, *Hunting*, 74.

¹⁰⁹ Trevor Dodman, “Hunting to Teach: Class, Pedagogy, and Maleness in the *Master of Game* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” *Exemplaria*, 17.2 (2005): 420, FN 19.

¹¹⁰ Dodman, “Hunting to Teach,” 442.

hunting because he manages his resources well, both land and people, through the ritual of the hunt. For Crane, “Rituals resemble other performances not only in their repeatability but also in their tendency to use symbolic images and to assert a connection between the framed event and the wider world.”¹¹¹ The carefully orchestrated hunt, dismemberment, and distribution of the game demonstrate man’s ability to control nature: “the aristocratic household, under the lord’s rule, can dominate a fearsome and adversarial world of nature. The hunt’s danger makes it appropriate for aristocratic leadership.”¹¹² The fact that this ritual of dominance takes place in a space (i.e., the forest) that demonstrates man’s dominance over nature in the form of resource management only heightens the performativity of the action of hunting by the aristocracy. When limited to viewing *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as a romance poem, we understand that Bertilak, as a willing pawn in a revenge scheme by Morgan LeFay, wins the beheading game by humiliating Gawain. But if *Sir Gawain* is a forest poem and the critique takes into account the material natural world, our understanding of Bertilak deepens because we witness him interacting as part of the forest ecosystem. By embracing his role as lord of the manor, Lord Bertilak easily manages the resources available to him and is successful in the forest environment

The Forest as Ecosystem: *A Gest of Robyn Hode*

Like the hunt scenes in Fitt III of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *A Gest of Robyn Hode* (c. 1450) depicts the forest as a place of concrete rules and laws and as a place of consumption. Robin Hood’s forest hideout is generally treated by critics as a

¹¹¹ Crane, *Performance*, 5.

¹¹² Crane, “Ritual,” 69.

backdrop for skirmishes with the Sheriff of Nottingham and as a place of protest against the king's forest laws. An ecocritical view of Robin's greenwood, which considers the influence of the forest on the inhabitants, allows the forest to be something more than just a stand of trees. The interaction in the forest between the authority figures of the realm, Robin and his men, and the other members of the community can be considered an ecosystem.¹¹³ The *OED* defines *ecosystem* as a "biological system composed of all the organisms found in a particular physical environment, interacting with it and with each other." The concept of an ecosystem with its networked components supports my claim that the *Gest* is a forest poem. The bounty of the forest both directly and indirectly provides Robin Hood with resources, and Robin's skillful management of these resources is what gives him power, wealth, and success.¹¹⁴ At the same time, the forest is still a hostile environment because of the strict forest laws, in addition to the potential physical discomforts, for people like Robin who live off the land.

While Robin is the main nexus through which the resources of the forest flow in the *Gest*, there are examples of interdependence among other characters and communities as well. This system of give and take—whether voluntarily or involuntarily—supports the notion of the forest as a site of commerce and exchange. Robin outsmarts several foes who are all members of the upper echelons of society, and the trickery usually involves some sort of financial gain for Robin and a social comeuppance for the noble. To his friends, neighbors, and honest people no matter their class, Robin exhibits largesse, leads by example, and garners respect for himself from his countrymen, who also chafe under

¹¹³ Term first used by A.G. Tansley in 1935.

¹¹⁴ In this context, *resources* means both everything naturally occurring in the forest, as well as the people and their portable wealth that travel through the forest.

the king's strict forest laws. Early in the poem, Robin instructs Little John on who counts as a target to rob and who does not:

“But loke ye do no husbonde harme,
That tilleth with his ploughe.

“No more ye shall no gode yeman
That walketh by grene wode shawe,
Ne no knight ne no squyer
That wol be a gode felawe.

“These bisshoppes and these archebischoppes,
Ye shall them bete and bynde;
The hye sheriff of Notyngham,
Hym holde ye in your mynde.” (51-60)¹¹⁵

Robin Hood is not some common criminal who commits crimes for crime's sake. Instead, he is what Eric Hobsbawm calls the “international paradigm of social banditry.”¹¹⁶ A social bandit is an active member of his community (i.e., ecosystem) and does not prey on just anyone. Hobsbawm states that “[social bandits] are peasant outlaws whom the lord and state regard as criminals, but who remain within peasant society, and are considered by their people as heroes, as champions, avengers, fighters for justice, perhaps even leaders of liberation, and in any case as men to be admired, helped and supported.”¹¹⁷ A social bandit has a part to play in the ecosystem at large, whether robbing from the rich and sharing the spoils with the less fortunate or being a thorn in the side of an oppressive authority. Robin's role as social bandit is ecological in that he helps to maintain the balance of resources. He manages and utilizes the resources available to

¹¹⁵ All references to *The Geste of Robyn Hode* are from *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*, eds. Stephen Knight and Thomas H. Ohlgren (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997).

¹¹⁶ Eric Hobsbawm, *Bandits* (New York: The New Press, 2000), 22.

¹¹⁷ Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, 20.

him to carry out an agenda that privileges everyone's right to hunt in the forest. For Robin, that hunting may or may not involve the king's deer as other resources, such as gold or other material goods, make themselves available. Robin changes the nature of the forest in that he makes its resources available to all. This harkens back to the Anglo-Saxon era, when forests were open for hunting and gathering by anyone, as long as the king's hunting was not disturbed.

For example, the Sheriff of Nottingham is always a game target, if only to remind him that he is not the top predator in this domain. Tricked by Little John, who is really one of Robin's resources, the Sheriff ends up a prisoner in Robin's camp. Like all captives in the greenwood, the Sheriff is treated to a fine meal (of the king's deer, of course) at a table laid with silver and the Sheriff's own silver vessel which was stolen earlier by Little John. Robin threatens the Sheriff with keeping him hostage for a year, and at that the Sheriff is ready to agree to anything. In exchange for letting him go, Robin extracts an oath:

"Lat me go," than sayde the sherif,
"For saynte charité,
And I woll be thy best frende
That ever yet had ye."

"Thou shalt swere me an othe," sayde Robyn,
"On my bright bronde:
Shalt thou never awayte me scathe,
By water ne by lande."

"And if thou fynde any of my men,
By nyght or day,
Upon thyn othe thou shalt swere
To helpe them that thou may." (801-812)

By agreeing to not only not persecute Robin or his men, but to also help them if need be, the Sheriff of Nottingham has basically given Robin free run of the forest. With such

freedom, he is able to maintain a comfortable life, because the forest environment provides him and his “seven score” of men with all they need (1555). Robin is able to marshal his resources (retainers, bounty from the land, and money from wealthy travelers passing through the forest) to great success.

Moreover, the plot line involving the impoverished knight Sir Richard of the Lee demonstrates Robin’s key position in the ecosystem of the forest as the center of a large ecological web. Little John abducts the knight along the forest road and brings him to Robin. After exchanging pleasantries, Robin treats Sir Richard to the requisite civilized meal with linen and silver:

They wasshed togeder and wyped bothe,
And sette to theyr dynere;
Brede and wyne they had right ynoughe,
And noumbles of the dere.

Swannes and fessauntes they had full gode,
And foules of the ryvere;
There fayled none so litell a birde
That ever was bred on bryre. (125-132)

On one hand, this meal displays Robin’s largess to strangers; on the other, this meal displays the ease of accessibility Robin has to the resources of the forest. After dining, Robin demands Sir Richard’s money because “It was never the maner, by dere worthi God, / A yoman to pay for a knight” (147-8). In the same way that society reflects the world at large, so should the members of the forest ecosystem: every organism has its role to perform and its place to occupy. The fact that Robin is breaking the king’s law by robbing a knight of the realm is not an issue, because, by the laws of the ecosystem, that same knight owes resources (money) for having partaken of the resources (the meal).

Relationships in nature are all symbiotic in some way, and the same can be said for relationships in the *Gest*. Some interactions between characters in the poem are mutual (beneficial to both characters); some are parasitic (beneficial to one character while harmful to another); while others are commensal (beneficial to one character, without helping or harming another). The forest-as-ecosystem paradigm functions to give structure to the relationships within the text. For example, immediately after Robin demands payment for providing Sir Richard supper, the knight states, ““I have nought in my coffers”” (149). He reveals that he is destitute and abandoned by his friends because he is about to default on a loan to the Abbot of Saint Mary Abbey. The combination of the threat of Sir Richard’s financial dissolution and the knight’s honest and good character spurs Robin to share from his bountiful resources that he has taken from the forest. As part of an ecosystem, Robin cannot fathom a world that only takes and does not give. Sir Richard leaves the greenwood with money, new clothes, two horses, a saddle, new boots with gilt spurs, and Little John posing as his squire. When Richard returns to the forest to repay the £400 Robin gave him, he brings along with him

...an hundred bowes,
The strynges well ydyght,
An hundred shefe of arowes gode,
The hedys burneshed full bryght;

And every arowe an elle longe,
With pecok wel idyght,
Inocked all with whyte silver;
It was a semely syght. (521-28)

By managing and making available his resources to Sir Richard, Robin receives a lot in return. In exchange for the loan he willingly gives Sir Richard, Robin not only gets his money back, but also one hundred bows with quivers full of arrows that Robin and his

men can use to gather more resources. Both parties thrive in this mutually beneficial relationship.

Relationships in an ecosystem are rarely a one-to-one equation; an ecosystem is more like a web of interrelated components. More often than not, a ripple effect occurs from any interaction. For example, after receiving assistance from Robin, Sir Richard emulates him and helps someone else less fortunate. On the way to repay his debt to Robin, a now financially secure Sir Richard assists a yeoman who was “ferre and frembde bested” (551) and who had won a wrestling match in Wentbridge. As someone not from the area, the yeoman would have been easy prey for the locals to deny him his winnings. Stating that “... yoman shulde have no harme / For love of Robyn Hode,” Sir Richard declares the yeoman the winner of the match and diffuses any lingering tension by tapping the prize cask of wine for everyone to partake (555-56). To offset the loss of the wine as prize, Sir Richard gives the yeoman “fyve marke” for it. The yeoman and Sir Richard engage in a commensal relationship. The yeoman benefits by Richard’s quick thinking and largesse of the five marks. Even though Sir Richard paid the young man and got nothing in return, the loss of the small sum of money was not detrimental to Richard as he was once again financially stable. By managing his resources—his wealth and status as knight—Sir Richard imitates Robin’s kindness and becomes an active part of the forest ecosystem.

The interaction between Robin and Sir Richard of the Lee demonstrates a balanced give and take of resources. Robin sends off the destitute Sir Richard well-provisioned with food, clothes, a horse, money, and a squire. These products are *of* the forest, while others were harvested *from* the forest by Robin and his men from passersby.

On the other hand, the Sheriff of Nottingham has a parasitic relationship with Robin. He takes more than he gives, disrupts the fragile balance, and, therefore, must be destroyed:

Robyn bent a full goode bowe,
An arrowe he drowe at wyll;
He hit so the proude sherife
Upon the grounde he lay full still.

And or he myght up aryse,
On his fete to stonde,
He smote of the sherifs hede
With his bright bronde.

"Lye thou there, thou proude sherife,
Evyll mote thou cheve!
There myght no man to the truste
The whyles thou were a lyve." (1385-96)

In the *Gest*, Robin Hood's relationship with King Edward can be abstruse. Robin is clear in his affection for the king: "I love no man in all the worlde / So well as I do my kynge" (1541-42). Yet, he does not hesitate to brutally kill the king's representative. Immediately afterward, he tells Sir Richard that they can hide out in the greenwood until they are forgiven of this bloody trespass: "Tyll that I have gete us grace / Of Edward, our comly kynge" (1411-12). This relationship exhibits the dynamics of an ecosystem: sometimes one is the predator; sometimes one is the prey. For Robin, he loves the king, but hates the king's laws and its agents. While Robin will use all of the resources at his disposal to fight against what most view as an unfair system—the illegality of hunting on one's land, he still places his trust in King Edward's beneficence as a man who also loves to hunt and roam free in the forest.

The introduction of King Edward into the tale demonstrates the existence of overlaps between ecosystems. The king is the nexus of the ecosystem of the court, and the Sheriff of Nottingham is one of his resources. After the death of the Sheriff, King

Edward scours the area unsuccessfully hunting for Robin. Robin, meanwhile, “By halke and eke by hyll, / And alway slewe the kynges dere, / And welt them at his wyll” (1462-64). At the urging of a forester, Edward and five of his men disguise themselves as monks and enter the forest to lure Robin out. Taking the bait, Robin and his men hold up the six “monks.” The “abbot” only has £40 and tells Robin ““But yf I had an hondred ponde, / I vouch it halfe on the”” (1523-24). Shrewdly, Robin keeps half of the £40, but tells the abbot ““We shall mete another day”” (1531). By allowing the “abbot” to keep half of his money, Robin exhibits resource management by not exhausting the supply of money that moves through the forest. By dismissing the “monks” when he is through with them, Robin also exhibits his power over the comings and goings in the forest.

At this dismissal, the “abbot” deploys his own resources to continue the interaction and surprises Robin by declaring that the king has ““sent to [Robin] his seale, / And byddeth [him] com to Notyngnam”” (1534-35). The “abbot” displays the king’s privy seal as evidence of his office as emissary from the king. Robin drops to his knee at the sight of the king’s image and states:

“Welcome is my lordes seale;
And, monke, for thy tydynges,

"Syr abbot, for thy tydynges,
To day thou shalt dyne with me,
For the love of my kynge,
Under my trystell-tre." (1543-48)

Because he bears the king’s seal, the “abbot” is part of the king’s ecosystem of the court and welcome in the greenwood, and Robin does not hesitate to utilize all his resources to impress the “abbot.”

An ecosystem is healthy and robust when all constituents play their role. As part of his outlaw band, Robin's men dutifully hunt and gather food provisions and are able to provide a meal akin to a feast: "Many a dere there was slayne, / And full fast dyghtande" (1551-52). The menu also includes, "The fatte venyson, / The good whyte brede, the good rede wyne, / And therto the fyne ale and browne" (1570-72). The point is not so much whether or not Robin and his men grew the grain for the flour for the bread or fermented the grapes to make wine or the wheat to make ale. The point with this meal is to display Robin's resource management skill, and therefore his wealth and power in the forest landscape and as center of this forest ecosystem. Even though he and his men live the lives of outlaws, they still live a civilized life with some of the hallmarks of luxury: white bread, red wine, and venison.

What amazes King Edward most is Robin's management of his human resources. Robin and his band of men enjoy a symbiotic relationship based on mutualism in that they both benefit from each other's presence in the forest. The men offer labor in strength of arms and gathering provisions, while Robin is their *de facto* leader. It is an impressive sight when Robin calls his men to prepare and enjoy dinner:

Robyn toke a full grete horne,
And loude he gan blowe;
Seven score of wyght yonge men
Came redy on a rowe.

All they kneled on theyr kne,
Full fayre before Robyn;
The kynge sayd hym selfe untyll,
And swore by Saynt Austyn,

"Here is a wonder semely syght;
Me thynketh, by Goddes pyne,
His men are more at his byddyng
Then my men be at myn." (1553-64)

Why are Robin's men so devoted to him? Robin is nature, and like nature, he can be full of bountiful giving (e.g., his dealings with Sir Richard of the Lee) or be fearsome to behold (e.g., his murder of the Sheriff of Nottingham). There is no doubt that Robin is the leader of the outlaw band, but Robin does not hold himself separate from his men. During the post-dinner games of skill, Robin often wins, but not always. When he loses, he surrenders his archery tackle and takes the requisite buffet on his head. Robin plays his part as leader, yet he does not expect his men to do more or differently than he would do himself. This equanimity helps to maintain the balance within the ecosystem. If Robin was more dictatorial and autocratic, eventually the men would chafe under his rule and either challenge his leadership or leave the band for a more democratic leader. But Robin sees himself as part of a whole, a leader who would just be an outlaw without his loyal band of men.

The symbiotic relationship shared by Robin and the king is neither parasitic nor mutualistic, but commensal: one organism gains, while the other is neither hurt nor helped. Robin gains from his relationship with the king: deer to hunt, money and weapons to steal. While King Richard loses something every time Robin kills a deer, robs royal representatives, or even murders a sheriff, the king's resources are so vast that there will always be more deer, money, or employees to be had. Commanded by King Edward to “come home, syr, to my courte, / And there dwell with me,” Robin agrees to leave the greenwood. Yet, he adds the caveat that he can always return to the forest:

"I wyll come to your courte,
Your servyse for to se,
And brynge with me of my men
Seven score and thre.

"But me lyke well your servyse,
"I come agayne full soone,
And shote at the donne dere,
As I am wonte to done." (1161-68)

One would expect Robin to be more circumspect about his illegal hunting activities, especially when speaking directly to the king; but as the top predator in the forest ecosystem, Robin will hunt—he cannot help but hunt—the king’s deer.

However, we find that when Robin is removed from the forest ecosystem, he is not as successful. In the court ecosystem, he is an exotic, to use a term derived from natural science. In modern biology, a species that is found outside of its natural home range is called an *exotic species*. Some exotics can flourish in the new area due to the lack of natural predators. Conversely, some exotics struggle to succeed outside their natural ecosystems, such as delicate tropical plants that cannot survive when faced with extremely cold temperatures. This forest text anticipates this modern idiom that describes an organism outside of its normal range of habitat. When Robin goes to King Edward’s court, he struggles in his non-native environment. Instead of prospering like he does in his native greenwood, Robin runs through his resources. Outside his native ecosystem, Robin is an exotic species that is doomed to fail:

Had Robyn dwelled in the kynges courte
But twelve monethes and thre,
That he had spent an hondred ponde,
And all his mennes fe.

In every place where Robyn came
Ever more he layde downe,
Both for knyghtes and for squyres,
To gete hym grete renowne.

By than the yere was all agone
He had no man but twayne,

Lytell Johan and good Scathelocke,
With hym all for to gone. (1729-40)

Relationships in the forest ecosystem are built on a web of organic interconnectedness: Robin and his men survive together because they choose to live a life in the greenwood. Their relationships are shaped by their habitat—food, water, shelter, and the arrangement of these things. Because Robin is at home in the forest, he understands the relationships there, and it is this understanding that is the foundation for his success in the forest ecosystem, his power and wealth. At Edward's court, relationships are built on artificial and material connections. Instead of an interconnected web, the court relies on a system of patronage based on one's ability to pay for the notice of others. In fifteen months at court, Robin has spent over £100 and lost all but two of his men to other patrons who can pay more.

Watching young men at court practice their archery, a nostalgic Robin is painfully aware of his diminished status and longs for his life in the greenwood:

Robyn sawe yonge men shote
Full ferre upon a day;
"Alas!" than sayd good Robyn,
"My welthe is went away.

"Somtyme I was an archere good,
A styffe and eke a stronge;
I was comted the best archere
That was in mery Englonde." (1741-48)

The recognition of his true self in the young men at ease with their bows elicits the realization that he is dangerously out of his natural habitat: "“Alas and well a woo! / Yf I dwele lenger with the kynge, / Sorowe wyll me sloo”" (1750-52). At that moment, Robin resolves to return to the greenwood. When he asks leave of the king, Edward demands that Robin be gone no more than seven nights from court, and Robin agrees to the deal.

But once Robin arrives in his natural habitat, there is no question about him ever returning to the court:

Whan he came to grene wode,
In a mery mornynge,
There he herde the notes small
Of byrdes mery syngynge. (1777-80)

The “mery mornynge” and the “notes small / of byrdes mery syngynge” compose an idyllic scene that reminds us of the *locus amoenus*. The Robin Hood that is so in tune with the ecosystem of the forest acknowledges that he has come home to his native land. Now that he is back in his place in the web of forest relationships, he needs to perform his role as top predator:

"It is ferre gone," sayd Robyn,
"That I was last here;
Me lyste a lytell for to shote
At the donne dere." (1781-84)

At this, one has to wonder if the reason King Edward kept Robin at court was for Robin's company or to keep Robin away from the king's deer in the forest. To solidify his return to the greenwood, Robin broadcasts his presence:

Robyn slewe a full grete harte,
His horne than gan he blow,
That all the outlawes of that forest
That horne coud they knowe,

And gadred them togyder,
In a lytell throwe;
Seven score of wyght yonge men
Came redy on a rowe. (1785-92)

The demonstration of still-sharp hunting skills and the display of loyalty by the other outlaws cement Robin's homecoming, for only in the forest ecosystem can Robin successfully manage his resources. His men recognize him for who he is and from where

his power and wealth come: ““Welcome," they sayd, "our mayster, / Under this grene wode tre”” (1795-96). Robin Hood is both an integral part and emblematic of the forest ecosystem. Like the managed royal forests, Robin has both natural and cultivated resources that he garners and shares. If not for the strict rules of forest law, Robin would not be able to function so well as an outlaw. But because Robin knows the law and what he can and cannot do, he is able to create a space for himself and his men to push right up against the boundary and to live free lives in the greenwood.

Life on the Edge: The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell

The woodland setting in the late medieval ballad *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell* displays the hallmarks of a medieval forest defined in this project: it is finite and knowable; it is a place of concrete rules and laws; and it is the site of commerce and exchange. *The Wedding* has roots in the loathly lady narratives, such as Chaucer’s “The Wife of Bath’s Tale” in *The Canterbury Tales*. The usual critical focus on this type of tale centers on the gender or supernatural elements and often explores female characters as the Other. Alternatively, I suggest that an eco-theory of genre allows for an exploration of the relationship between Dame Ragnelle’s ability to manage the resource and her wealth, power, and status in the ballad. The following section considers Inglewood Forest as a medieval environment governed by rules and ritual, an ecosystem where Dame Ragnelle’s resource management skills enable her to determine her own future.

The Inglewood Forest does not seem like a safe, rule-governed place to King Arthur. In fact, it is a dangerous place for him. The tale opens with Arthur hunting deer with his retinue. He sees a “greatt hartt” and tells his men that he will stalk it on his own

(23).¹¹⁸ In the next fifteen lines of the poem, we are told three times that Arthur is alone in the forest away from his men. This solitary condition allows for Arthur to be ambushed by Sir Gromer Somer Joure, who challenges Arthur and also mentions Arthur's vulnerability:

“Welle imet, Kyng Arthour!
Thou hast me done wrong many a yere
And wofully I shall quytte the here;
I hold thy lyfe days nyghe done.
Thou hast gevyn my landes in certayn
With greatt wrong unto Sir Gawen.
Whate sayest thou, Kyng alone?” (49-60)

By going off on his own, Arthur has broken a rule of hunting in the royal forest: the king is never left alone in case some accident should happen. Another factor concerning Arthur's separation from his retainers and hunting party centers on his status and identity as king. Cummins states:

In the Arthurian romance, particularly, detachment from one's environment is synonymous with immersion in that misty landscape in which sudden and unexplained demands are made on the resilience and prowess of the hero who is weary and disoriented, and who, in many cases, has been stripped of those accoutrements which marked his position in a secure social framework – his hawk and his hounds.¹¹⁹

Cummins' statement certainly holds true in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as Gawain wanders in the wilderness of Wirral and struggles to find the Green Knight. In *The Wedding*, Arthur follows the deer for only “half a myle,” yet we know he is alone because “no man with hym went” (38, 39). And because he is “stalkyng” the deer, any

¹¹⁸ All quotations for *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell* are taken from *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, ed. Thomas Hahn (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995).

¹¹⁹ Cummins, *Hound*, 74.

hounds would have been left behind at the tryst as well (30). Once he is accosted by Sir Gromer in the forest, it is clear that Arthur is outside his “secure social framework.”

For his part, Sir Gromer also breaks some rules in a place that is so bound by rules that, like all medieval royal forests, it has four separate law courts to adjudicate Forest Law.¹²⁰ First, Gromer ambushes the king, the sovereign ruler of England. Second, Gromer threatens the life of the king. Third, Gromer threatens Arthur while Gromer is dressed for battle and Arthur is dressed for hunting, as Arthur quickly points out: ““Shame thou shalt have to sle me in veneré, / Thou armyd and I clothyd butt in grene, perdé”” (82-83). Fourth, Gromer demands reparation from the king in the form of a quest. Finally, adding insult to injury, Gromer questions Arthur’s fidelity to the conditions of the quest and threatens his life again: ““For and I wyst, by Mary mylde, / Thou woldyst betray me in the feld, / Thy lyf fyrst sholdyst thou lose”” (112-14).

Sir Gromer may be *in* the forest, but he is not part *of* the forest in the same way Robin Hood is: Robin is cajoling and the center of a healthy ecosystem made up of resources that include other people; Gromer is alone and sounds antagonistic and desperate. He declares to Arthur: ““Thou hast me done wrong many a yere / And wofully I shall quytte the here; / I hold thy lyfe days nyghe done”” (55-57). Because he accuses Arthur of stealing his lands and forcing him from court, Gromer qualifies as an exotic species in the forest. Inexplicably, Gromer’s solution to losing his property is to challenge Arthur: ““To shewe me att thy comyng whate wemen love best in feld and town / And thou shalt mete me here withouten send / Evyn att this day twelfe monethes end...”” (91-93). The quest to discover something—in this case, what women love best—

¹²⁰ The Forest Law courts include: the Court of Attachment, the Swainmote, the Court of Regard, and the Court of Justice-seat or Eyre Court.

with its requisite year-and-a-day timeframe is a common enough literary convention. But in the context of this project, this exchange of information for a life supports the hallmark of the forest as a place of commerce. With this encounter in the forest, Arthur is subject to a new set of rules in the forest, rules that he did not decree; he goes from sovereign to subject of Sir Gromer's demands. Moreover, this encounter demonstrates that the forest is still a dangerous place, even though it is governed by strict rules and laws.

A forest could include stands of trees, brushy understories, cultivated fields, fallow land, and cleared areas, and it is this variety of habitats that makes the forest a biodiverse ecosystem. While each of these habitats is important in its own way as part of the larger ecosystem, it is the edges where the different habitats meet that are central to an ecocritical reading of *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell*. In modern theory, these edges are called *ecotones* and have a prominent place in the ecology of any ecosystem. According to the *Dictionary of Ecology*, an ecotone is "A narrow and fairly sharply defined transition zone between two or more different communities. Such edge communities are typically species-rich. Ecotones arise naturally, e.g. at land–water interfaces, but elsewhere may often reflect human intervention (e.g. the agricultural clearance of formerly forested areas)."¹²¹ In *The Wedding*, unlike most Middle English narratives, power and success come from the edges, so this text anticipates a modern ecological theory that it could not have known about.

Like Robin Hood when he moves to Edward's court, Sir Gromer is an exotic species: he is (formerly) of the court, yet he is living in the forest. He uses this incongruity to surprise Arthur and gain the upper hand over him. The source of Arthur's

¹²¹ *The Dictionary of Ecology*, 4th ed., ed. Michael Allaby (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

challenge is from an unexpected and atypical place: an exiled nobleman eking out a living in the forest. Because Arthur and Gawain are wholly of the court ecosystem, they are not dominant in Inglewood Forest, and Gromer's challenge stumps them. After spending the allotted year with Gawain unsuccessfully trying to discover what women love best by asking everyone they come across, Arthur makes his way back into the forest to meet his fate. Instead, he meets a woman on horseback at the edge of the woods. Similar in description to the Bull Man in *Ywain and Gawain*, this woman is "as ungoodly a creature / As evere man sawe, withoute mesure" (228-29). But where the Bull Man is obviously a man who is just really large, the woman at the edge of the forest is beyond ugly. She is scary because she is so foul-looking:

Her face was red, her nose snotyd withalle,
Her mowithe wyde, her tethe yalowe overe alle,
With bleryd eyen gretter then a balle.
Her mowithe was nott to lak:
Her tethe hyng overe her lyppes,
Her chekys syde as wemens hippes.
A lute she bare upon her bak;
Her nek long and therto greatt;
Her here cloteryd on an hepe;
In the sholders she was a yard brode.
Hangyng pappys to be an hors lode,
And lyke a barelle she was made.
And to reherse the fowlnesse of that Lady,
Ther is no tung may telle, securly;
Of lothynesse inowghe she had. (231-45)

Yet, true to the nature of a creature that inhabits an ecotone, Ragnelle also displays characteristics of a second habitat:

She satt on a palfray was gay begon,
With gold besett and many a precious stone.
Ther was an unsemely syghte:
So fowlle a creature withoute mesure
To ryde so gayly, I you ensure,
Ytt was no reason ne ryghte. (246-51)

In a socio-economic reading of the narrative, Sheryl L. Forste-Grupp argues that the premise of the ballad is a complaint against medieval inheritance laws. Ragnelle is bewitched by her stepmother (692) in a bid to keep Ragnelle from marrying. Because Sir Gromer and Ragnelle are siblings (475), Forste-Grupp assumes Gromer is son to the step-mother, so there is some competition for

their family lands, possession of which would integrate one of them to court society and would confer upon one title, status, authority, and wealth. [. . .] Dame Ragnell is marginalized by her loathsome appearance which makes her an undesirable wife; however, that very same repulsiveness might be an asset when she competes with her brother for the family fief, because her appearance frees her from medieval strictures regarding female behaviors—silence, modesty, humility—and female enclosures—hearth, hall, and garden.¹²²

Forste-Grupp's use of "marginalized" has a negative connotation, even as she admits that Ragnelle's foul appearance "might be an asset." I argue that the duality that Ragnelle exhibits is definitely an asset in the same way an ecotone is a successful community. In contemporary thought, ecotones exhibit what is known as the *edge effect* which "occurs because the overlap region supports some species from both adjacent ecosystems and some peculiar to itself."¹²³ The modern ecological concept of the edge effect aptly describes why Ragnelle is successful in her quest to secure Arthur's notice and assistance. Because of her position on the edges of the forest, of society, of woman, of creature, Ragnelle is able to marshal and manage the resources available to her. To begin with, there is her dreadful appearance, which definitely gets Arthur's attention, but it is her articulate speech and fine caparisoned horse that keeps him from running away.

¹²² Sheryl L. Forste-Grupp, "A Woman Circumvents the Laws of Primogeniture in *The Weddyng of Sir Gawen and Dame Ragnell*," *Studies in Philology* 99.2 (2002): 115-16.

¹²³ *Dictionary of Ecology*.

Because she is Sir Gromer's stepsister, she is privy to his machinations. So when Ragnelle meets Arthur in the forest, her knowledge of his predicament is nothing less than miraculous to him, especially given her appearance. Because of her seemingly uncanny knowledge, she (almost too) easily gets Arthur to promise her the hand of Sir Gawain in marriage in exchange for the answer to Gromer's question. Again, for Arthur, what she says is more important than how she looks. Finally, once she is released from her enchantment, Ragnelle gets Arthur, if begrudgingly, to be kind to Sir Gromer:

She prayd the Kyng for his gentilnes,
"To be good lord to Sir Gromer, iwysse,
Of that to you he hathe offendyd."
"Yes, Lady, that shalle I nowe for your sake,
For I wott welle he may nott amendes make;
He dyd to me fulle unhend." (811-16)

Even though she has been physically bewitched and relegated to the forest (i.e., away from court with its perks, protection, and privilege), Ragnelle catches and keeps Arthur's attention by using the noble identifiers that are left to her: her horse, her speech, and her knowledge of court. At the same time, her nonconformity to female beauty norms gives her the freedom to act in a more assertive manner. She speaks openly to Arthur about the peril he is in: "'Speke with me, I rede, or thou goo, / For thy lyfe is in my hand, I warn the soo; / That shalt thou fynde, and I itt nott lett'" (255-57). She brazenly demands from Arthur Gawain's hand in marriage in exchange for the answer to the challenge. Even though she appears to be not of the court, Arthur realizes that she is more than she seems. By maintaining a position on the edge of the forest, Ragnelle makes the most of her resources by offering to assist Arthur.

Unlike her stepbrother Gromer Somer Joure, who does not fare well outside of his native habitat of the court, Dame Ragnelle is able to survive outside the court ecosystem

by occupying the edge of the forest. Her bewitching creates a duality that manifests itself as a foul exterior and a noble interior. Ragnelle is able to re-establish herself at court by virtue of her knowledge of that ecosystem, even though she initially retains her grotesque appearance. For example, when the Queen tries to convince Ragnelle to be married to Gawain ““in the mornynge erly, / As pryvaly as ye may,”” Ragnelle firmly declines (570-71). The noble Ragnelle knows that to be fully accepted in the court as Gawain’s wife, they must celebrate with the entirety of the ecosystem:

“I wol be weddyd alle openly,
For with the Kyng suche covenant made I.
I putt you oute of dowte,
I wolle nott to churche tylle Highe Masse tyme
And in the open halle I wolle dyne,
In myddys of alle the rowte.” (575-80)

Once the couple is alone in their bedroom, Ragnelle’s experience in court gives her confidence that she can rely on Gawain’s reputation as the most chivalrous knight and that he will respond to her coaxing in such a way that the spell will be broken. After revealing her true physical appearance, she outlines Gawain’s options:

“Wheder ye wolle have me fayre on nyghtes
And as foulle on days to alle men sightes,
Or els to have me fayre on days
And on nyghtes on the fowlyst wyfe -
The one ye must nedes have.
Chese the one or the oder.” (659-64)

As she knew he would, because of his gallant reputation, Gawain chooses the most courteous option: ““Butt do as ye lyst nowe, my Lady gaye. / The choyse I putt in your fyst”” (677-78). The spell is broken when Gawain privileges Ragnelle’s desires over his own and allows her to choose her own fate.

In setting her sights on Gawain for a husband, Ragnelle leverages her familiarity with and experience of the court ecosystem in general and of Gawain specifically. As a component of an ecotone at the edge of the forest, Ragnelle secures Arthur's promise of Gawain's hand in marriage through a commercial exchange: Gawain for the answer to Sir Gromer's question. Once back at court, Ragnelle deploys her knowledge of court social politics and insists on the rituals that will cement her relationship with Gawain in the eyes of the court ecosystem. Finally, she relies on Gawain's characteristic chivalry to actually break the spell. Even though Ragnelle's successful incorporation back into the court ecosystem takes place in a bedroom at Arthur's castle, *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* is a forest poem. An eco-theory of genre provides a deeper understanding of the poem by considering in particular how Sir Gromer and Dame Ragnelle manage their resources as exotic species inhabiting a forest ecosystem and how that management leads to their success or failure in the narrative.

With its boundaries and strict laws, the forest ecosystem occupies the midway point on the continuum of containment and control of nature that threads its way through this project. The forest exhibits dangerous characteristics despite human progress in this environment, and activities steeped in ritual, such as the hunting of wild game, provide only an illusion of control. The wilderness environment explored in Chapter One, with its heroic exploits in life-threatening conditions, stands in contrast to the regulated and managed forest. The next chapter considers human attempts to control nature by creating a semblance of nature within garden walls and examines the relationships between nature and artifice, love and possession.

CHAPTER 4

THE NATURAL ART OF DISOBEDIENCE: GAMES IN THE GARDEN

Most, if not all, medieval literary gardens harken back to the Garden of Eden, the *Song of Songs*, and/or the *Roman de la Rose*. There is a long literary tradition of garden imagery from these three sources, as well as more than a spade full of well-turned earth in terms of scholarly investigation. While this chapter recognizes this tradition, the allegorical or symbolic is only one plane on which medieval gardens in Middle English texts can operate. Like the medieval royal forests, gardens during the Middle Ages were real places that were created and tended and used by real people. This chapter assesses the importance of real gardens in the medieval period and how they influenced the imaginary gardens in the literature of the time. Real spaces provide inspiration for works of the imagination, and the garden space is no different. During the Middle Ages, as now, there were different types of gardens, including kitchen gardens and decorative gardens. This second category contains a wide range of sizes, designs, and features. An herber is a “close garden surrounded by benches,” while a larger garden might contain several herbers.¹²⁴ According to John Harvey, “The pleasure grounds of palaces and mansions included not only small herbers but orchards with fish-ponds and other pools, and at times aviaries and menageries. The creation of such luxuries was a recognized

¹²⁴ John Harvey, *Medieval Gardens* (Beaverton, Oregon: Timber Press, 1981), 103.

activity.”¹²⁵ A garden brought the natural world in from the outside in a cultivated and civilized fashion. In fact, the Persian word *pairidaeza*, meaning “walled garden,” gives us the word *paradise*.¹²⁶ Unlike the utilitarian kitchen garden, the decorative garden was created for leisure activities. Individual pursuits that took place inside the manor or castle, such as drawing, needlework, or reading, were easily moved out-of-doors. Indoor group activities like feasting and dancing could also be adapted to an outdoor setting that provided both open space and places to sit or recline in a pleasant environment.

In thinking about the importance of real and imagined gardens to literature, this chapter examines three works from Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*: two fabliaux, “The Shipman’s Tale” and “The Merchant’s Tale,” and one Breton lay, “The Franklin’s Tale.” As I shall demonstrate, these poems are garden texts not only because of their prominent garden setting, but also because the setting shapes the narrative by influencing the actions of the characters. The garden offers a space that allows its users to be surrounded by nature in a relatively safe environment, as in, the dangers of both the wilderness and the forest are conspicuously absent. This freedom from harm liberates the user to enjoy the sensory pleasures of the outdoors without concern for one’s safety. The sanctuary of the material garden translates well to the imagined gardens of literature. I move away from the traditional genres of fabliau and Breton lay and toward an organic classification, one based not just on landscape but a genre that bridges the material and the imaginary. These three tales explore different dispositions of love and lust, desire and infatuation, and from an ecocritical standpoint the garden setting reflects the type of

¹²⁵ Harvey, *Medieval Gardens*, 103.

¹²⁶ Teresa McLean, *Medieval English Gardens* (New York: The Viking Press, 1980), 126.

seduction acted out in each tale. As discussed in Chapter 2, the forest environment enables the hunt by providing proper habitat for the animals of the woods. In a similar way, the garden environment provides a specific setting for amorous liaison, and the three chosen texts involve marital and extra-marital relationships that take advantage of the garden setting. Terry Comito states, “Love and gardens are linked ... by traditions of thought as well as of myth; and the two traditions interpenetrate, support, and transform one another.”¹²⁷ While this entire statement is true, this project is more concerned with its second half. What are the understood behaviors and/or expectations for inhabiting a garden? How does a garden influence the actions that take place in it? Most importantly, how do these texts open up our views on the fashioning of nature to our desires? While these questions are paramount to this chapter, the larger issue of human’s desired control of nature, as seen in the wilderness and the forest, is still the constant undercurrent even in the garden. The garden is a legitimate place to explore the association between amorous desire and control of the desired, because the garden is ostensibly a landscape where people, not nature, are in control. If people can design and create a space using natural elements in an artificial way, there is a temptation to control everything that enters that space, including other people. While reading about imaginary gardens in contemporary literature influenced people’s understanding of love and courtship, the real, tangible places of lived-in gardens did so as well by providing a space for interaction that was both protected from the world at large and separate from the more socially confining spaces indoors. Gardens were places to talk, flirt, and explore relationships in ways that otherwise would not be acceptable indoors.

¹²⁷ Terry Comito, *The Idea of the Garden in the Renaissance* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1978), 92.

In each text, the garden is intended to be a place of delight and respite, a reflection of the beauty of the larger world outside the garden walls. But as Comito notes, “gardens are more than models, for the stuff of which they are contrived is the living substance of nature.”¹²⁸ That an artificial space can be made up of natural things is a key point because of nature’s proclivity to be disorganized or disobedient: even though a garden is designed and planted, the materials that make up the garden are still from nature. Actual gardening practices in real gardens recognize the potential for disorganization. Plantings are arranged into beds, trained to climb supports, or captured in pots; yet, any plant may escape its container and grow how it wills. Even though the natural aspects of the garden are contained within the garden walls and delineated within specific boundaries (e.g., beds, trellises, and pots), the potential for disobedience is still there. Howard Marchitello further elucidates this paradox in his article “Garden *Frisson*”:

consider the nature of the “natural” in the garden. This is an especially urgent matter – and an especially vexed one – in that the materials that serve to constitute the garden are, in some sense, the very objects of nature – whether animate (the tree, for example) or inanimate (a stone) – and therefore always simultaneously “natural” and, to the extent that they are *semiotically* deployed, artificial. It is the object of the garden, after all, to construct for its viewer (or reader) the artificial experience of nature.¹²⁹

Added to this deployment of the artificial as natural is the notion that, as these stories were read or listened to, the audience was very familiar with gardens: what they looked like and how they functioned. This familiarity plays into what Hans Robert Jauss refers to as the *horizon of expectations*. For Jauss, the audience’s baseline knowledge is the starting point from which the author may echo or depart: “The new text evokes for the

¹²⁸ Comito, *Idea*, xii.

¹²⁹ Howard Marchitello, “Garden *Frisson*,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 33.1 (2003), 144, original emphasis.

reader (listener) the horizon of expectations and ‘rules of the game’ familiar to him from earlier texts, which as such can then be varied, extended, corrected, but also transformed, crossed out, or simply reproduced.”¹³⁰ In *Chaucer’s Gardens and the Language of Convention*, Laura Howes states that the audience understood “the contextual meaning of Chaucer’s gardens, how his gardens function[ed] with or against the ‘horizon of expectations’ of medieval generic conventions [. . .]. With each genre within which Chaucer works come expectations about various garden *topoi*.”¹³¹ I contend that each type of garden discussed in this chapter also comes with its own set of expectations and *topoi*. The gardens in each text present a known environment, yet there is a tension between the expectations for each garden type and the set of actions that ultimately play out in the narratives. These tales belong to the genre of garden poem because the space of the garden influences the narrative. More importantly, the imagined gardens, as juxtaposed to the real gardens as experienced by the readers, offered a place to explore actions and emotions that led to a deeper understanding of the texts themselves. As this chapter will demonstrate, the inherent multiplicity of artificially arranged nature creates space for interpretations and events that are beyond expected garden pursuits, such as conversing, dancing, and playing games. The characters demonstrate this same multiplicity by way of their own actions in the garden and their interactions with other characters. A garden is no longer just an area for respite and/or recreation, but it is a place for subversion and destabilization. According to Laura Howes:

¹³⁰ Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 88.

¹³¹ Laura Howes, *Chaucer’s Gardens and the Language of Convention* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1997), 11.

because the garden comes to medieval literature laden with so many prefabricated meanings, Chaucer also represents in his gardens a whole series of subversive activities, tempered by the acknowledgement that the garden's received structure and history make such activity possible. Gardens then provide a language of convention *and* a language in which protest can be voiced.¹³²

While agreeing with Howes, I push her claim further by arguing that it is the garden's natural elements, with their disobedient materiality, that allow, encourage, and even demand, the disruption of human attempts at domination over the garden environment specifically and over nature in general. The real garden provides opportunity for interaction that might not otherwise be available in other settings, such as a hall, a church, or a drawing room. Real gardens, because they are wholly fabricated and controlled by their creators, impart a sense of safety and security that is lacking in the wilderness and forest environments. No one ever enters a real garden thinking that he might not make it out alive. Enclosing man-made walls of stone or dense hedges delineate the garden from the wide-open wilderness and from the forest with its drawn legal boundaries. The walls enable the garden to be a private space, while holding back the encroaching natural growth from the outside world. And it is the combination of these two elements—opportunity and safety—that positions the garden as a subversive and dangerous place.

Bridget Henisch notes that “If the characteristic features of a medieval garden were to be set down in dictionary form, the two most important words listed under the letter C would be ‘control’ and ‘containment.’”¹³³ These two components are also present in the deployment of the elements that make up the space: the flower beds, plant pots,

¹³² Howes, *Chaucer's Gardens*, 2.

¹³³ Bridget Ann Henisch “Private Pleasures: Painted Gardens on the Manuscript Page” in *Inventing Medieval Landscapes: Senses of Place in Western Europe*, eds. John Howe and Michael Wolfe (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2002), 155-56.

trained vines, trimmed trees, marked paths, and the like. Medieval gardens, like gardens now, were designed for the maximum opportunities for pleasure: fragrant flowers, colorful displays of blooms and foliage, and side paths that may end at a secluded screened arbor. All of these sensual pleasures and more could be enjoyed in safety and secrecy behind protective walls. Nevertheless, because it is ultimately of nature, the garden environment proves itself to be just as dangerous and unstable as any other environment.

Gardens are present in many Middle English texts, and that speaks to their pervasive presence in the lives of medieval people. Many of Chaucer's works include a garden as a nominal part of the setting, such as *Troilus and Criseyde* and "The Knight's Tale" in the *Canterbury Tales*. Several of Chaucer's dream vision poems incorporate a garden as the place where the dreamer nods off or is part of the dream landscape, such as *The Parliament of Fowls* and *The Legend of Good Women*. Other poems written in clear imitation of Chaucer, such as *The Flower and the Leaf*, acknowledge the conventions of a garden setting. But the concrete materiality of the garden itself as presented in each narrative, along with the ways in which the narrative is shaped by the garden setting, is what makes the texts featured in this chapter different. More specifically, the gardens in "The Shipman's Tale," "The Franklin's Tale," and "The Merchant's Tale" mirror the pattern of seduction that occurs in each tale.

In "The Shipman's Tale," a merchant's wife contracts sex for money with a monk; this text is a garden poem because the wife successfully uses the landscape of the garden to acquire money that allows her to dress fashionably. Even though the assignation ultimately takes place in the house, it is in the family's garden that the

original seduction occurs and the financial arrangement is agreed upon. “The Franklin’s Tale” contains a pleasure garden that is made for and used by a group of friends and retainers from the noble class. Yet, rather than contributing to an erotics of control, in this narrative the rules of courtly love are destabilized because of the alluring pleasure grounds. Finally, “The Merchant’s Tale” demonstrates how Chaucer plays with and shows the dangers of a personal Garden of Eden on Earth. This fabliau sendup of a courtly romance embraces and then undermines many conventions associated with the medieval garden environment.

As the garden environment represents the farthest place on the continuum of the containment of nature that this project explores as a whole, the gardens in the three texts represent different levels of containment, which are tailored to the individual needs and purposes of control within the narrative. Comito states that, “[gardens] are not just conveniences for lovers but incitements to love, centers of a sometimes dangerous power.”¹³⁴ Chaucer exploits the “dangerous power” in these texts by subverting the romantic idea of a garden and making the garden a place of duplicity and trickery. By presenting each tale in a real and familiar landscape—a garden complete with its intrinsic issues of control and containment—Chaucer exposes characters who express similar desires to control and contain beyond the cultivated boundaries set for them by medieval society.

The Garden as Office: “The Shipman’s Tale”

The garden of “The Shipman’s Tale” is an herber that belongs to a wealthy merchant and his wife, and as such, it reflects a business-oriented relationship between

¹³⁴ Comito, *Idea*, 90.

the wife and the visiting monk, Daun John. Even though there are no details in the text about what the garden looks like or what plants are growing there, it is possible to surmise the setting for an amorous encounter. This garden is not a large *pleasance* like those found in most romances, but a simple herber. As a member of the business class, the merchant and his wife live in the town, and their garden would be hard by the house. The smallness of the garden is also implied by the fact that the wife can watch for the monk from her rooms above. The basic shape of the medieval herber resembled the shape of the religious cloister: “areas enclosed were roughly square or rectangular, or composed of rectangular sections.”¹³⁵ William Adams, in *Gardens through History*, notes the uniformity to be found in the basic design of small medieval gardens:

The planes of the medieval garden, like an open-air room, were flat and horizontal. Wells served both psychological and practical concerns. Raised plant beds, some as much as two feet above the walks, and an occasional grass bench seem to have been the only relief from the spatial monotony of the tiny plots.¹³⁶

In her descriptive text on medieval gardens, Sylvia Landsberg states that *herber*

has also come to be used more loosely for any small enclosed flower garden, and is the form of the garden which comes to mind when we think of the Madonna, or a lover, seated in “the” medieval garden, surrounded by “all sorts of flowers.” This type of garden came into its own from the twelfth century onwards in confined castle sites, where small herbers were commonly placed beneath the bedchambers of royalty and the nobility.¹³⁷

This description of an herber illustrates the perfect size and atmosphere of a garden in the late-fourteenth century for members of the rising merchant class who lived in town and not on a great estate. With the garden visible from the bedchamber, it is away from the

¹³⁵ Christopher Thacker, *The History of Gardens* (London: Croom Helm, 1979), 83.

¹³⁶ William Adams, *Gardens through History: Nature Perfected* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1991), 49.

¹³⁷ Sylvia Landsberg, *The Medieval Garden* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 16.

business end of the house, where the merchant is working on his accounts. While the merchant “up into his countour-hous gooth,” the wife can view the garden from her rooms and wait for an opportunity to be safely alone with the monk (77).¹³⁸

Several elements were featured in most gardens, whether small or large. The surrounding walls, which could be of stone or a high hedge, are the most obvious of human attempts at controlling the garden environment. Not only did the walls provide a physical demarcation of the garden boundaries—and, therefore, the domination by people of the area inside—they also “no doubt provided a kind of psychological protection from the reminders of human mortality lurking in the terror of nature” *outside* the walls.¹³⁹ The presence of this boundary separating inside from outside is a marking characteristic of a garden. The garden is a separate space from the private house or the public street and must be entered in some way. After watching from her rooms for the monk to enter the garden, the merchant’s wife does the same: “This goode wyf cam walkynge pryvely / Into the gardyn, there he walketh softe, / And hym salweth, as she hath doon ofte” (92-94). The *MED* defines *pryvely* as secretly, covertly, in secret (1.a.); in a concealed manner or state (1.b.); and stealthily, furtively, treacherously (d). These senses enhance the notion that the garden is a separate space from the house that can be entered “into” and that one can be concealed in once there.

Gardens of all sizes have features that add to the sense of privacy, which is the second garden-marking characteristic. A large *pleasance* might have hedge rows

¹³⁸ All quotations from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

¹³⁹ Adams, *Gardens through History*, 52.

delineating pathways that lead to secluded areas. An herber, however, is too small to host such features. Instead, trelliswork could screen one area from another:

Something was needed to add a touch of mystery, even secrecy, to the formal garden. That element was supplied by lattice-and-trelliswork. These structures, covered in vines and creepers and other climbing plants, introduced new pleasures: striking patterns, the play of light and shadow, the illusion, at least, that one was, for a moment, safe from prying eyes. And of course they added new surfaces for the vertical display of flowers and foliage, and so increased the richness and intricacy of the effects that could be achieved.¹⁴⁰

Between the raised beds or expanses of grass would be arbors made of wooden trellis work and covered in vines or real branches woven together in a method known as *pleaching*. Labor intensive, the arbor was an artistic endeavor as well as a practical one, as noted by Marilyn Stokstad: “These light wooden trellises as well as interlaced living branches, requiring constant maintenance, are the most ephemeral structures in garden architecture, but they were essential in the medieval pleasure garden, forming bowers and arbors offering shelter from the elements – and from prying eyes.”¹⁴¹ Fancy trellis work, called “carpenter’s work,” was a “distinctive feature of the gardens” in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.¹⁴²

The trellis and arbor, while providing privacy, are examples of artificially deployed nature: vines growing on a frame of wood or real branches forced into a lattice form providing shade or screen where there previously was none. This level of control in the cultivation of the garden plantings adds to the illusion that nature vis-à-vis the garden can be controlled. In the same way, Chaucer uses the expectation of the garden as

¹⁴⁰ Henisch, “Private Pleasures,” 162.

¹⁴¹ Marilyn Stokstad, “The Garden as Art,” in *Medieval Gardens*, ed. Elisabeth E. MacDougall (Washington, DC: Dunbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1983), 183.

¹⁴² Thacker, *History of Gardens*, 84.

controlled space to intensify the comedy of the tale that stems from the garden functioning as the wife's office. Daun John inhabits the garden space to say his morning prayers while he walks a pleasant path, yet he ends up agreeing to a sex-for-money scheme. By giving his disobedient nature free rein, the monk plays into the wife's plan to fatten her wallet.

The recognition of the garden-as-office is strengthened by the seating arrangements available in the garden. Trellises could be paired with a bench of some kind to provide seating for people to be in close proximity for speaking to one another and not be overheard. A narrow trellis, covered with plants trained to climb the lattice-work, placed behind a bench would screen the seated couple from view. The most common type of seat would be a turf bench. These could be built of wood or brick and covered with grass and flowers. Thacker states, "The depiction of [turf benches] is so frequent that there can be no doubt that the practice was widespread, even if today we might think it a damp one."¹⁴³ The turf seats offer a semblance of sitting in a flowery meadow and enhance the impression of being in a natural environment. Yet, this natural environment has been crafted and maintained by the hands of humans. The sense of privacy created by the herber's walls and screening features allows for the intimate physical contact with which the wife and the monk seal their sex-for-money pact: "For I wol brynge yow an hundred frankes.' / And with that word he caught hire by the flankes, / And hire embraceth harde, and kiste hire ofte" (201-203). The wife, who desires to appear above her station, approaches the monk for money so that she may attire herself

¹⁴³ Thacker, *History of Gardens*, 85. Howard M. Colvin, "Royal Gardens in Medieval England," in *Medieval Gardens*, ed. Elisabeth E. MacDougall (Washington, DC: Dunbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1983), 13-14.

with evermore sumptuous clothing and accoutrements. Like the garden environment itself with its set boundaries, the wife seems to be control of the situation as she successfully extracts a promise of money from the monk. But the tale shows us how little control the wife really has as the monk proceeds to borrow the promised sum from her own husband. Similar to dressing above one's station, the ability to have and maintain a garden was one way for the middle class to imitate the upper class as the arbiters of good taste and culture. That the illicit contact between the wife and the monk takes place in the garden satirizes the garden as the mark of middle class respectability. The comedic effect comes from the grasping merchant's wife acting as if she is entertaining a guest when she is really offering sex for money to buy herself more clothes.

As the garden is configured as a controlled and contained environment, the garden also controls and contains the activities that take place there. Because of the high walls and screening trellises, no one is witness to their duplicity, and the wife and the monk believe their behavior harms no one. They easily compartmentalize their encounter since it occurred in an environment that is controlled and contained. The impression of being secure in their dealings with each other generates the third marking characteristic of a garden: the notion that the garden offers an alternative reality and/or special rules that are in play only within the garden walls. Their behavior exemplifies Terry Comito's assertion that gardens are "centers of dangerous power."¹⁴⁴ As a member of a holy order, the monk is bound to a vow of celibacy; as a married woman, the wife should uphold her marriage vows to her husband. Yet, neither the monk nor the wife gives much thought to his or her moral obligations as they strike their deal in the space that substitutes for the wife's

¹⁴⁴ Comito, *Idea*, 90.

office. Traditional criticism of the exchange includes a wide range of perspectives, such as the role of the money and Chaucer's knowledge and experience of accounting practices. For some critics, to whom the tale was assigned—the Wife of Bath or the Shipman—makes all the difference in its interpretation.¹⁴⁵ This project, however, is concerned with the role that the garden plays in the deployment of the narrative and how an understanding of human failure to control nature provides some insight into the tale. In the garden landscape, the wife is the uncontrollable force of nature who adroitly manipulates the monk into doing her bidding. But, ultimately, it is the monk who shows that he cannot be controlled. By lying to the husband about both the reason for his need for borrowing the money and that he paid the money back to the wife, the monk has sex with the wife for free. While the garden itself is not the impetus for their separate transgressions, it is the garden environment that facilitates them. A fabliau is typically thought to be a genre that allows libidinous desire to run wild, as well as spoofing the rising merchant class for their aristocratic pretensions. A garden poem highlights the characters' interactions and the impetus to respond to the sensual garden setting. By thinking of “The Shipman's Tale” as a garden poem, the emphasis of the environmental genre clarifies the traits claimed by the traditional genre.

The Garden as Playground: “The Franklin's Tale”

¹⁴⁵ Even though “The Shipman's Tale” is one of the lesser studied of all the *Canterbury Tales*, there is still no shortage of research. A very small sample includes: Paul Stephen Schneider, “‘Taillynge Ynough’: The Function of Money in the ‘Shipman's Tale,’” *The Chaucer Review* 11.3 (1977): 201-209; John M. Ganim, “Double Entry in Chaucer's ‘Shipman's Tale’: Chaucer and Bookkeeping before Pacioli,” *The Chaucer Review* 30.3 (1996): 294-305; Andrew Galloway, “The Account Book and the Treasure: Gilbert Maghfeld's Textual Economy and the Poetics of Mercantile Accounting in Ricardian Literature,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 33 (2011): 65-124; William F. Woods, “A Professional Thyng: The Wife as Merchant's Apprentice in the ‘Shipman's Tale,’” *Chaucer Review* 24.2 (1989): 139-149.

“The Franklin’s Tale” is a garden poem because of the influence the garden has on the actions of the characters; without the garden, Dorigen could not have spoken her faulty promise, averting the crisis at the heart of the tale. Literary criticism of “The Franklin’s Tale” tends to focus on a couple of broad categories. One is the role of the tale as part of the “Marriage Group,” including Dorigen and her role as wife as bracketed by courtly confinements. Another is the symbolism of the garden in relation to the rest of the narrative and/or as juxtaposed to the rocky shore.¹⁴⁶ I would like to consider, instead, the material garden, the role it plays in the tale, and the views it offers us regarding reality and fantasy, nature and art. Like “The Shipman’s Tale,” the climactic action of the narrative does not take place in the garden, but it is this environment that sets the rising action into motion. Because the garden environment incites the characters to act on their inherent disobedience, they engage with each other in ways they would not outside the garden. The urge to freely express oneself (e.g., Aurelius in his declaration of love and Dorigen’s unthinking promise to Aurelius) marks this text as a garden poem.

The garden in “The Franklin’s Tale” is much more than a simple herber; accordingly, its size and configuration suggest that more is at stake than the simple money-for-sex transaction of “The Shipman’s Tale.” With more room for a wider variety of activities, such as dancing and lawn games, more people can participate in the gathering. With the presence of more people, there is increased chance of and opportunity

¹⁴⁶ John M. Fyler, [“Love and Degree in the ‘Franklin’s Tale,’” *The Chaucer Review* 21.3 (1987): 321-337] looks at marriage roles in the tale. Kathryn Jacobs [“The Marriage Contract of the ‘Franklin’s Tale:’ The Remaking of Society,” *The Chaucer Review* 20.2 (1985): 132-143] considers Arveragus’ role in particular in the action. Francine McGregor [“What of Dorigen? Agency and Ambivalence in the ‘Franklin’s Tale,’” *The Chaucer Review* 31.4 (1997): 365-378] notes how Dorigen appears to have agency in the beginning of the tale, but fades into the background as the male characters become the focus. Kenneth A. Bleeth [“The Rocks and the Garden: The Limits of Illusion in Chaucer’s ‘Franklin’s Tale,’” *English Studies* 74.2 (1993): 113-123] and Sandra J. McEntire [“Illusions and Interpretation in the ‘Franklin’s Tale,’” *The Chaucer Review* 31. 2 (1996): 145-163] both consider the rocky coast versus the garden.

for contact among participants. There is more potential for conversation, flirting, and interaction in general. As part of the landholdings of a noble family, this garden contains pleasurable sights and smells and is compared to Paradise:

This gardyn ful of leves and of floures;
And craft of mannes hand so curiously
Arrayed hadde this gardyn of swich prys
But if it were the verray paradys.
The odour of floures and the fresshe sighte
Wolde han makid any herte light
That evere was born, but if to greet siknesse
Or to greet sorwe helde it in distresse,
So ful it was of beautee with pleasaunce. (908-917)

A pleasure garden is like an herber but with more of everything and on a larger scale: more plantings, more water features, more paths, trellises, and arbors. It is easy, perhaps, to gloss over the reference to the “craft of mannes hand” as one anticipates the descriptive details, but this allusion is essential in understanding both the garden and its role in the narrative (909). This garden is different from other gardens in Chaucer’s works because of the overt acknowledgement that it is of man’s creation “so curiously / Arrayed” (909-10). Howes notes, “A large part of most comparisons of literary gardens with the earthly paradise arises from the sense that the garden grows perfectly without human intervention.”¹⁴⁷ Even the medieval patron saint of gardens, St. Fiacre, reflects the lack of human participation in the creation of a garden space. According to Henisch, St. Fiacre is “a curious choice, and an unsatisfactory role model, as the saint himself had a mind above such matters. Every waking moment of the day was spent in prayer, and it

¹⁴⁷ Howes, *Chaucer’s Gardens*, 103.

was his spade that miraculously, quite by itself, took care of all the digging.”¹⁴⁸ The garden in “The Franklin’s Tale” is “presented as a consciously created space, not one that appears to grow in such a way naturally.”¹⁴⁹ The paradox of the garden environment (i.e., an artificially created natural area) influences the plot of the tale. The garden is a created space that is meant to be enjoyed by the user. The intricate design, the showy plantings, and the refreshing water features are meant to create a sensually pleasing experience, one that soothes and relaxes. But the beautiful garden in “The Franklin’s Tale” is a site of grief and anxiety for Dorigen. An eco-theory of gardens highlights the role of the artificially created natural area, not as a reflection of the outside world of nature in its pure form, but as a place of manipulation and contrived interaction.

When thinking about Dorigen’s loss of control over her plight, it is important to remember that the medieval *pleasance* certainly could not happen naturally. These large gardens were the product of hard work and design. As Adams notes, “the evidence of gardening in medieval times is indirect and illusive.”¹⁵⁰ There were contemporary texts available that related to gardening as an activity: “garden literature available for common use amounted to very little. Gardening advancement in Europe was pretty much in the hands of practical gardeners until the sixteenth century.”¹⁵¹ These texts range from lists of necessary and preferred plants to how-to guides that describe the construction of garden features. Two influential works deserve specific mention here: the *Opus ruralium commodorum* and “The Feate of Gardening.” Both texts demonstrate an interest in and

¹⁴⁸ Henisch, “Private Pleasures,” 157.

¹⁴⁹ Howes, *Chaucer’s Gardens*, 103.

¹⁵⁰ Adams, *Gardens through History*, 50.

¹⁵¹ Adams, *Gardens through History*, 50.

explain the care of these large pleasure gardens, yet they are vastly different from each other. The former, written by an educated man for an educated audience, is a text that extols the benefits of proper care of the land on a large scale. The latter is a text written as a practical guide for the workers who would actually do the work in the garden. The existence of pleasure gardens, such as the one in “The Franklin’s Tale,” demanded the attention of both types of audiences: the educated wealthy who saw the benefits of cultivating a piece of property for pleasurable use and the gardeners who maintained those landscapes.

The *Opus ruralium commodorum* was written by an Italian jurist whose avocation was agriculture. As Pietro de Crescenzi traveled the countryside for court, he studied various techniques for improving the fertility of land for farming and gardens, such as crop rotation, the use of fertilizer, and the importance of prohibiting erosion. Crescenzi’s *Opus* was written around 1305 in Latin and was the first to “urge the cultivation of a kind of pleasure garden for the upper orders of society”¹⁵² Within less than 75 years, there were translations of this text into Italian, French, and German.¹⁵³ According to Adams, “The fame of Crescenzi’s book, [...] spread by frequent republication, helped to establish Italy’s lead in gardening for the next several hundred years. It remained the unchallenged work on the subject, and illustrated versions of it circulated widely until the sixteenth century.”¹⁵⁴ The *Opus* influenced the upper classes, like the group of friends in “The

¹⁵² Adams, *Gardens through History*, 53.

¹⁵³ Thacker, *History of Gardens*, 83. See also Lois Olsen, “Pietro de Crescenz: The Founder of Modern Agronomy,” *Agricultural History* 18.1 (1944): 35-40.

¹⁵⁴ Adams, *Gardens through History*, 52.

Franklin's Tale," in their desire to create beautifully landscaped spaces to enjoy in their leisure hours.

Part of the illusion of control in a pleasure garden comes from the way the garden just appears to occur naturally. But someone did the actual gardening, and the second text, "The Feate of Gardening," was written for the gardeners. Composed by a master gardener, probably at either Westminster or Windsor, sometime during the middle of the fourteenth century, Jon Gardener's text is a poem that covers "in brief the main aspects of garden work throughout the year. A short introduction leads to sections on Trees, Grafting, Viticulture, the Onion family, Coleworts, Parsley, Herbs generally including a long list, and a concluding section on Saffron."¹⁵⁵ Transmitted in the form of a booklet and easily memorized or carried in one's pocket, the "Feate of Gardening" provides how-to information that was lacking in other sources of the time, such as how to prepare open areas to grow only grass or how to cover wooden or wicker benches with turves. John Harvey notes the main distinction between Jon Gardener's text and other sources of horticultural information at the time: "The chief interest of Master Jon's work is that though turned into doggerel verse, its content is entirely practical and shows no sign of borrowing from authorities. In this it differs markedly from almost everything else of a comparable kind in its field."¹⁵⁶

These texts show two different approaches to gardens. The *Opus ruralium* envisions what garden spaces could look like and discusses the benefits of cultivating an area of land strictly for pleasure. "The Feate of Gardening" is a practical user's manual

¹⁵⁵ John Harvey, "The First English Garden Book: Mayster Jon Gardener's Treatise and Its Background" *Garden History* 13.2 (1985): 84.

¹⁵⁶ Harvey, "First English Garden," 83.

for how to have a successful garden space. The interactions in the garden between Dorigen and Aurelius utilize the same two types of approach. Aurelius envisions what a relationship with Dorigen would be like, and Dorigen provides Aurelius with a “how-to” guide with her rock removal scheme.

The popularity of these medieval garden texts illustrates that gardens and the act of gardening were important to medieval life, particularly in the upper levels of society, like those that Chaucer depicts in “The Franklin’s Tale.” Significantly, both the *Opus ruralium* and “The Feate of Gardening” were so well-known during the late fourteenth century that they were part of the cultural consciousness in regards to garden information. The pleasure gardens of the upper classes were the playgrounds of their day, and texts like Crescenzi’s *Opus* and Jon Gardener’s “Feate of Gardening” provided information regarding the design, contents, and care of the garden. According to Stokstad, the written word is not the only way we know what medieval gardens were like:

The visual arts also provide information on the most ephemeral elements of garden art: not only the turf benches and raised planting beds, which can be recovered by modern archaeology, but also the trellises and arbors, the clipped shrubs and trained flowers. Books of Hours and herbals illustrate contemporary gardens and garden activity in meticulous detail.¹⁵⁷

The ubiquity of all these types of texts—herbals, practical guides, detailed illustrations in prayer books, descriptive lists of plants—guaranteed that most people would have some knowledge of the material garden. Any medieval audience could easily envision the tableau and imagine the action as characters danced and flirted within the garden walls. The upper classes, for whom Chaucer wrote and who had access to his work, viewed the pleasure garden as a place for types of play and relaxation that could happen anywhere

¹⁵⁷ Stokstad, “Garden as Art,” 182.

but were enhanced by being surrounded by nature. Gardens are designed to consciously shape natural elements into how people want the natural to be. The privacy and safety afforded by the garden environment allows the illusion that not only can the user be *in* nature without being subjected to any danger, but the user also has inordinate control *over* nature. In the same way, Dorigen thinks she is in control of her interaction with Aurelius, but she loses control of the situation when she makes her rash promise. Like a planting that has escaped its delineated bed, Aurelius takes Dorigen's promise and runs with it and is emboldened by the garden atmosphere to speak his true feelings for Dorigen. His confessions of love are harmless enough within a courtly love context, but when Dorigen "in play" offers to submit to his desires, Aurelius crosses the line that circumscribes proper behavior in that same courtly context when he envisions (and ultimately demands) Dorigen's acquiescence. But, as "The Franklin's Tale" demonstrates, it is not humankind but nature that is always in control, and therefore, nature is always dangerous. Even in a garden, where recreational activities occur in a sense of play, Dorigen and Aurelius find that danger can still be present, albeit in a more rasubtle form. Kenneth Bleeth, utilizing Jaques Ehrmann's work on the concept of *play* in literature, notes, "For Chaucer, inside and outside exist in a reciprocal relation; the garden scenes ... ask us to reexamine the notion that the realm of play can be clearly distinguished from a normative reality 'outside' and to recognize that play 'cannot ... be isolated as an activity without *consequences*'."¹⁵⁸ As this applies to "The Franklin's Tale," the garden seems to be a safe place to temporarily distract oneself—or allow

¹⁵⁸Kenneth Bleeth, "Chaucerian Gardens and the Spirit of Play," in *Place, Space, and Landscape in Medieval Narrative*, ed. Laura Howes (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2007), 109. Jacques Ehrmann, "Homo Ludens Revisited," trans. Cathy and Phil Lewis, in *Game, Play, and Literature*, ed. Jacques Ehrmann (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 31-57.

oneself to be distracted—from a depressive emotional and mental state, but there are consequences in such play. Dorigen allows herself to be distracted from her husband's absence by a young man who ultimately demands more from her than she is willing to give. In the heady, sensuous atmosphere of the garden, Dorigen rashly promises to take Aurelius as a lover—if he can do what it takes to guarantee her husband's safe arrival home—never expecting Aurelius to hold her to the bargain.

Overall, the pleasure garden in the “The Franklin's Tale” signifies different things to different characters. For Dorigen, the garden is a place to seek respite from her heartache over the long absence of her husband Arveragus, who is off to war. For the group at large, the garden is a place for flirtation and love games overseen by the lady of the castle. As Adams explains, “the chatelaine might appear to turn her garden into a smart salon, a drawing room where friends could explore new emotional relationships while being entertained by polite flirtation, music, conversation and displays of chivalry.”¹⁵⁹ For Aurelius, a squire in Arveragus's court, the garden provides opportunity to spend time in Dorigen's presence as part of the larger group, for he is a “servant to Venus” and honors Dorigen according to courtly love conventions (937). For all involved, the material garden offers a space that is separate from the outside world both in place and in atmosphere. The pleasure garden with its artfully created spaces of natural beauty offers a fantasy of escape where the concerns of everyday life are held at bay. By enabling such an escape, the garden enhances the feeling of control in the user.

¹⁵⁹ Adams, *Gardens through History*, 56.

Unlike the small herber of “The Shipman’s Tale,” the medieval pleasure garden, as described in “The Franklin’s Tale,” was not right up against the dwelling walls: “large medieval pleasure grounds often existed at some distance from the manor house, so that part of the appeal of medieval pleasure grounds was derived from the effort involved in traveling to them.”¹⁶⁰ When Dorigen experiences increased distress about her husband’s safe return because of the presence of the “grisly rokkes blake” along the Brittany coast, her friends “leden hire by ryveres and by welles” to a large pleasure garden (859, 898). The journey *to* the pleasure garden and *into* the pleasant atmosphere of colors and aromas puts literal and figurative distance between Dorigen and the source of her heartache, the dangerous rocky coast. The revelers make their “ordinaunce / Of vitaille and of oother purveiaunce” to maximize their fun and spend the whole day in the garden where they “dauncen and they pleyen at ches and tables” (903, 900). This outing demonstrates the garden’s ability to blur the lines between outside and inside and allows the picnickers to have the comforts of inside the castle, dining and entertainment, in the well-tended and safe environment of the garden, a place where the user can enjoy nature on his or her own terms.

Responding to the escapist environment of the garden, Aurelius seizes the opportunity to tell Dorigen about his long-hidden feelings, thereby creating a relationship on his terms between the two:

“Madame, reweth upon my peynes smerte;
 For with a word ye may me sleen or save.
 Heere at youre feet God wolde that I were grave!
 I ne have as now no leyser moore to seye;
 Have mercy, sweete, or ye wol do me deye!” (974-978)

¹⁶⁰ Howes, *Chaucer’s Gardens*, 5.

Howes states, “That the squire approaches Dorigen in the garden underscores our sense that the garden is designed and intended for love-games. That she acknowledges his presence and speaks with him makes her a willing participant in the game of courtesy.”¹⁶¹ While this statement is true on one level, that gardens are made for “love-games,” an eco-theory of genre furnishes a further understanding of this concept. The garden, composed of natural items but arranged in a man-made space, is a constructed environment that exhibits the tension that exists when humans attempt to control nature. When Aurelius embraces the opportunity to escape his lovesickness and acts on his impulse to approach Dorigen, his attempt to create a relationship between them sets off a chain of events that reaches beyond the garden walls. The chaos that ensues affects others, including Dorigen and her husband Arveragus.

Contrary to courtly custom, Aurelius wants to be Dorigen’s lover in fact as well as sense, and at first, Dorigen claims that “Ne shal I nevere been untrewē wyf” (984). But the environment of the garden, with its disobedient nature, encourages Dorigen to reconsider and embrace the disobedient aspects of her own nature. She tells Aurelius “in pley”:

Yet wolde I graunte yow to been youre love,
 Syn I yow se so pitously complayne.
 Looke what day that endelong Britayne
 Ye remove alle the rokkes, stoon by stoon,
 That they ne lette ship ne boot to goon –
 I seye, whan ye han maad the coost so clene
 Of rokkes that ther nys no stoon ysene,
 Thanne wol I love yow best of any man;
 Have heer my trouthe, in al that evere I kan. (990-98)

¹⁶¹ Howes, *Chaucer’s Gardens*, 104.

For Howes, the garden is about roles to play: “Thus the pleasure park that reminds her of her absent husband becomes also the site of a second suitor’s advance, and as such represents the conflicting roles Dorigen is called upon to perform in the tale: dutiful wife and unescorted courtly lady.”¹⁶² But the garden, with its sensory pleasures, privacy, and remove from reality, is much more than a representation of “conflicting roles.” It is an active participant in the narrative with a dangerous capacity to make people disobedient in resemblance to their surroundings. For Dorigen, who genuinely misses her husband, the garden is and should be a place of respite from her heartache. The garden environment offers evidence of how people can control nature if they so desire. If a person can create a virtual paradise where there was not one before (e.g., the pleasure garden), then why can he not remove the rocks from the coast? In a moment of “pley,” an acknowledgement of the potentiality that people can control nature, she surrenders to her natural nature, with its proclivity for disobedience, and promises Aurelius all he desires.

Bleeth states:

It is not surprising that critics have understood Dorigen’s vow as expressing simultaneously two impossible and incompatible desires. The first . . . is that the rocks that threaten her husband’s return might miraculously disappear. The second is the wish to take a lover, a forbidden fantasy that may be indulged (and perhaps defused) only within the garden’s “magic circle” of imaginative play.¹⁶³

The garden, however, is more than just the place where one can participate in a “‘magic circle’ of imaginative play.” Ecocriticism explains just how the “magic circle” works: the natural elements of the material surroundings influence the characters’ reactions to and interactions with each other. Because the garden is made up of artificially placed natural

¹⁶² Howes, *Chaucer’s Gardens*, 105.

¹⁶³ Bleeth, “Chaucerian Gardens,” 114.

features, the effect is one that encourages the inhabitants of the space to believe they have control over their surroundings. For Dorigen, this allows her to entertain the notion that the rocks can be removed without considering the cost of making that happen—taking Auerlius as a lover. By making her glib promise to Auerlius “in pley,” Dorigen embraces the disobedient nature in her own being and sets herself on a dangerous course.

An ecocritical reading of the pleasure garden in “The Franklin’s Tale” also reflects the artificial nature of the relationship between Dorigen and Aurelius. Dorigen does not take Aurelius seriously because the garden is a place of flattering discourse and shallow pursuits. As a married woman of noble birth, she is all too familiar with courtly love games. A pleasure garden is a place for respite and fun; serious conversations are checked at the gate. In his essay “Rocky Shores and Pleasure Gardens,” V.A. Kolve explains the source of this artificial, and therefore potentially insincere, environment:

The standard medieval pleasure garden [. . .] is characteristically a place of *artificial* beauty, set apart from the real world by garden walls, entered by a narrow gate, and ruled by geometry – however natural the trees and grasses and flowers in formal beds within those walls. Little is untouched, untrained, or untutored in this world. Here, love talk and witty conversation replace earnest discourse, music and song often replace speech, and dance makes an art of motion.¹⁶⁴

Aurelius, too, is incited by the garden environment and engages in behavior that goes beyond the courteous norm. After hiring a magician to make the rocks disappear, Aurelius demands that Dorigen fulfill her promise to “love yow best of any man” (997). Because he is able to artificially (through magic) shape natural elements (the coastline of Brittany), Aurelius believes that he can control any nature, including Dorigen’s. It is from the environment of the garden that he derives this notion of control and why he wants to

¹⁶⁴ V. A. Kolve, *Telling Images: Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative II* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 171.

consummate their arrangement there. Bleeth notes: “When he confronts Dorigen to claim his reward for making the rocks vanish, Aurelius invokes the garden both as a reminder of and the place for the fulfillment of her promise: ‘in a gardyn yond, at swich a place / Ye woot right wel what ye behighten me’ (V [F]. 1326-27).”¹⁶⁵ The pleasurable garden atmosphere—the nobles’ playground—convinces Aurelius that a dance and brief conversation are evidence of a mutual attraction. Because he is in a garden, Aurelius is able to envision a love affair where there is none.

The garden creates a pleasant atmosphere that encourages the user to be more free of social constraints. Dorigen learns that not only does the garden environment provide merely illusory escape from one’s cares, but it also can incite one to act in ways she might not when outside the garden walls. The walls are there to keep the inside world of the garden in just as much as they keep the outside world out, and Dorigen fails by speaking her mind to a young man who is not able to separate the escape of the garden from the real world outside. Aurelius learns that courtly love games have everything to do with time and place. The natural components of the garden conceal the artificiality of the space itself, and the users need to be aware of that artificiality. When Dorigen answers him “in pley,” Aurelius should recognize her response as one that is tied to a certain place and time—the garden on a particular afternoon. That Aurelius holds Dorigen to her rash promise once they are outside the garden walls is evidence that he neither recognizes the garden boundaries nor understands the rules of the courtly love games in which he engages. Like a plant that overflows its container, Aurelius lets his true nature dominate the artificial construct of chivalry.

¹⁶⁵ Bleeth, “Chaucerian Gardens,” 114.

If Aurelius fails by carrying the inside world of the garden out into the real world, Dorigen's husband Arveragus fails just as well by doing the opposite. Insisting that Dorigen keep her promise to Aurelius, Arveragus imposes his idea of real-world integrity upon the garden: ““For verray love which that I to yow have, / But if ye sholde youre trouthe kepe and save. / Trouthe is the hyeste thing that man may kepe”” (1477-79). A pleasure garden is composed of natural elements, but the presence of those elements does not keep the garden from being an artificial space. When confronted with a space that appears natural but is utterly artificial and where the focus is on distraction from the cares of the world, as Dorigen is, there is no room for truth as Arveragus lives it. Arveragus only seems to know the truth in the real world outside the garden walls.

At the end of his tale, the Franklin asks, ““Which was the mooste fre, as thynketh yow?”” (1622). The better question from an eco-theory of genre would be: Who understood the garden environment the most? The answer, of course, is Dorigen. It is Dorigen who fully comprehends the purpose of the garden and the context it presents regarding interactions between its users. She recognizes Aurelius' attention as an artificial construct which, like the garden environment itself, should cease to exist when faced with the real world outside the garden walls.

The Garden as Personal Eden: “The Merchant's Tale”

“The Merchant's Tale” is a garden poem because the garden in the tale thwarts the plans of its creator to have a paradise of his own. Like “The Franklin's Tale,” “The Merchant's Tale” is considered part of the Marriage Group in the *Canterbury Tales*, and most analyses of this tale emphasize the gender and/or socio-political dynamics of a

marriage between an old man and a beautiful, much younger woman. An eco-theory of genre regarding the tale, however, presents an opportunity for a more elemental view, one that is more fundamental than either the traditional husband versus wife narrative or a feminist critique. An ecocritical perspective considers the material in an ecologic setting, the basic matter that makes up all natural things and its function in the natural world. On one level: how do the individual systems operate within the larger ecosystem? On another level: how do the systems interact with each other? “The Merchant’s Tale” depicts the dangers inherent both in trying to copy nature too closely and in attempting to create a prelapsarian garden in a postlapsarian world.

Unlike the other two gardens discussed in this chapter, the garden in “The Merchant’s Tale” is front and center as the setting for the climactic action. An examination of the tale’s luxurious garden alongside real medieval garden spaces provides a bridge between the material and the imaginary. Though the tale itself is a work of fiction, it takes place in a landscape that is very real in terms of its natural constituents and arrangement. Even if the medieval audience had never experienced a pleasure garden as elaborate as the one in the tale, they were very familiar with both the purposes and workings of a decorative garden. Most of the events in the tale are believable mainly because the space in which they occur is believable. The exception to this, of course, is the appearance in the garden of Pluto and his entourage. At the same time, the very presence of these mythical figures imposes the idea that this garden is a paradise-like environment. The material marking characteristics of this garden poem highlight the old man as not only a laughable *senex amans*, but also as the subject of a cautionary tale about a man who tries to control nature and create his own paradise on Earth.

In essence, the elaborate pleasure garden facilitates the old knight's ridiculous fantasies of control—both of himself and others. January has been successful in his life and “His housynge, his array, as honestly / To his degree was maked as a kynges” (2026-27). The garden reflects his wealth and status and plays the role of *paradisus voluptus*, a simulacrum of the Garden of Eden:

He made a gardyn, walled al with stoon;
So fair a gardyn woot I nowher noon.
For, out of doute, I verraily suppose
That he that wroot the Romance of the Rose
Ne koude of it the beautee wel devyse;
Ne Priapus ne myghte nay suffise,
Though he be god of gardyns, for to telle
The beautee of the gardyn and the welle
That stood under a laurer alwey grene. (2029-37)

And where the garden in “The Franklin's Tale” is a standard pleasure garden that is a gathering spot for a large group of friends and retainers, the garden in “The Merchant's Tale” is strictly for the owner's private enjoyment: “In somer seson, thider wolde he go, / And May his wyf, and no wight but they two” (2049-50). The mention of the ancient Greek fertility god Priapus in the description of the garden underscores both the use of the garden space for sexual liaisons and the aid that being in the garden gives a man in those pursuits. As an elaborate garden designed for the pleasure and use of only two people, January's garden is particularly extravagant and reminiscent of Everswell, the garden Henry II had built for his mistress Rosamund Clifford in the second half of the twelfth century near Woodstock in Oxfordshire. A pleasure garden about which there are more legends than facts, Everswell looms large as an example of a trysting place for lovers. Colvin sees a close connection between the layout of Everswell and the garden in Thomas of Britain's version of *Tristan*:

Everswell, in fact, provided the complete *mise-en-scène* of the poetic episode: the enclosed orchard; the spring with the stream flowing first into an artificial pool and then into a narrow channel; and the chamber or “bower”; and finally the lovers, in the persons of Henry and Rosamund. How far the place was intended to be a deliberate evocation of the poem, or the poem of the place, must be a matter for conjecture, but if the two were in some way related, it would help make sense of the most puzzling and intriguing of the royal gardens of medieval England.¹⁶⁶

The real gardens of medieval royal and noble houses were magnificent expressions of the owners’ capacity to spend money on frivolous expenditures, as a pleasure garden is purely decorative. The text states that January “lyved in greet prosperitee” and had the funds to maintain a large house, servants, and retainers (1247). A pleasure garden not only allowed the owner to display his wealth, but also to demonstrate his ability to control nature, thereby fashioning his image in the community via his power and wealth. Howes states:

To harvest the fruitfulness of the earth is one thing; to paint, as it were, a picture of one’s wealth and power with the trees, grasses, rivers, rocks, and flowers of nature is to project an image of one’s position in society onto the land. Enjoying that image, then, approximates gazing into a mirror, but it is a mirror that illuminates for us how we want to be seen.¹⁶⁷

January is able to enjoy the benefits that come along with his status as a sixty-year-old knight, and his embracing of the trappings of the nobility speaks to his superficial and materialistic tendencies that come to light in his reasons for marrying and his decision to marry late in age.

Much of what little is known about the pleasure gardens of the nobility comes from financial records. According to Colvin, “any major expenditure on gardens was accounted for by the clerks who supervised the royal works. It is chiefly from their

¹⁶⁶ Colvin, “Royal Gardens,” 20. See also, McLean, *Medieval English Gardens*, 101.

¹⁶⁷ Howes, *Chaucer’s Gardens*, 1.

accounts, preserved among the records of the Exchequer in the Public Records Office in London, that we know what we do about the royal gardens of medieval England.”¹⁶⁸

From these records, it is possible to glean not only the money spent on the species of plants used to populate the garden space, but also a general picture of the scale of the horticulture industry that supported the building, planting, and upkeep of these noble gardens. For example, the rolls show that, towards the end of his long reign, in 1264

Henry III

ordered 100 pear saplings to be planted in the Everswell garden, and they had been bought and set by 1268. Two things are significant: the number of trees shows that Everswell had a large area devoted primarily to the spectacular effect of pear-trees in bloom and later in fruit; and that there was, probably at Oxford, a local nurseryman able to fill such an order for bought trees.¹⁶⁹

While several factors combined to produce the legacy that we know as the great English garden, it is impossible to overstate the importance of two components: the gardeners themselves and the climate. The first had the specialty knowledge required to design and maintain these large pleasure grounds, and the second allowed for a more hospitable environment which in turn permitted the growing of plants generally no longer seen in England in modern times. Close consideration of these factors enables an understanding of this ecocritical theory of genre, which is not just about landscape but how the landscape can bridge the material and the imaginary. For January in “The Merchant’s Tale,” his garden began as an imagining that became real through design and cultivation, two activities that produce real results, results with which the medieval audience would have been intimately familiar: the pleasure gardens of the nobility.

¹⁶⁸ Colvin, “Royal Gardens,” 12.

¹⁶⁹ Harvey, *Medieval Gardens*, 80.

Because it takes the material world into account, even in imaginary situations, ecocriticism facilitates a new and vibrant view of the texts themselves.

Like the plants they worked with, many of the early gardeners were imported from other countries. Colvin sees a correlation between foreign-born queens and the presence of foreign-born gardeners who oversaw the pleasure grounds. Of the twenty-two queens who reigned between 1066 and 1485, only five were native to Britain: “Nine came from northern France or Flanders, four from Aquitaine or Provence, three from Castile or Narvarre, one from Bohemia. Their taste in gardens must have been even more cosmopolitan than their husbands’.”¹⁷⁰ Again, the Exchequer rolls provide evidence as they list many gardeners as “from abroad.”¹⁷¹ It is easy to imagine a queen, as she starts her new life in a strange place, wanting many reminders of her home country that she will probably never see again, and a gardener familiar with the plants of her home would be a welcome addition to her staff.

During the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries, Britain experienced a warming climate, currently referred to as the Medieval Warming Trend, and evidence exists in a variety of sources as to the plants grown during that time.¹⁷² For example, Colvin notes that, “In the twelfth century vines grew freely in southern England, and men could pick grapes in what are now the streets of Bloomsbury.”¹⁷³ While there is still much speculation in the scientific community as to the extent and degree of this period,

¹⁷⁰ Colvin, “Royal Gardens,” 9.

¹⁷¹ Colvin, “Royal Gardens,” 9.

¹⁷² Thomas J. Crowley and Thomas S. Lowery, “How Warm Was the Medieval Warm Period?” *AMBIO: A Journal of the Human Environment* 29.1 (2000), 51-54.

¹⁷³ Colvin, “Royal Gardens,” 10.

“there does seem to be general agreement that in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries [particularly] England enjoyed a climate that approximated more closely to that of continental Europe as a whole than it does now.”¹⁷⁴ Given both the hospitable climate conditions and the expertise of gardeners accustomed to working with such conditions, it is not surprising that noble medieval gardens could attain a paradise-like standard. And it is his own personal Eden that January attempts to create and control in “The Merchant’s Tale,” but the disobedient materiality of the natural elements—including his own wife—always gets the upper hand.

To this point, even when a garden is planted under perfect conditions, the plants do not always grow as expected. Seeds can fail to germinate; cuttings can fail to flourish; less-than-ideal weather conditions can occur. As a fabliau, the form of “The Merchant’s Tale” reflects this incongruity. Instead of truly romantic encounters in the garden by a hero and his beloved, the tale highlights how January’s expenditure of resources in creating his own Eden are for nought because May uses the garden for her own ends. Regarding “The Merchant’s Tale,” Derek Pearsall states: “The garden of love here is an ocean for derision, which throws the more clearly into relief the delicacy and complexity of its more traditional significances. The message is not, by any stretch of the imagination, or by any stretch of whatever faculty it is that elicits messages from poetry, the same.”¹⁷⁵ As a sendup of a courtly romance, “The Merchant’s Tale” mirrors the unpredictability of a garden environment: January created and cultivated what he thought

¹⁷⁴ Colvin, “Royal Gardens,” 10.

¹⁷⁵ Derek Pearsall, “Gardens as Symbol and Setting,” in *Medieval Gardens*, ed. Elisabeth E. MacDougall (Washington, DC: Dunbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1983), 246.

was the perfect place for sex with his wife, but instead, the garden becomes the perfect place for May to have sex with her lover.

January's mindset toward marriage speaks to his overall desire for control over nature that eventually is his downfall, because he imagines a wife to be less of a partner and more of a controllable object with no will or desires of its own. For him, the ideal wife will never argue with her husband and will eagerly acquiesce to any demand: "'Do this,' seith he; 'Al redy, sire,' seith she" (1346). If January desires to collect his marriage debt out-of-doors, then his wife will surely agree. In the same way that he controls what grows in his pleasure garden, January believes that he can control his future wife. He also believes that by marrying, he will be able to fulfill his sexual cravings in a Church-sanctioned union: "That I shall lead now so merry a life, / So pleasing, without worry and strife, / That I shall have my heaven in earth here" (1645-47). January's image of marriage as "heaven on earth" perfectly reflects the notion of a garden as a paradise on earth. The pleasure garden is more than a symbol for May's body: it is the material manifestation of January's desire to exert control over nature generally and over May specifically. January's choice of bride is based on a list of superficial attributes:

Hir fresshe beautee and hir age tender,
Hir myddel small, hire armes longe and sklendre,
Hir wise governaunce, hir gentillesse,
Hir womanly berynge, and hire sadnesse. (1601-04)

The fact that May is of "smal degree" enables him to use his wealth and status to procure her as a wife "by sly and wys treetee" (1625, 1692). As Howes notes, May "has somehow been sold or traded into matrimony with the wealthy landowner."¹⁷⁶ January's (mis)construction of how a wife should be is echoed in his approach to the construction

¹⁷⁶ Howes, *Chaucer's Gardens*, 99.

of the garden, and, like his garden, January hopes to cultivate May for his pleasure.

January's garden is such a delightful and pleasant space that the god of the underworld and his retinue come to play there:

Ful ofte tyme he Pluto and his queene,
Proserpina, and al hire fayerye,
Disporten hem and maken melodye
Aboute that welle, and daunced, as men tolde. (2038-41)

By introducing the mythical elements into the tale, we understand that this garden is so perfect and Eden-like that gods "ofte tyme" seek it out. Because January created this paradise, he must, ostensibly, control it. By the same token, January wants everything about his new bride to be as he imagines nature to be: perfect and controllable. Because she was purchased and brought to his household, May is no different than the plants grown in January's pleasure ground.

The text specifies that January "made" the garden (2029), promoting him to creator status, although it is doubtful that he did the actual manual labor. In the metaphorical realm, Howes sees similarities between planting a garden and writing poetry:

They both require the manipulation of things that already exist (words and plants), and they both entail formal arrangement of these things into patterns (poems and gardens). This and other metaphorical uses of gardens demonstrate the applicability of gardening as an image for other human activities. The effort to organize, arrange, and control nature can represent metaphorically the efforts of men and women to organize, arrange and control other forces that may seem natural, such as love or dreams.¹⁷⁷

An eco-theory of genre goes beyond the metaphorical and anchors the human actions of organizing, arranging, and controlling to the material world. All natural things have their own ways of existence. Animals mate and bear young; plants bud, bloom, and go to seed.

¹⁷⁷ Howes, *Chaucer's Gardens*, 6.

These processes have a schedule that is dictated by both inherent genetics and the environmental conditions of the habitat (food, water, shelter, space, and the arrangement of these). Humans can certainly influence nature, but they cannot determine it.

Reminiscent of his self-interested reasons for marriage, January creates the paradisaal garden environment for his own sexual gratification: “And thynges whiche that were nat doon abedde, / He in the gardyn parfourned hem and spedd” (2051-52). The marking characteristic of a separate, private, walled space assists January with his sexual performance. Howes states that “The garden’s stated purpose – to protect the couple’s privacy during summer lovemaking (IV. 2048-49) – masks only temporarily its function as an aphrodisiac for the old man, for January appears capable of several sexual acts in the garden that he cannot perform in the bedroom.”¹⁷⁸ From an ecocritical standpoint, January’s enhanced sexual exploits are nothing more than the expected inclinations of a body with a disobedient nature. When placed in a garden that is made up of such beautiful natural (and, therefore, disobedient) components, it is no wonder that even January’s aged body responds the way that it does. The medieval Church had strict proscriptions as to when and where married couples could have sex because the act itself was for procreation and not enjoyment. By creating a private space in which to enjoy the pleasures of his wife, January is being very disobedient indeed.¹⁷⁹ January summons May to the garden with “Com forth, and lat us taken oure disport; / I chees thee for my wyf and my comfort” (2147-48). While he corrupts the intent of the Song of Songs, which

¹⁷⁸ Howes, *Chaucer’s Gardens*, 1-2.

¹⁷⁹ See James A. Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990). This work also contains a handy flow chart created by Brundage that outlines the possible days of the year on which sex was legal.

treats the consummation of marital love as a sacred and holy endeavor, January naturally responds to the call of the garden with abandon.

Howes continues, “The garden, it appears, links January’s sense of himself as a man of worth to his sexual arousal and satisfaction. When performing sex in the garden he seems to draw not only on the energy of nature but also in the power generated by his own inflated, reflected image.”¹⁸⁰ When viewed ecocritically, the link between January’s self-perception (vis-à-vis his socio-economic status) and his ability to sexually perform is strengthened. The luxurious and fecund garden is one manifestation of January’s wealth and status, and it encourages his persona of the still-virile knight. Yet, the closer and more accurately the garden can mimic a naturally lush setting, the more the components within the garden embrace their inherent disobedience. In other words, the more natural the garden appears in its design and plantings, the more likely the users of the space will yield to their disobedient natures. For January, this means that the extravagant pleasure garden incites him to heights of sexual aptitude that he could never achieve indoors.

The private space within the garden allows for another marking characteristic, a sense of security, which only adds to the sense of control. Not only is January’s garden walled with stone, it also has but one gate by which to access the pleasure ground. He will “no wight suffren bere the keye / Save he himself; for of the smale wyket / He baar alwey of silver a clyket” (2044-46). By controlling the access to the garden environment, January believes he can control the environment itself, as well as all the components in it, including May. However, his one key policy is only as secure as the access to the one key. It is no surprise, then, when her natural sexual desires take over, that May copies the

¹⁸⁰ Howes, *Chaucer’s Gardens*, 2.

key for her lover Damian and makes arrangements with him for an assignation in the garden proving that January's control of the garden space and May is only illusory. Marilyn Stokstad comments in a general way on the nexus of nature and human creativity in a garden when she states, "The powerful expressive effect of a great garden derives from the implied effort to order both nature and human activity; among the fine arts the garden alone combines the creative powers of nature with the creativity of human beings."¹⁸¹ But, when viewed through an ecocritical lens, Stokstad's statement becomes a commentary in a more particular sense on January, May, and the garden together. The garden in "The Merchant's Tale" lies at the intersection of "the creative power of nature" and "the creativity of human beings." Because he created the garden, by way of his gardener(s), January thinks that he controls not only the garden itself, but also the power or energy that creates the "expressive effect" of the garden.

Even though January considers May to be his own in body and mind, ecocriticism recognizes that only May has control of her power and energy that stem from her natural materiality. Laura Howes performs a gendered critique of May: "Until the wedding night, [May] is an idealized, beautiful, young woman either imagined or seen from a distance. But as soon as the matrimonial bonds are finalized and the two are left together in bed, we discover that May has desires, likes, and dislikes of her own."¹⁸² If May is read as a component of the garden, cultivated and placed there by January's artificial machinations (i.e., the wedding contract as opposed to some mutual attraction), then it is not surprising when, like a plant, she grows out of control. She is suffocated by January's ministrations

¹⁸¹ Stokstad, "Garden as Art," 177.

¹⁸² Howes, *Chaucer's Gardens*, 96.

and responds positively to Damian's attention. Like a sunflower turning to follow the sun, May acts on her youthful nature and its penchant for disobedience when the occasion presents itself. When January is struck blind and will not allow May to be out of his reach for an instant, the two young lovers creatively decide to consummate their affair in the garden. By meeting Damian in the garden, May actively embraces her disobedient nature and steps outside the proscribed role of dutiful wife as envisioned by January. May acts on her natural desires and subverts the garden (and life) that January has so carefully cultivated. For Adams, May is fulfilling her desire for romantic love:

The conditions for romantic love included voluntary choice, a concern for personal values, mutual response, and an absence of compulsion on the part of either party. The more autonomous and independent the choice of the beloved, the higher it stood in the scale of values. In order to encourage all of these ideals, a neutral setting free of confining traditions and associations had to be found, and the idealized garden composed of *nature's purest elements* seemed the inevitable trysting place.¹⁸³

Although Damian's wooing of May is less than desirable, it is exponentially more than she received from January. By meeting Damian in the garden, May frees herself from the constraints of wifely devotion, surrounds herself with "nature's purest elements," and gives in to her desires. She silently encourages Damian to climb into a pear tree and then tells January that she is craving pears. In the ultimate subversion, May stands on January's back to reach the limb where Damian awaits her. To Howes, May's act is about space and what each person's purpose in that space can mean:

[May's] subversion of the paradisaal matrimonial spot into a trysting place for her and her young lover Damian demonstrates the great malleability of inhabited space, which is, after all, never entirely our own. For an individual to see in the built landscape not a mirror image of herself as she would like to be but an image of herself in thrall to another – as May is to January – can lead to subversive use

¹⁸³ Adams, *Gardens through History*, 55, my emphasis.

of that space, to a way of commenting – by means of actions in the space – on the projected image that has denigrated her.¹⁸⁴

Ecocriticism takes us not beyond Howes, but to a place based on a more primal understanding and need. Ecofeminist critic Stacy Alaimo refers to nature as “undomesticated both in the sense that it figures as a space apart from the domestic and in the sense that it is untamed and thus serves as a model for female insurgency.”¹⁸⁵ Yes, May wants to subvert the “projected image that has denigrated her,” but the ecocritical view claims that even before the desire to subvert must come the desire to do what comes naturally as a creature made of disobedient matter. May, a woman in the prime of her life sexually, responds to the power and energy present in the garden. For May and Damyan to be attracted to each other is the most natural thing in the world: both are young and virile in their appetites and capabilities. It is expected that the two young lovers will consummate their affair when placed in an environment that imitates nature at its best and urges disobedience within its very matter. January, who acquiesces to May’s tale of why she is “struggling” in the tree with Damyan (2372ff), finds it easier to accept the dominance of nature than to argue against it.

Referring to the poem *The Roman de la Rose*, critic Kenneth Bleeth considers the word *play* and its uses:

The narrator’s favored word for characterizing life in the garden, [*play*] denotes a variety of activities—walking about, singing, dancing, making love—that have as their single goal the fulfillment of personal pleasure. As students of the subject

¹⁸⁴ Howes, *Chaucer’s Gardens*, 2.

¹⁸⁵ Stacy Alaimo, *Undomesticated Ground* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 16. See also, Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1993) and Rosi Braidotti, *Patterns of Dissonance: A Study of Women in Contemporary Philosophy*, trans. Elizabeth Guild (New York: Routledge, 1991). These critics stress the *feminism* in the field of ecofeminism. The current project, instead, focuses on the ecological and material.

have observed, play takes place within carefully prescribed limits of time and space [...] from which threatening realities are excluded and within which illicit or impossible desires may be fulfilled.¹⁸⁶

Bleeth's statement holds true for the texts examined in this chapter. The word *play* appears with some regularity in all three texts: nine times in "The Shipman's Tale," six times in "The Franklin's Tale," and seven times in "The Merchant's Tale." The gardens in the texts are used as spaces where "illicit or impossible desires" are at least articulated, if not fulfilled, and with its enclosing stone walls or thick hedges, the garden landscape provides the ideal place for the "fulfillment of personal pleasure." Without delineating walls to hold back the outside world and to shield from prying eyes, the decorative garden would not be the same in its appearance nor in its function. Lynn Staley traces the importance of this sense of enclosed separation when she states: "The key concept attached to England's language of place is enclosure, the island enclosed by the sea, the garden enclosed by its wall, the bride enclosed by her chastity, the nation protected by its ecclesiastical foundations or its kings, a concept fraught with anxieties of violation or of isolation."¹⁸⁷ Staley's statement considers the act and method of enclosure and recognizes both the significance of the sense of enclosure and the accompanying fears should that enclosure be breached. But an eco-theory of genre is concerned with the materiality of the components themselves: not the wall, but the stones that make up the wall; not the garden, but the plants cultivated there.

Although these three tales have been interpreted through a variety of lenses, an ecocritical reading of the garden episodes based on the inherent disobedient materiality that

¹⁸⁶ Bleeth, "Chaucerian Gardens," 107.

¹⁸⁷ Lynn Staley, *The Island Garden: England's Language of Nation from Gildas to Marvell* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame, 2012), 3.

comprises the landscape contributes to a larger conversation, a conversation that encompasses literature, ecology, history, and art. An eco-theory regarding these texts shows that it is possible to bridge the imaginary and the material. The gardens in “The Shipman’s Tale,” “The Franklin’s Tale,” and “The Merchant’s Tale” are meant to be places of respite, enjoyment, and play. These imaginary gardens allow the characters to experience nature in what they think will be a safe and secure way. Real gardens in the Middle Ages were meant to be the same. Teresa McLean states:

The more the wilds and the woods were confronted and tamed, which they were in fact and in romance from the twelfth century onwards, the more important walled gardens became. The womb-like sheltering quality of flowery meadows and groves diminished when the wilderness around them was diminished. In a dark forest, a meadow ranked as a sanctuary; in a flowery meadow or a pleasant wood, only a walled garden ranked as one.¹⁸⁸

More importantly, as far as an eco-theory of gardens is concerned, the walled decorative gardens of the Middle Ages signified human kind’s best attempt to control and contain nature, whether the space was a simple herber or an elaborate pleasure garden. What each tale shows us, however, is that no matter how beautiful or secure a garden, nature, because of its inherent disobedience, can neither be controlled nor contained.

¹⁸⁸ McLean, *Medieval English Gardens*, 124.

CHAPTER 5

ONTO THE PAGE AND BACK INTO THE WILDERNESS

As a whole, this dissertation project puts forth and argues for a new theory of genre for literary texts, one that is based on ecological concepts. Instead of categorizing texts based on content, origin, theme, and the like, the eco-theory of genre allows for a greater understanding of Middle English literature via recognition of the concrete materiality of the setting and considers a way that medieval people negotiated the divide between both the philosophical construct and the lived experience of the natural world. If we think that there is a distinction between imagined and concrete manifestations of different landscapes, the organic, vegetal, and animal illustrations in medieval manuscripts suggest otherwise. Indeed, I argue that the same negotiation between imagined and lived environments is evident in the illustrations on the pages of medieval manuscripts, which contain clever and vivid depictions of people's awareness of and negotiation with the natural world.

Over all, this project considers texts containing fictional narratives. In this, the concluding chapter, I turn my attention to medieval manuscript illustrations and examine them through an ecocritical lens. What can these illustrations from manuscripts tell us about how medieval people viewed and negotiated the natural world? I claim it is possible to see images on the page as the final place on the continuum of containment and control of nature that is discussed in the previous chapters of this dissertation. It is not my aim to categorize the illustrations as wilderness, forest, or garden images. Rather, I argue

that these images mimic the environmental imaginary of the wilderness, the management of forest, and the natural art of the garden. Eco-theory offers an interpretation of these illustrations that addresses the same concerns about humankind's place in the natural world as seen in the earlier chapters of this project. How do medieval people reconcile the good and bountiful side of nature against the bad and dangerous aspects? An ecocritical reading of some illustrations shows an expressed anxiety that highlights a lack of control over nature, even though logic dictates that an artist has control over what he draws.

In Chapter One, I claim that the poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, traditionally considered a romance, is both a wilderness and a forest poem according to the eco-theory of genre. How does the *Gawain*-poet hold both environments in check at once? First, the descriptions of both environments are so detailed as to make out the marking characteristics of each environment. Second, the environmental settings are enhanced by other aspects of the text that also display the duality of the wilderness and the forest. For example, the physical appearance of the Green Knight when he arrives at Arthur's court incorporates both the wild and the controlled. He is richly arrayed in a coat, high hose, and a furred mantle all in green, yet "scholes vnder schankes" (160). He wears "no helme ne hawbergh nauþer / Ne no pysan ne no plate þat pented to arnes / Ne no schafte ne no schelde to schwue ne to smyte" (203-05). However, "in his on honed he hade a holyn bobbe / . . . / And an ax in his oper" (206-08), leaving Arthur's court to wonder if the strange green man, who is a weird melding of beauty and danger, control and wildness, has come in peace or for a more sinister reason.

In Fitt IV, Sir Gawain rides out to meet his fate with the Green Knight at the Green Chapel. The Cotton Nero A.x manuscript contains an illustration of the confrontation. This illustration, too, contains elements of both wild and tamed environments. In the text, the description of the landscape is reminiscent of the wilderness of Wirral in Fitt I, but for the absence of other creatures:

Ridez þurȝ þe roȝe bonk ryȝt to þe dale.
And þenne he wayted hym aboute, and wylde hit hym þoȝt,
And seȝe no syngne of resette bisydez nowhere,
Bot hyȝe bonkkeȝ and brent vpon boþe halwe
And ruȝe knokled knarrez with knornd stoneȝ;
þe skwez of þe scowtes skayned hym þoȝt. (2162-67)

The desolation is oppressive, and the presence of the high banks is somewhat claustrophobic, making one feel as if there is no escape. Looking for the chapel, Gawain “ofte changed his cher þe chapel to seche. / He seȝ non suche in no syde—and selly hym þoȝt— / Saue, a lyttel on a launde, a lawe as hit were, / A balȝ berȝ bi a bonke þe brymme bysyde” (2169-72). The smooth hill or barrow contains “a hole on þe ende and on ayþer syde” (2180) best described as “nobot an olde caue / Or a creuisse of an old cragge” (2182-83) (See Figure 5.1).

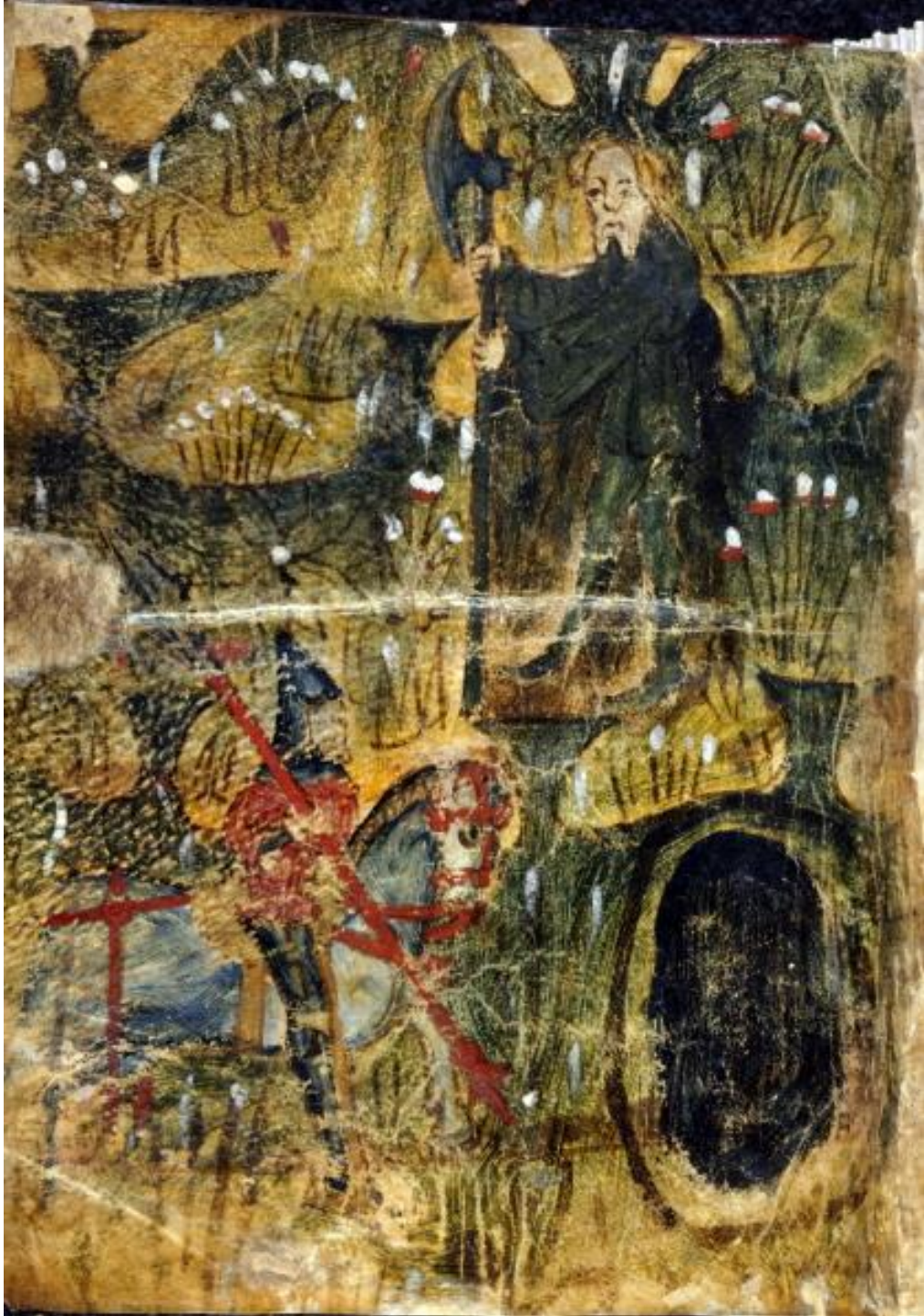


Figure 5.1: Cotton Nero A.x f. 129v

The illustration makes obvious the duality of the landscape: the scene at the Green Chapel is both wild *and* regulated. In the wild column: the desolate and otherworldly

scenery, the large green knight armed with an ax, the gaping hole in the ground resembling a grave, the unrecognizable flora, and the unpredictability of the situation. In the regulation column: the hierarchy as the Green Knight clearly has the upper hand over Gawain in terms of placement, Gawain's accoutrement as a knight of Arthur's court, and the rules of the game itself are in play. This image clearly demonstrates what the text conveys: there is a potential theoretical bind between the wilderness and the forest aspects of the narrative. That we cannot squeeze the poem into a single genre signals its complexity as a text.

The basic purpose for any illustration is to make the accompanying text more vivid and to aid in the comprehension of the text. For the rest of this chapter, I focus on the images found in psalters, specifically the Luttrell Psalter (BL Add MS 42130) and the Gorleston Psalter (BL Add MS 49622). The reasons for using this genre generally and these examples in particular are three-fold. First, in examining psalters, I add to the list of genres already discussed that exhibit the predominant theme of this project: medieval people's negotiation of the natural world. Therefore, it is not just fictional, narrative texts that can be investigated via eco-theory. Second, as sacred texts, psalters demonstrate an attempt by medieval people to grasp the imagined Word of God that mimics the overall argument of this dissertation: in the same way that wilderness, forest, and garden poems give shape to the understanding of nature, the psalter, with its Psalms and liturgical calendar, offers medieval people a modicum of control as they grapple with the understanding of God's Word. Third, and finally, the chosen images are exemplary in their depiction of medieval people's attempts to understand the natural world and their place in it. Are they to dominate and flourish, or are they to only labor and struggle? Far

from depicting explicit images of the wilderness, forest, or garden, the psalters present images that, instead, align themselves with the environmental imaginary of the wilderness, the resource management of the forest, and the natural artifice of the garden.

Analyses of medieval manuscript illustrations range from the symbolic—as in the representation of sacred concepts—to the pedestrian—as when elaborate drawings function as line filler. Focusing on illustrated romance texts, Murray J. Evans takes a quantitative approach to illustrations by documenting the kinds of illustrations that accompany a certain kind of text.¹⁸⁹ Christopher de Hamel sees the myriad illustrations in the Luttrell Psalter as memory aids for the reader: “Every page is different. The more bizarre the images, the more memorable they are to anyone who turns the pages. The borders can then serve as a visual aid to recognizing and memorizing every page of text.”¹⁹⁰ Other critics, such as V.A. Kolve, study the part illustrations play in the “essential role the Middle Ages assigned to mental imagery in such distinctly human activities as *remembering* what we have experienced, *imagining* things we have not experienced, and thinking deeply (*meditating*) upon both.”¹⁹¹ In his work specifically on the Luttrell Psalter, Michael Camille approaches an ecocritical method when he travels to the village of Irnham to find connections between the manuscript itself and the place where it was created. Ultimately, however, Camille settles on a socio-historical view as he considers “how [the manuscript’s] complex manufacture by a single scribe and a

¹⁸⁹ Murray J. Evans, *Rereading Middle English Romance: Manuscript Layout, Decoration, and the Rhetoric of Composite Structure* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1995).

¹⁹⁰ Christopher de Hamel, *Manuscript Illumination: History and Techniques* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 33. See also de Hamel’s *A History of Illuminated Manuscripts* (London: Phaidon Press, 1994).

¹⁹¹ V.A. Kolve, *Telling Images: Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative II* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), xvi.

group of talented illuminators must be viewed as part of the manorial economy and not as ‘art’ separate from it.”¹⁹² The first environment discussed in this project is the wilderness. Because this environment no longer existed in the English landscape by the middle of the thirteenth century, authors were at liberty to create this environment from their imaginings. Visual artists were no different when faced with the opportunity to fill a blank space with whatever their minds envisioned. The Luttrell Psalter was created sometime between 1320 and 1340 for Sir Geoffrey Luttrell, lord of the manor house at Irnham. This psalter contains the Psalms, the liturgical calendar, several collects, and other prayers, including the Office of the Dead. It also contains a number and variety of illustrations that set this substantial manuscript apart from others created in England during the same period. The vivid and detailed creatures, made up of parts and pieces of unrelated animals and people, embody a nature that is out of control and unpredictable. More than examples of the monstrous races as found on the edges of medieval maps, such as blemmyes or sciapods, the Luttrell Psalter creatures possess a balance between whimsical and frightening. Almost every single page of the Luttrell Psalter contains at least one of these imaginary creatures. Camille states that “marginal imagery lacks the iconographic stability of a religious narrative or icon,” and it is this instability that allows the images in this group to be both scary and playful in the same instant.¹⁹³ Like the depictions of the wilderness in Middle English narrative texts, these weird beings make visible human fear of the lack of control over nature—even on the page (See Figures 5.2 – 5.4).

¹⁹²Michael Camille, *Mirror in Parchment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 13. See also, *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art* (London: Reaktion Books, 1992).

¹⁹³ Camille, *Image*, 31.



Figure 5.2: Luttrell Psalter f. 196r



Figure 5.3: Luttrell Psalter f. 155v



Figure 5.4: Luttrell Psalter f. 194v

One of the more fascinating things about the Luttrell Psalter is the sheer variety of images to be found within the manuscript. Alongside the wild imaginary creatures is a group of illustrations that echo a managed and regulated environment comparable to the

forest. A series of *bas-de-page* illustrations depict the agricultural cycle on a large manor holding. Instead of the representation of nature as out of control and scary as seen in the imaginary creatures, the agricultural scenes represent the ordered and predictable cycle of preparing the land for planting, sowing seed, weeding, and harvesting. More importantly, these illustrations show human dominance over nature as manifested by the ability to reap a harvest from the land. Reminiscent of the description of the hunting scenes in Fitt III of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the artistic representations of the duties of the field hands, both men and women, are so detailed that anyone even remotely familiar with the tools of farming can recognize what is happening in the illustrations (See Figures 5.5 – 5.12).



Figure 5.5: Luttrell Psalter f. 170r



Figure 5.6: Luttrell Psalter f. 170v



Figure 5.7: Luttrell Psalter f. 171r



Figure 5.8: Luttrell Psalter f. 171v



Figure 5.9: Luttrell Psalter f. 172r



Figure 5.10: Luttrell Psalter f. 172v



Figure 5.11: Luttrell Psalter f. 173r



Figure 5.12: Luttrell Psalter f. 173v

For example, in Figure 5.6, a man sows seed from a basket, while a small dog chases the crows that are trying to eat the seed (f. 170v). Figure 5.9 (f. 172r) shows two women weeding a green grassy patch with the use of tools that allow them to hold the weeds with a forked pole in order to slice them with a metal blade at the end of another

long pole. As part of a larger manuscript that was created for the use of the wealthy landowner, these *bas-de-page* illustrations demonstrate the ability to manage the natural resources available to medieval people in a general way, as well as representing the level of control that Sir Geoffrey Luttrell has over nature via his workers. As lord of the manor, Sir Geoffrey provided leadership and capital and was head of the organizational structure that was the manor economy. By commissioning his own psalter, Sir Geoffrey attempted to control nature by controlling the representation of his well-managed property, thereby providing evidence of his success. Similar to the ordered ecosystem of the forest, where success depends on the management of one's resources, the agricultural scenes in the Luttrell Psalter emanate a well-ordered sense of activity as everyone attends to each specific job and a sense of comfort in the predictability of the cycle of work that revolves around the growing season.

If the wild, unpredictable creatures in the margins of the Luttrell Psalter recall the features of the wilderness as an environmental imaginary, and the *bas-de-page* illustrations of real people in real situations of the agricultural cycle evoke the regulation and management of the forest resource, then the third group of illustrations is a combination of the first two groups. In Chapter 3, I discuss how the garden environment is an artificially created natural area: the components of the garden are from nature (plants, rocks, water, etc.), but the space itself is designed, arranged, and maintained by humans. The Gorleston Psalter, created sometime during the first quarter of the fourteenth century for the church of St. Andrew in Gorleston, contains marginal images that portray the same concept as that found in a garden: real people and animals in

imaginary situations. For example, there are several instances of knights in armor fighting snails or rabbits (See Figures 5.13 - 5.14).



Figure 5.13: Gorleston Psalter f. 193v



Figure 5.14: Gorleston Psalter f. 149v

The reversal of the hunter and the hunted roles between rabbits and hounds are some of the more surprising illustrations (See Fig. 5.15).



Figure 5.15: Gorleston Psalter f. 161v

The incongruent image gives the viewer pause as he must recalibrate his view on what is “normal” or “expected.” The components of the images—a knight, a snail, a rabbit, a hound—come with expectations as to their behavior and *milieu*. The Gorleston Psalter depicts these individually familiar images in unexpected ways and makes visible a sense of anxiety that evokes the paradox of the garden. How can something created by a person

(a garden, an illustration) create a sense of unease? By placing the real and familiar in unanticipated and startling situations or configurations.

The illustrations in the Luttrell and Gorleston Psalters occupy the final place on the continuum of containment and control that this dissertation has explored across the wilderness, the forest, and the garden. But as the illustrations discussed here demonstrate, a person is not safe even when he is holding the paintbrush. An innate fear of the uncontrollable, uncontainable, unknowable natural world manifests itself on the page as the artist negotiates the divide between what he is told of the natural world versus what he experiences there. This fear of what he cannot control is most reminiscent of the fear experienced in the wilderness environment. And, so, instead of a continuum of containment and control, perhaps it is, instead, a circle that begins and ends in the fear of the wilderness where nature is at its most elemental.

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