

READING LANDSCAPES IN MEDIEVAL BRITISH ROMANCE

DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

My dissertation establishes a new framework with which to interpret the textual landscapes and ecological details that permeate late-medieval British romances from the period of c.1300 – c. 1500, focusing on the ways in which such landscapes reflect the diverse experiences of medieval readers and writers. In particular, I identify and explain fourteenth- and fifteenth-century English and Scottish conceptions of the relationships between literary worlds and “real-world” locations. In my first section, I analyze the role of topography and the management of natural resources in constructing a sense of community in *Sir Isumbras*, *William of Palerne*, and *Havelok the Dane*, and explain how abandoned or ravaged agricultural landscapes in *Sir Degrevant* and the *Tale of Gamelyn* betray anxieties about the lack of human control over the English landscape in the wake of population decline caused by civil war, the Black Death, and the Little Ice Age. My next section examines seashores and waterscapes in *Sir Amadace*, *Emaré*, *Sir Eglamour of Artois*, the *Awntyrs off Arthure*, and the Constance romances of Chaucer and Gower. Specifically, I explain how a number of romances present the seaside as a simultaneously inviting and threatening space whose multifaceted nature as a geographical, political, and social boundary embodies the complex range of meanings embedded in the Middle English concept of “play” – a word that these texts often link with the seashore. Beaches, too, serve as stages upon which the romances act out their anxieties over the

consequences of human economic endeavor, with scenes where shipwrecks are configured as opportunities for financial gain for scavengers and as mortal peril for sailors. In my third section, I move beyond the boundary space of the sea to consider the landscape descriptions of foreign lands in medieval British romance, focusing in particular on representations of Divine will manifested through landscape features and dramatic weather in the Holy Land of *Titus and Vespasian* and the Far East of *Kyng Alisaunder*. Finally, my concluding section returns to literary descriptions of medieval Britain, but this time to examine the idea of the “foreign at home.” I discuss here how romances of Scotland and the Anglo-Scottish border such as *Sir Colling, Eger and Grime*, and *Thomas of Erceldoune* cast the Border landscape as one defined by rugged topography, extreme weather, and an innate sense of independence, while also emphasizing its proximity to the Otherworlds of Fairy and Hell. I then trace how these topics get developed later, in the early modern ballads that are based on some of these romances, explaining how song-texts persist in communicating some of these same ideas regarding Scottish and northern English landscapes. Many of these issues remain pertinent to modern discourses across a variety of disciplines, and thus invite an interdisciplinary approach that combines literary criticism with environmental history and cultural geography. Through historical and cultural analyses of these textual landscapes, I explain how romances not only reflect concerns of their medieval audience, but also provide some enduring motifs that appear in the popular literature of later periods.

DEDICATION

For my parents, Connie and Jim

Amor sine dubio

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The responsibility for any errors that remain is entirely my own.

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Fields of Study

Major Field: English

Medieval Studies

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ABBREVIATIONS

DSL	<i>Dictionary of the Scots Language</i>
EETS	Early English Text Society
(o.s.)	Original Series
(e.s.)	Extra Series
(s.s.)	Supplementary Series
JEGP	<i>Journal of English and Germanic Philology</i>
MED	<i>Middle English Dictionary</i>
OED	<i>Oxford English Dictionary</i>

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The natural world was a daily, material presence in the lives of medieval people. Many of them slept in halls that doubled as stables; they shared (and squabbled over) strips of communal farmland and saw their inherited field-plots enclosed by land-grabbing sheep farmers; they harvested and sold necessary resources like metal ore, charcoal, wood, and peat; they participated in traditional excursions into the local landscape, such as the annual processions charting villages' religious and secular boundaries, which reaffirmed communal identities; and they enjoyed leisure activities such as hunting, fishing, swimming, and – for the wealthy – estate design, endeavors which consisted of a close, active relationship with a variety of different biomes. Both the authors and audiences of medieval British romance – a genre explicitly concerned with the fantastic exploits of heroic knights – experienced their geological, topographical, and organic surroundings through perspectives shaped by physiology, culture, and religion. Reflecting a fascination with their home environments, Anglo-Norman, Middle English, and Old/Middle Scots romances even present their heroes' most fantastic exploits in foreign lands within settings and landscapes having recognizably British features.

My dissertation establishes a new framework with which to interpret the textual landscapes and ecological details that permeate late-medieval British romances from the period of c.1300 – c. 1500, focusing on the ways in which such landscapes reflect the

diverse experiences of medieval readers and writers.¹ In particular, I identify and explain fourteenth- and fifteenth-century English and Scottish conceptions of the relationships between literary worlds and “real-world” locations.² My work concentrates on passages describing natural resource management, the assignment of activities or mindsets to certain spaces (such as “play” and scavenging on beaches), the desire to recreate foreign landscapes with familiar features, the relationship of the Anglo-Scottish Border landscape to a sense of regional independence, and fears regarding the human roles in, and consequences of, landscape degradation and climate change during the onset of the Little Ice Age.³ Many of these issues remain pertinent to modern discourses across a variety of

¹ As such, I add a new approach to the diverse scholarly attention that the oft-maligned genre of medieval British romance (particularly in Middle English) has enjoyed in the past couple of decades. For a small sampling of the recent romance studies following Susan Crane’s important work on romances and baronial identity in *Insular Romance: Politics, Faith, and Culture in Anglo-Norman and Middle English Literature* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), see: Judith Weiss, Jennifer Fellows, and Morgan Dickinson, eds., *Medieval Insular Romance: Translation and Innovation* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000); Ad Putter and Jane Gilbert, eds., *The Spirit of Medieval English Popular Romance* (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2000); Helen Cooper, *The English Romance in Time: Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the Death of Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Rhiannon Purdie and Michael Cichon, eds., *Medieval Romance, Medieval Contexts* (Cambridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 2011); Randy P. Schiff, *Revivalist Fantasy: Alliterative Verse and Nationalist Literary History* (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2011); and Michael Johnston, *Romance and the Gentry in Late Medieval England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

² I thus avoid focusing on the traditional, *locus amoenus* aspects of idealized literary landscapes made famous in Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Age*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Pantheon Books, 1953), particularly in his chapter “The Ideal Landscape” (pp. 183-202), and analyzed in detail by studies such as Helen Cooper, *Pastoral: Medieval into Renaissance* (Ipswich, UK: D. S. Brewer, 1977). Instead, I seek to supplement such work on artistic convention by examining a broad spectrum of landscape descriptions in medieval Insular romances, so as to explain how such passages reflect contemporary conceptions of real-life ecological contexts.

³ For a detailed overview of how environmental factors including weather, tree-growth, temperature, and precipitation variation resulting from the Little Ice Age directly influenced the development of wages, prices, and human population in fourteenth-century England, see especially Bruce M. S. Campbell, “Nature as Historical Protagonist: Environment and Society in Pre-Industrial England,” *Economic History Review* 63.2 (2010): pp. 281-314. Regarding overall declining temperatures (with significant temporary variation) over the thirteenth-fifteenth centuries in East Anglia, and the effects on local harvests, see also Kathleen Pribyl, Richard C. Cornes, and Christian Pfister, “Reconstructing Medieval April-July Mean Temperatures in East Anglia, 1256–1431,” *Climatic Change* 113.2 (2012): pp. 393–412. On the effects of Little Ice Age storm floods destroying property and reclaimed land after the Black Death’s reduction of available labor, see James A. Galloway, “Storm Flooding, Coastal Defence and Land Use around the Thames Estuary and Tidal River c.1250-1450,” *Journal of Medieval History* 35 (2009): pp. 171-88, and also his discussion of

disciplines, and thus invite an interdisciplinary approach that combines literary criticism with environmental history and cultural geography. Through historical and cultural analyses of these textual landscapes, I explain how romances not only reflect concerns of their medieval audience, but also provide some enduring motifs that appear in the popular literature of later periods.

My research is interdisciplinary in its approach. With the development of analyses of the natural world in medieval art by Derek Pearsall and Elizabeth Salter in the 1970s, and archaeologically-based studies of the medieval environmental history of human settlements and natural biomes in the 1980s and 1990s (coupled with considerations of “space, place, and landscape” presented in Laura Howes’ 2007 collection), tools for analyzing the textual, “real-world” settings for medieval narratives have begun to take

these ecological factors’ impacts on coastal industries (mostly negative, apart from fishing) and communities in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries especially in James A. Galloway, “Coastal Flooding and Socioeconomic Change in Eastern England in the Later Middle Ages,” *Environment and History* 19 (2013): pp. 173–207. Peter Brimblecombe, “A Meteorological Service in Fifteenth Century Sandwich,” *Environment and History* 1.2 (1995): pp. 241-9, notes that dramatic Easterly winds in the first half of the fifteenth century led to the abandonment of many English fields and villages (p. 243), and interestingly details the use of musicians to chart and announce changes in wind and weather to sailors and merchants in Sandwich (pp. 245-8). For recent studies on the effects of droughts on human activity that would precede and follow periods of extreme rainfall and storminess in the fourteenth century and after, see David Stone, “The Impact of Drought in early fourteenth-century England,” *The Economic History Review* 67.2 (2014): pp. 435-62, and also Rob Wilson, Dan Miles, Neil J. Loader, Tom Melvin, Laura Cunningham, Richard Cooper, and Keith Briffa, “A millennial long March–July precipitation reconstruction for southern-central England,” *Climate Dynamics* 40 (2013): pp. 997-1017. For an opposing viewpoint arguing against the existence of a coherent Little Ice Age in Europe over the entirety of the fifteenth to nineteenth centuries, see Morgan Kelly and Cormac Ó Gráda, “The Waning of the Little Ice Age: Climate Change in Early Modern Europe,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 44.3 (2014): pp. 301–325. Even considering their conclusion, Kelly and Ó Gráda still admit that “Extreme weather events clearly mattered in the past,” and moreover that “Campbell [“Nature as Historical Protagonist”] carefully documented their consequences for the late medieval period” (p. 324). As such, regardless of the existence of a coherent Little Ice Age through the early modern and later periods, the extreme variability of weather and temperature corresponding with landscape abandonment and population decline in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Britain still provides an active ecological context whose effects were clearly felt in both real life and in the landscapes written into the popular romances that I discuss. As such, when referring to the Little Ice Age, I indicate the specific climactic events described in these studies and the work I cite in the following chapters.

shape.⁴ Moreover, environmental historians such as Oliver Rackham, Tom Williamson, and Oliver H. Creighton demonstrate that medieval people were physically engaged with shaping the material and symbolic realities of their ecological contexts, pursuing interests as diverse as agricultural strategies, natural resource management, and recreational landscape design.⁵ Recent studies in cultural geography foreground the ongoing relationship between human imagination and how we experience the physical world – and moreover, how we communicate that experience to others. As Denis Cosgrove states, “written narrative and description hold as significant a place as cartographic representation in the history of geographical practice: the graphic can be textual as much as it can be pictorial,”⁶ demonstrating the important impact that written narratives can have on readers’ understanding of their own world. Furthermore, the work of sociologist Wendy Darby argues that “access [to different categories of space] is bound up in contested myths of national and class-identity formation and the cultural construction of space.”⁷ Works like Catherine Clarke’s study of literary landscapes in Anglo-Saxon and

⁴ See Derek Pearsall and Elizabeth Salter, *Landscapes and Seasons of the Medieval World* (London: Paul Elek, 1973) and Laura Howes, ed., *Place, Space, and Landscape in Medieval Narrative* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2007). For more on the analyses of space popular in the 1990s, see also Sylvia Tomasch and Seally Gilles, eds., *Text and Territory: Geographical Imagination in the European Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), and John Howe and Michael Wolfe, eds., *Inventing Medieval Landscapes: Senses of Place in Western Europe* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2002). The latter readings especially owe a great amount to Henri Lefebvre’s work from the 1960s and 1970s, which developed explorations of how powerful segments of societies inscribe conceptions of space with their own cultural hegemonies, rewriting the record of the past in the process; see further Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

⁵ See Oliver Rackham, *Trees and Woodland in the British Landscape*, rev. edn. (London: Phoenix Press, 2001), Tom Williamson, *Shaping Medieval Landscapes: Settlement, Society, Environment* (Bollington, UK: Windgather Press, 2004), and O. H. Creighton, *Designs Upon the Land: Elite Landscapes of the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2009).

⁶ Denis Cosgrove, *Geography and Vision: Seeing, Imagining, and Representing the World* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2008), p. 6.

⁷ Wendy Joy Darby, *Landscape and Identity: Geographies of Nation and Class in England* (New York City: Berg, 2000), p. xvii.

monastic writing, Alexandra Walsham's meticulous examination of the Reformation's effects on the English landscape, and Corinne Saunders' discussion of forests in medieval romance provide both the inspiration and the starting points from which my dissertation proceeds.⁸ In particular, Lynn Staley's recent study of the evolving concepts of England as an "island nation" throughout a collection of medieval and early-modern texts, diverse in generic and chronological scope, considers important historiographical, social, and literary contexts regarding the artistic appropriation of ecological symbols and details to define British and especially English conceptions of "national" community.⁹ R. W. V. Elliott's painstaking work mapping the landscape of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* onto the topography of medieval Cheshire, Staffordshire, and Derbyshire recognizes of alliterative romances that, "for all their fictitiousness, the landscapes of these poems ... bear the imprint of genuine English landscapes,"¹⁰ while Sebastian Sobceki tempers such readings by observing that realism and allegory can work with, and not necessarily against, each other in the fictional landscapes of medieval texts.¹¹ By building upon the

⁸ See Catherine Clarke, *Literary Landscapes and the Idea of England, 700-1400* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2006), Alexandra Walsham, *The Reformation of the Landscape: Religion, Identity, and Memory in Early Modern Britain and Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), and Corinne Saunders, *The Forest of Medieval Romance: Avernus, Broceliande, Arden* (Cambridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 1993).

⁹ Lynn Staley, *The Island Garden: England's Nation of Language from Gildas to Marvell* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012).

¹⁰ See Elliott's retrospective collection, *The Gawain Country: Essays on the Topography of Middle English Alliterative Poetry* (Leeds, UK: University of Leeds School of English, 1984), at p. 85. While Elliott's work focuses mostly on *Sir Gawain* and *Piers Plowman*, his surveys of topographical terminology in a variety of alliterative poems and romances touch in passing on a couple of the poems (*Awntyrs off Arthure* and *William of Palerne*) that I discuss below, and thus helped me gain an appreciation for the subtle variations of meaning inherent in Middle English landscape terminology; see further Elliott, *Gawain Country*, pp. 85-152.

¹¹ Sebastian Sobceki, "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 Posaniensia* 42 (2006): pp. 463-75. Sobceki comments directly on Elliott's work on pp. 466-7. Sobceki's warning to critics of the need to recognize the "vanity of our own modernity" (p. 474) and its prizing of realism when analyzing supposedly naturalistic scenes in medieval literature is an important one. I hope that, by analyzing the scenes I do in light of how they reflect contemporary reactions to, and not

studies of these scholars, then, my work combines data regarding the actual environments inhabited by medieval people with an awareness of the complex human understandings of those environments, especially as they appear in the fantastic landscapes of late-medieval British romance.

While I employ a uniquely interdisciplinary approach, this study is not the first to tackle the multifaceted descriptions of landscape that permeate the literature of medieval Europe.¹² In addition to the more recent studies already noted, the greatest landmark in medieval landscape studies remains Derek Pearsall and Elizabeth Salter's *Landscapes and Seasons of the Medieval World*. In this monograph, Pearsall and Salter establish a critical narrative that presents medieval artistic representations – both written and visual – of the natural world as evolving closer and closer to the mode of realism – yet declare that, almost as quickly as elements of naturalistic detail are incorporated into literary and visual traditions, those same details are conventionalized, and thus move away from the real towards ideal conceptions of natural spaces.¹³ They further develop this idea in their discussion of late medieval art in particular, charting its overall development away from the traditions of the *locus amoenus* and stylized symbolism and toward landscape depictions as independent art forms.¹⁴ While they see later texts, such as those of the alliterative revival, presenting a greater amount of naturalistic detail, they find the sense of realism in such texts to be ultimately “illusory,” since they argue that

utterly realistic vignettes of, real-life human interactions with various environments, I have at least avoided falling entirely into such an interpretive trap.

¹² For an overview of the (admittedly few) studies in this field, see John Ganim, “Landscape and Late Medieval Literature: A Critical Geography” in *Place, Space, and Landscape in Medieval Narrative*, ed. Laura Howes (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2007), pp. xv-xxix.

¹³ See especially Pearsall and Salter, *Landscapes*, pp. 1-2.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 161-228.

these details are added purely due to the demands of the form.¹⁵ “Concreteness of effect is produced” in alliterative poems, they claim, “more by accident than design, for the technique is essentially one of piling up detail, not of articulation.”¹⁶ As such, they conclude that the landscape of a romance exists predominantly when it serves a symbolic purpose¹⁷ or as a necessary stage for the plot.¹⁸ On account of its breadth and insightfulness, Pearsall and Salter’s work remains an important starting point. However, its narrative of explaining away naturalistic details in late medieval British romances neglects to consider how non-symbolic presentations of natural details in such texts reflect the complicated and often contradictory array of perspectives on and relationships with the natural world that the poets and audiences of such texts employed and experienced on an everyday basis – and thus leaves a gap that my own work seeks partially to fill.

Following closely in Pearsall and Salter’s footsteps, other scholars have sought to craft a historical narrative explaining the evolving representation of landscape in Western literature overall. Primary among these studies is Chris Fitter’s *Poetry, Space, Landscape: Toward a New Theory*.¹⁹ The approaches that Fitter employs are valuable in that he seeks to place literary representations of landscape within evolving historical contexts, considering developments in economics, religion, science, and philosophy. Fitter rightly considers economic developments such as the commercialization of the countryside to be of paramount importance to how members of a particular culture

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 177-9.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 177.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 52.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 167-8.

¹⁹ Chris Fitter, *Poetry, Space, Landscape: Toward a New Theory* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

conceive of landscape – even if he does make this point through the employment of his overly rigid matrix of anatomical categories.²⁰ Yet, due to its broad scope, Fitter’s grand narrative of landscape representation (reaching from the art of Ancient Greece to the poetry of the eighteenth century) groups together the entirety of late medieval literature and visual art, over-privileging an understanding of natural space shaped by post-medieval painting practices. While Fitter admits that late medieval literature did not always fit into his neat evolutionary trajectory,²¹ he does not examine such outlier texts himself. My focus on the specifics of late medieval British romances, then, satisfies Fitter’s call for future scholarship,²² since these popular texts react to unique literary, cultural, and ecological environments. Insular romances present views of the natural world that, while not always composed according to the values of composite landscape scenes from visual art, nevertheless reveal generic conventions as well as contemporary attitudes towards human understandings of their everyday surroundings. Focusing on the economic, cultural, and literary developments local to specific texts, as I do, thus helps to provide a greater level of insight into how particular romances (or even manuscript

²⁰ See especially Fitter’s discussion of the “the managerial relation to landscape” that he argues spurred the “confident” championing of human labor in the natural environment as a way of understanding landscape throughout Europe in the later Middle Ages, at *Poetry*, pp. 181-6. For a breakdown of Fitter’s approach, which Ganim labels as “more an anatomy than a new theory, all for the better,” see “Landscape and Late Medieval Literature,” p. xvii.

²¹ Fitter, *Poetry*, pp. 179-80, remarks that “pictorial naturalism will, however, develop through the Middle Ages with no steady chronological regularity,” observing how “the coexistence of symbolic and material planes to the reality of the visible world maintains a duality in which either may predominate to the exclusion of the other” (p. 179). Nevertheless, Fitter’s study maps a narrative of landscape representations evolving steadily away from symbolic representations and toward “pictorial naturalism” that presented confident representations of human beings dominating their surroundings. As my dissertation demonstrates, however, late medieval representations of landscape in popular literature were often much more complex.

²² As Fitter notes, “one further important element for the thorough analysis of literary landscape, a discussion of the differential development of landscape perception within the existing ensemble of artistic forms – within distinct literary genres ... each with their own history and separate tempo of development” is a “dimension of the study of landscape aesthetics [that] cannot ... find space” in his study (*Poetry*, p. 12).

witnesses of a particular romance) reflected diverse contemporary perspectives on the natural world.

Discussion of these previous studies raises the issue of terminology, particularly with the post-medieval word “landscape.” This method of understanding topographical description in literature, leaning heavily on particular forms of visual art as it does, privileges thereby a somewhat anachronistic sense of looking back in time to prove the existence and legitimacy of a later perspective. Why, then, do I continue to employ the term “landscape” in my own study, seeing as the word’s roots in English stem directly from early modern landscape painting techniques?²³ The primary reason is audience. While I wish to avoid forcing an anachronistic understanding of material surroundings onto medieval texts, I cannot entirely deny language that would render those medieval ideas approachable to modern readers (while still acknowledging the individual and often alien nature of those past perspectives). As the *OED* notes, one modern meaning of “landscape” distances the term from a purely artistic sense, defining it instead as “a tract of land with its distinguishing characteristics and features, esp[ecially] considered as a product of modifying or shaping processes and agents (usually natural).”²⁴ Modern conceptions of the word “landscape,” then, while still closely connected with painting, also include definitions that link natural topography’s shape and identity to non-human forces in the physical world.

A defining feature of my framework and scholarly motivation is a respect for the variety of landscapes and topographical features that medieval romances present. Some

²³ See the *OED* entry for “landscape, n.,” particularly the section on etymology.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, definition 2b.

scenes denote a sense of depth and scale in line with a painterly sense of landscape (à la Fitter or Pearsall and Salter), placing a hay meadow against the backdrop of an entire estate as seen from a tower; others foreground a single feature – a hill, tarn, or tree – whose description conveys medieval understandings of the characteristics that defined that feature’s value and character to human observers.²⁵ Complicating all textual topographies, of course, were the generic expectations of their narrative contexts. In order to consider this diversity of representation and priority in the same study, I have had to rely on the broad terms of “landscape” and “waterscape” to avoid oversimplifying my results. These terms are also useful in that they prioritize both the physical – land and water – and culturally constructed – “scape” – aspects of these topographical descriptions, without discounting either element. In this way, these terms are preferable to a label such as “scenery,” which places the physical world inspiring the cultural categories at too distant of a remove.²⁶ Over the course of this study, I considered adopting more theoretical terms to represent my attempt to capture the diversity of romance perspectives, including the awkward constructions “landspace” and “landscape.” While the latter compound especially emphasizes the concepts of both perspective and variation, both of these constructed terms ultimately draw attention to my analytical framework in a way that diminishes the primacy of medieval texts and their perspectives. As such, my decision to continue using the categories of “landscape” and

²⁵ This “flattened” approach is more akin to what Fitter identifies as the “Gothic landscape” that he claims lacked a sense of depth, and which he identifies as primarily a phenomenon of the High Middle Ages; see *Poetry*, pp. 156-72. I aver, however, that such scenes can also reflect the alien nature of the late medieval, commercialized eye for landscape, which shared characteristics of modern economic worldviews while incorporating a sense of physical immediacy and nature’s “otherness” unique to their historical moments.

²⁶ I do, of course, employ terms such as “topography” when seeking to specify the elements of landscape highlighted by particular works.

“waterscape” is ultimately the product of a compromise: I allow the modern reader entrance through the presentation of a familiar, if perhaps too overtly visual label that I immediately seek to complicate and specify based on the text at hand. In this way, I hope to expose and dismantle many of the anachronistic obstacles that have shaped the grand narratives of previous critics – but I readily acknowledge that I cannot avoid them all.

My readings also depart from critical predecessors in that I focus not only on the cultural contexts of these romances and their representations of nature, but on their ecological contexts as well. Inhabitants of late medieval Britain experienced a variety of effects unique to their historical moment and place that resulted from a changing climate – and their reactions to and anxieties regarding such environmental events helped to shape the way landscape was defined and delineated in contemporary literature. The physical realm of nature exists as a context for all human writers, but critics must remember that “natural” biomes, species, and weather patterns are themselves always in a state of flux, moving through their own periods of history. What I attempt to do in this study is to align such ecological epochs with the cultural calendars of late medieval Britain, and understand how the popular romantic literature of the time interpreted and reflected those overlapping contexts. The human concept of nature – its values, its constituent elements – may always be a cultural construct, but its foundation in a non-human physical world is a trait too often overlooked in analyses of medieval literature.²⁷

²⁷ For a succinct but insightful discussion of this issue, see the Barbara Hanawalt and Lisa J. Kiser, “Introduction,” in *Engaging with Nature: Essays on the Natural World in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, eds. Barbara Hanawalt and Lisa J. Kiser (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), pp. 1-10, at pp. 3-4. Particularly useful is their comment regarding the various definitions of “nature” employed by writers in their volume, as they note that “for some of our authors, nature is ‘fact,’ while for others, nature is clearly ‘value’; still others, it appears, would locate nature somewhere along a spectrum between the two,” while “some might also wish to reject both the binary and the spectrum altogether” (p.

As such, I follow Gillian Rudd's call to examine the influence of non-anthropocentric entities on the definitions of nature contained in medieval English literature, even if I do not entirely adopt her ecocritical approach.²⁸ Instead, by maintaining an awareness of the importance of such non-human elements while focusing on how the romances' decidedly anthropocentric, political perspectives filter and define these environmental details, I seek to craft a framework for reading these popular literary texts through the lens of environmental history. Creating or adapting didactic fantasies of property ownership, martial contest, and knightly conduct, the poets and scribes of medieval British romance wrote narrative topographies that sought to idealize or to criticize contemporary evaluations of the non-human world, and human actions within it.

Indeed, action is central to these romances' presentations of land- and waterscapes. Whether overt or merely implied, the natural spaces of these texts are largely understood in terms of human activity – be it travel, resource management, agricultural labor, warfare, or trade. Such everyday understandings of practical human values inherent in non-human topographies, flora, and fauna serve to familiarize the purportedly foreign spaces of many romances, and render their worlds as identifiably British. Yet along with this feeling of familiarity comes an anxious sense of threat.

Unlike the purely managerial, scientific, or artistic mindsets explored in medieval

4). My approach builds from this spectrum of values, acknowledging Gillian Rudd's claim that "the balancing act thus becomes one between a desire to give due consideration to the actual, material world and a recognition that 'nature' is to some extent a human construct, liable to change according to shifts in human society;" see Gillian Rudd, *Greenery: Ecocritical Readings of Late Medieval English Literature* (New York City: Manchester University Press, 2007), quoted at p. 8.

²⁸ See again Rudd, *Greenery*, especially her "Introduction: Green Reading," at pp. 1-19. In my appreciation of the variety of perspectives on nature found in the romances, I concur with Rudd's position when she refuses with her interpretations to strive "for an homogenous overview which I believe would be both improbable and undesirable" (pp. 17-18).

representations of landscape by scholars like Fitter,²⁹ these British romances couple such understandings of their local environments' practical values with anxieties over their inability to control absolutely the production or utilization of such values. As the human societies and individuals of these texts are shown to be entirely dependent upon their ecological contexts, so too do those contexts appear as grounds for hope and dread. This dread manifests in a variety of ways: as destructive neighbors, that disrupt the productivity of one's holdings; as storms that penetrate the boundary between purgatory and the mortal realm; as God-given signs in the natural world that characters struggle to interpret; and as fairy knights, armies, and prophecies that reveal the landscape as a realm of alien knowledge and experience beyond the pale of human understanding.

Economically and socially productive activities thus share the stage with scenes of violence upon and across a variety of ecological settings. These struggles in turn represent the continuing hardships evoked by the particular ecological contexts of Britain in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, as the island suffered both from the inclement weather and falling temperatures resulting from the onset of the Little Ice Age and from the political and cultural upheaval that (perhaps consequently) characterized these centuries.

In the end, medieval British romances reveal the diverse array of often-contradictory perspectives on the natural world that defined contemporary audiences' relationships with Insular environments. Far from espousing a homogenous worldview, these texts reveal that late medieval people still struggled to make sense of the landscapes they so carefully managed for economic and aesthetic ends. Of course, this project cannot

²⁹ Fitter, *Poetry*, especially pp. 230-2.

represent the sum total of all the diverse perspectives presented by medieval romance; instead, I have endeavored to choose a collection of works that demonstrates as broad a sampling of that spectrum as possible in the space allowed. If nothing else, I hope that my study thus helps move modern readers a step closer to understanding medieval authors and audiences as the people they were: an array of different individuals whose unique and shifting concerns about economic welfare, survival, and changing ecological conditions colored even the most extraordinary of their popular fictions.

In order to represent the variety of ways in which medieval British romances conceived of ecological contexts, my project is separated into four sections. In Chapter 2, I identify the range of economic, religious, and social values attached to landscape in late medieval Middle English romances. This analysis begins by considering the role of topographical description in shaping the development of the religious and social identities of human characters interacting with that landscape, and how these interactions reflect historical contexts. In *Sir Isumbras*, for instance, topographical descriptions of hills and landmarks reflect medieval strategies for recording religious and secular property boundaries. I also examine how romances' descriptions of landscape often concentrate on economically significant features, especially natural resources, and the laborers who manage and harvest them, such as in scenes describing the working of stone quarries in *William of Palerne*, or sea harvests in *Havelok the Dane*. The chapter then builds on these arguments to explain how descriptions of abandoned or ravaged agricultural landscapes in *Sir Degrevant* and the *Tale of Gamelyn* betray the anxieties of an increasingly gentry readership about the lack of human control over the English landscape in the wake of population decline caused by civil war, the Black Death, and the Little Ice Age.

Chapter 3 focuses on one landscape space in particular: the seashore. Specifically, I explain how a number of romances develop their larger themes with a concentration on the seaside as a simultaneously inviting and threatening space whose multifaceted nature as a geographical, political, and social boundary embodies the complex range of meanings embedded in the Middle English concept of “play” – a word that these texts often link with the seashore. “Play” can refer to lighthearted entertainment, but it may also indicate violent conflict or gambling with high stakes. Beaches, too, serve as stages upon which the romances act out their anxieties over the consequences of human economic endeavor. In *Sir Amadace, Emaré, Sir Eglamour of Artois*, and the Constance romances of Chaucer and Gower, scenes of shipwrecks are configured as opportunities for financial gain for scavengers and as mortal peril for sailors. Such a view shows us that medieval people were fascinated with the ways in which economic gain is sometimes tied up with the loss of human lives on the open sea. Moreover, the coupling of the beach with concepts of play emerges in numerous scenes from romance where beach-walking characters create – both in jest and in earnest – new identities for themselves, in order to elude past enemies or mistakes. My analysis thus explains how seaside scenes can serve to embody anxieties about human relationships with the natural world and with the divine power that medieval Christians saw within and beyond the physical universe. The beach, then, invites play and pleasure at the same time that it provides the opportunity to rewrite one’s own place in society in the face of natural and divine forces beyond human control.

Chapter 4 moves beyond the boundary space of the sea to consider the landscape descriptions of foreign lands in medieval British romance. Despite the allure of fantasy

and exotic settings endemic to the genre of romance, many Middle English texts create imaginative landscapes that delineate recognizably British forms. I look at similarities between these scenes, and consider why certain details come to be associated with these imaginative landscape settings in the texts of *Titus and Vespasian* and *Kyng Alisaunder* surviving in Oxford Bodleian Library MS Laud Misc. 622, a manuscript saturated with tales of the Holy Land and the Far East. I also examine the particular literary traditions that are often associated with imposing especially English landscapes onto foreign settings (especially in the enduringly popular narratives of Alexander the Great) and investigate how the authority and prominence of these stories are used to consider the role of divine will in the increasingly hazardous ecological events experienced by Britain at the close of the Middle Ages. These texts may champion the ability of landscape engineers to reshape the base clay of creation, but they also use the distant lands of the Middle and Far East as spaces to contemplate the hubris of such actions in a Christian universe.

Finally, Chapter 5 returns to literary descriptions of medieval Britain, but this time to examine how romances construct the idea of the “foreign at home.” I discuss here how romances of Scotland and the Anglo-Scottish border such as *Sir Colling, Eger and Grime*, and *Thomas of Erceldoune* cast the Scottish and Border landscapes as ones defined by rugged topography and extreme weather, while also emphasizing their proximity to the Otherworlds of Fairy and Hell. I also examine how these topics get developed later, in the early modern ballads that are based on some of these romances, explaining how song-texts persist in communicating some of these same ideas regarding Scottish and northern English landscapes to modern audiences. This last chapter, then,

allows me to consider how medieval understandings of the natural world survived and evolved in the literary environments of ballads, folk songs, and popular literature, and how the issues I raise in this and the preceding sections form an important influence upon post-medieval understandings of human relationships with local and global landscapes.

In this dissertation, I have attempted to delineate how these texts' fantasy worlds communicate the various ways in which contemporary readers experienced and evaluated their local environments. In turn, I also consider how such texts identify a desire in their late medieval audiences to attribute significance to their own immediate, recognizable surroundings, finding support for (or contradictions to) their own political and religious beliefs in the very features of their local topography. These popular works reveal widespread concern regarding the damaging effects of political decrees (especially the enclosure of farmland for use as pasture), military violence, and climate change on the appearance and composition of British biomes. Such complicated interactions with landscape features demonstrate that the natural world was a constant presence in the writing, thoughts, and lives of the audiences and authors of medieval British romance – and perhaps illuminate the growing roots of later ideologies regarding the ecological contexts and consequences of human actions.

CHAPTER 2: A (DISAPPEARING?) WORLD OF OPPORTUNITY

Social Topography, Ecological Economics, and Landscape Change in Middle English Romance

In the Middle English romance of *Sir Isumbras*, the reader's experience of the narrative itself develops from its presentation of landscape. Losing his aristocratic power to manipulate his geological, vegetative, and animal surroundings, the eponymous hero is forced to learn the contours and uses of his environment(s) by physical experience. In addition to representing the trying experiences of dangerous (but ultimately beneficent) beasts, forests and rivers characteristic of the romance genre, however, *Sir Isumbras* focuses in minute detail on the eponymous hero's path over rough, hilly terrain. The evolution of Isumbras' progress over, and relationship to, this terrain in turn shapes the narrative's plot. Such topographical description echoes contemporary practices such as Rogation Tide Processions and property charters, focusing on defining both landscape spaces and the social and religious communities they sustain based on the landmarks at their edges. Moreover, as one of the most popular Middle English romances (based on rates of survival), *Sir Isumbras* provides insights into a broad medieval audience's understandings of human relationships with the natural world.¹ As such, *Sir Isumbras*

¹ As Harriet Hudson notes in her edition of *Four Middle English Romances: Sir Isumbras, Octavian, Sir Eglamour of Artois, Sir Tryamour*, 2nd edn. (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2006), "*Sir Isumbras* is one of the most popular Middle English romances, surviving in more manuscripts and prints

provides an apt stepping stone from which to develop a discussion of landscape features in Middle English romance: it is a popular text whose obsession with charting topographical detail reveals contemporary attitudes toward the categorization and evaluation of landscape.

In this and other romances, the close focus on prominent landscape features reveals the economic significance of such topographies. In the fourteenth-century Middle English translation of *William of Palerne*, for example, the protagonist and his lover Melior flee through a world of forests and bays that overflows with details of the natural world. These intricate explanations of quarry pits, hollow oaks, roadside groves, seaside caves, and war-torn estates all share an implicit perspective on the landscape that is defined by concepts of economic value and systems of exchange. In this regard, the predominant view of the natural world presented in *William* ties it to earlier romances such as *Havelok the Dane*, a text interested in the systems of exchange that knit seaside fishermen to urban markets; to contemporary works such as *Sir Isumbras*, which depicts the close association between iron-smiths and the hillside mines that supply them; and to later texts such as the Middle English versions of *Partonope of Blois*, which demonstrates in its depictions of estates the mercantile and agricultural uses of natural spaces that underlie the successful maintenance of a noble identity. Together, these and other late-medieval Middle English romances reflect an ecological perspective on the natural world delineated by attention to economically significant topographical detail. This chapter, then, will discuss how these romances' attention to the management and harvest of

(nine and five, respectively) than any other romance" (p. 5). Only the *Tale of Gamelyn* survives in more manuscripts, and that because of its integration with the *Canterbury Tales*; see further my discussion in the final section of this chapter.

natural resources often reveals the link between country and urban spaces created by the exchange of such goods. I will also consider how sympathetic portrayals of laborers and other low-class harvesters of natural resources suggest that romances, particularly from the late-fourteenth century and into the fifteenth, reflected the shifting nature of their audience by engaging with the environmental experiences of merchants, household clerks, reeves, franklins, and gentry farmers in addition to those of the higher aristocracy.

Finally, the evolving nature of the audience for Middle English romance, and the varieties of interactions with the natural world experienced by that ever more diverse group, leads us to consider how late medieval romances reflect contemporary concerns over landscape degradation, climate change, and population decline in the generations that followed the Black Death. *Sir Degrevant*'s narrative of designed landscapes laid waste by the ravages of jealous neighbors links the economic and social significance of English topography to a budding awareness of the mounting challenges for aristocratic landlords as the fifteenth century dragged on. Moreover, in the *Tale of Gamelyn*, these issues lie alongside a perspective on English landscape that records grievances of rural decay endemic to the late medieval context of its composition, while also implying a very personal emotional and physical connection between small landowners and the local environments and topography of their holdings. Throughout *Gamelyn*, observation of the local landscape – from fields left fallow and parks destroyed to “The wodes and the shawes and the wild feeld”² – leads directly to anxieties over the owner's own connections to, and responsibilities for, that landscape. My discussion of the many

² *The Tale of Gamelyn*, l. 784. All citations of this text, unless otherwise noted, are taken from the edition in Stephen Knight and Thomas Ohlgren, eds., *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997).

“values” attributed to landscape in Middle English romance will thus conclude with a consideration of how *Gamelyn*’s conservative concentration on landed property as the foundation of social identity reveals contemporary attitudes of the lower gentry toward the ever-shifting legal and natural landscape of late medieval England. To begin this discussion, then, I turn to the importance of topography in shaping social, political, and economic boundaries in the textual worlds of Insular romance.

Topography, Identity, and Boundaries in Sir Isumbras

In the fourteenth-century Middle English romance *Sir Isumbras*, both the hero’s and the audience’s engagement with the plot is ultimately guided by its descriptions and investigations of landscape. In broad strokes, this romance deals with a hero whose pride earns him an ultimatum from God: he must face suffering in youth or age. Choosing youth, he loses first all of his possessions and then his family, having his children stolen by animals, and his wife abducted by Saracens. Destitute and alone, Isumbras joins a community of smiths, works his way up the social hierarchy, fights in a Christian army, does penance in the holy land as a pilgrim, and is ultimately reunited with his family, conquering the Saracen lands and ending the story wealthy once more. Modern scholars have read this story, and the details associated with it, in the context of an exemplary penitential³ or Crusading narrative.⁴ Elizabeth Fowler suggests that the romance functions as a thought experiment to test the “political, sexual, and religious bounds of

³ See Andrea Hopkins’ *The Sinful Knights: A Study of Middle English Penitential Romance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).

⁴ For which see Lee Manion, “The Loss of the Holy Land and *Sir Isumbras*: Literary Contributions to Fourteenth-Century Crusade Discourse,” *Speculum* 85 (2010): pp. 65-90.

lordship” in a “stark landscape of suppose,”⁵ while Samara Landers argues that the poem’s unique concentration on Isumbras as a figure who fails to remain in any particular group for the duration of the poem focuses the text on the development of knightly identity.⁶ Within its overarching redemption story, however, *Sir Isumbras* demonstrates a peculiar fascination with the specific rise and fall of the “londe” itself, tracing the minute progress of the hero up hills and across rocky upland environments. These elevated spaces serve as literal and figurative platforms from which Isumbras can decry (and define) his state, while simultaneously thrusting the plot forward. My analysis, then, will seek to demonstrate how *Sir Isumbras* ultimately ties the social and cultural “ascension” of the hero and his family to his ability to manipulate the matter of the earth, as he moves from stone-bearer to iron-smith to recast knight, ready to employ his environmental education to reassert his control over the cultural as well as physical landscape. In *Sir Isumbras*, social and economic value remains wrapped up with the land, and narrative itself becomes a literal mapping of one's progress across a countryside of cause and effect.

Elevation becomes particularly important to the development of Isumbras' story along the border of the Greekish Sea, presumably signifying the Mediterranean (ll.

194ff).⁷ Here, the text obsesses over charting the specific topography that Isumbras

⁵ Elizabeth Fowler, “The Romance Hypothetical: Lordship and the Saracens in *Sir Isumbras*” in *The Spirit of Medieval English Popular Romance*, eds. Ad Putter and Jane Gilbert (London: Harlow, 2000), pp. 97–121, at pp. 118 and 99. The second quote is cited by Manion in “The Loss of the Holy Land” (p. 73) as well.

⁶ See Samara Landers, “‘And loved he was with all’: Identity in *Sir Isumbras*,” *Orbis Litterarum* 64.5 (2009): 351-72.

⁷ Except where expressly indicated to be otherwise, citations of “Sir Isumbras” in this chapter are taken from Hudson's edition (*Four Middle English Romances*) of the version surviving in Cambridge, Gonville and Caius College MS 175. Fowler marks the Greekish Sea, the ‘borow’ of Jerusalem, and the part of Acre as the only real geographical landmarks in the poem, discounting “the bleak landscape” of the poem by

passes over and pauses upon. This is not to say that the poem abandons the general, allegorical nature of its landscape presentation in favor of a descriptive technique linking landmarks to particular, real-world sites. Instead, it expends a large number of lines reminding the audience that the terrain that Isumbras has reached is characterized by stony hills, which he both climbs and descends. From the hilltop where he loses his youngest son – the last vestige of his family identity –, to the hillside settlement of iron-smiths that he joins, to the twin mountains that define the battlefield where Christian and Muslim forces first meet, the core of *Sir Isumbras* charts a space of mountainous highlands, cutting the poem into two narrative halves. Such a divisive demarcation echoes the mountains of the poem's landscape, which themselves define the boundary between Christian Europe and the seas (and lands) of the Saracens.

This topographical narrative of boundary-defining highlands adds a particularly English flavor to the St. Eustace story that served as the basis for *Sir Isumbras*.⁸ Marking out specific hilltops, trees, and stones, the text develops a tone strongly reminiscent of Old and Middle English land-grant charters. Nicholas Howe, referring to the definition of property through local landmarks in Anglo-Saxon wills and charters, posits that “the Anglo-Saxons conceived of the land and all that grew on it as more enduring than

positing that “the poem’s places clearly stand for Christian political claims rather than for any natural topography” (“Romance Hypothetical,” p. 98). I agree with Fowler’s pronouncement that the poem is invested in investigating the boundaries between Christian and Saracen realms (“Romance Hypothetical,” pp. 98-9). However, I think that topographical details play an integral role in this focus of the text, particularly in its climactic central section.

⁸ On the much-noted association between the plot of the *South English Legendary* tale of St. Eustance and *Sir Isumbras*, see for example Anne B. Thompson, “Jaussian Expectation and the production of Medieval Narrative: The Case of “St. Eustace” and *Sir Isumbras*,” *Exemplaria* 5.2 (1993): pp. 387-407; Laurel Braswell, “*Sir Isumbras* and the Legend of St. Eustace,” *Medieval Studies* 27 (1965): pp. 128-51; and Dieter Mehl’s *The Middle English Romances of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968), pp. 128-35.

anything human beings could build on it and thus as more useful for legal purposes.”⁹ These charters define land by its boundaries; specifically, they present a narrative of walking the limits of the designated plot, relying on prominent, often natural landmarks to guide the charted course.¹⁰ Such attention to detail is particularly pronounced in charters written within a century of 1066. As Della Hooke has observed, “as time progresses not only does the number of charters increase but the amount of detail included within the boundary clauses also increases and some of the tenth- and eleventh-century boundary clauses are brimming with topographical detail.”¹¹ Such charters and boundary clauses would then undergo generations of copying, including some “attempts [that] were made to translate the Old English bounds into Middle English, [although] sometimes with very misleading results.”¹² Thus, despite the fact that, “after the Norman Conquest[, w]rits replaced charters and written boundary descriptions were rarely preserved,”¹³ later medieval English readers nevertheless maintained an interest in reading these definitions of space by boundary features and prominent topography. The proliferation of deeds and other documents relating to the transfer of land in the thirteenth and especially fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (and beyond) also preserved a literary record of landscape description, if one that skewed more towards an emphasis on

⁹ Nicholas Howe, “Looking for Home in Anglo-Saxon England” in *Home and Homelessness in the Medieval and Renaissance World*, ed. Nicholas Howe (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), p. 159.

¹⁰ On the rich topographical details included in Anglo-Saxon boundary clauses as evidence of a close attention by authors to the actual lay of the land, see the pioneering works of Della Hooke, in particular *The Landscape of Anglo-Saxon England* (London: Leicester University Press, 1998), pp. 84-102.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 89. Unfortunately, Hooke does not provide any specific examples.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

economically important natural resources.¹⁴ Moreover, perambulatory definitions of English landscapes remained current throughout the late medieval and early modern periods in the Rogation Tide practice of “beating the parish bounds”¹⁵ – a community-defining event whose significance I will explore below.

This concept of land as defined by its edges and economic significance echoes the perspective presented in *Sir Isumbras*.¹⁶ Thus, the central section of the romance literally maps the territory covered onto an English concept of landownership. In doing so, it weaves together economic and religious issues of paramount importance to its late-medieval English readers through its presentations of landscape and the management of natural resources. Simultaneously, it also combines literate, legal practices of land-definition with oral practices of perambulatory topographical experience, yielding a composite perspective of landscape that fuses symbolic, literary, and everyday English landscapes in a way that echoes the view of the texts’ composer(s) and readers.

At the opening of the work, Isumbras' pride – and the circumstances of his fall from power – communicates his inability to comprehend or control completely the

¹⁴ On the initial post-Conquest proliferation of charters, deeds, and other such documents, see for instance the foundational study by M. T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: 1066-1307*, 3rd edn. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), especially pp. 46-82. Richard Firth Green cites Clanchy’s discussion of the fact that “dependence on symbolic gestures and the word persisted in law and literature, and throughout medieval culture, despite the growth of literacy” (Clanchy [1993 edn.], p. 278, cited at Green p. 43) to support his claim that, in addition to appearing “in metrical romances and folk ballads to the end of the Middle Ages... this tension between two modes of evidence, two kinds of truth, was not felt solely by the uneducated and the provincial; it permeated the conceptual system of medieval society as a whole;” see Green’s *A Crisis of Truth: Literature and Law in Ricardian England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002 [Orig. 1999]), cited at p. 43. Similarly, the ways in which certain Middle English romances like *Isumbras* present concepts of topography demonstrate an intersection of both literate (documentary charters) and spoken or acted definitions of property and community vis-à-vis landscape features.

¹⁵ Among many other scholars, Hooke also notes this continuation, at *Landscape*, p. 91.

¹⁶ For an overview of the evolving economic values and uses of landscape in the mid-fourteenth to early sixteenth centuries, see Christopher Dyer, *Making a Living in the Middle Ages: The People of Britain 850-1520* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), pp. 265ff, especially pp. 330-362.

workings of his natural domain. Here, the text notes how Sir Isumbras “wente hym to play, / His foreste for to se” (ll. 38-9). This lackadaisical approach to his land as something to be enjoyed entirely for its entertainment value (here through hunting) corresponds with the narrator’s immediately preceding condemnation of Isumbras’ arrogance: for, since “So longe he levede in that pryde / That Jhesu wolde no lenger abyde; / To hym he sente a stevenne” (ll. 34-6).¹⁷ The divine messenger (in most versions, a bird) informs Isumbras that, “For pryde of golde and fee” (l. 45), he must suffer poverty as penance for arrogance in his youth or old age; he chooses youth. The material effects of his decision are immediately made manifest. His horse dies; his dogs and hawk return to the wild (ll. 61ff). His aristocratic, material mediations of the forest’s “value” have been stripped away. Yet here the text also provides the first marker of its concerns with the economic and social significance of land(scape) and resource management, which surface time and again throughout the romance. Returning to his home after the loss of his animals in the woods, Isumbras encounters his “herdemen,” who inform him that “Owre fees ben fro us revedde, / There is nothyng ylevelandde, / Nowghte on stede to thy plowe” (ll. 88-90). With their animals gone, his vassals are unable to work the land – a fact characterized as the loss of “fees.”¹⁸ Since Isumbras has mismanaged his property by not considering its value outside of usefulness for funding his largesse (ll. 22-4) and his own entertainment, the loss of this property robs him of the income he depends upon – reaffirming the clear link between landed property and wealth common to many romances.

¹⁷ For a counter-example of a romance lord carefully considering the minuteae of estate management, see my discussion of *Sir Degrevant* in the third section of this chapter. Isumbras will learn to adopt a more complex appreciation for his landholdings over the course of his romance.

¹⁸ See *MED* “fe (n.(1)),” meanings 1-3a: livestock, material wealth, or “money as a medium of exchange.”

However, the poem also notes how Isumbras' fate is similarly suffered by his tenants and "herdemen." While this setup explicitly reinforces the extremity of Isumbras' fall from grace, the specific details of the tenants' woes drives home the point that such laborers and smaller landowners are dependent upon the ability of the lord to govern his property (and himself). Thus, the text implies here that Isumbras' failure demonstrates not only a lack of religious foresight, but also an ignorance of Isumbras' responsibilities as a manager of people, properties, and resources – practical matters to which the poem will later return, in order to complicate its initial praise of noble largesse with an awareness of the need to understand and appreciate one's dependence upon the local landscape for both profit and survival. The order in which Isumbras meets with his misfortunes implies the dynamic network of dependence that characterizes the successful management of an estate (although the chronology collapses here to heighten dramatic effect). With his animals dead, the land cannot be worked; without crops, he loses income; without wealth, his family is forced, destitute, out of their home.

Considering this matrix of allusions to the late-medieval economic context in English land ownership (in Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Ashmole 61, for instance, the romance shares a manuscript with a popular warning against legal pitfalls in *The Rules for Purchasing Land*),¹⁹ Isumbras' first set of major challenges take place in the context of a narrative that demonstrates him learning how to define the worldly limitations of his power. Isumbras' trials in the central highlands of the romance, however, connect these financial, worldly concerns to a broader conception of the boundaries of Christian

¹⁹ For editions of, and commentary on, all texts as included in Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Ashmole 61, see George Shuffleton, ed., *Codex Ashmole 61: A Compilation of Popular Middle English Verse* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2008).

Europe. In a way, the romance itself becomes a land-grant charter of Christianity. Having lost his wife at the seashore (the lowest elevation in the work), Isumbras and his son begin the ascent (literally) toward the romance's third act. First, "He took his sone be the hand / And wente up upon the land / By holtes that were hore" (ll. 340-2) – and here, this foreign, implicitly threatening forest on the hillside is a far cry from the forest wherein he went to "pley" at the poem's beginning. Moreover, while "holtes...hore" is a fairly common romance formula, the adjective "hore" carries associations with boundary markers in Middle English deeds.²⁰ Its use here, then, reinforces the sense of Isumbras and his son charting a dangerous space at the edge of Christendom, beating the boundary on land doubled by the "Greekish Sea" itself.

The poem's preoccupation with the topographical course of Christian perambulation continues as the father and son seek a place to rest. "Thenne come they to an hyl ful hy / And there they thought al nyght to ly, / They myghte no lenger dree" (ll. 352-4), where they collapse beneath a solitary tree. It is here the next morning that an eagle snatches away the last of their possessions, and Isumbras, "A sory man thenne walkes hee / And folewyd [the eagle] to the Grykkysche see" (ll. 358-9), where it flies out into the ocean. Notably, it is while Isumbras follows the bird once more to retrace the seashore that a unicorn abducts his son. Bereft of family, social standing, and goods, Isumbras "sette hym on a ston" (l. 366) and prays that, since "Now am I lefte alone," he desires "Jesu that weredest in hevene coroun / Wysse me the way to sum toun" (ll. 369-71). The answer to his prayer, in keeping with this concentration on topography, appears

²⁰ See *MED* "hor (adj.)," meaning 1a: "~ ston [cp. grei ston], a monolith, a gray stone marking a boundary."

in the very next line, “As he wente be a lowe” (l. 376).²¹ In effect, the poem employs here the language and concept of property evident in the land charters – namely, a space defined by the landmarks lining its boundaries. Here, however, the boundaries mark not an individual’s plot of land, but the edge of Christendom. Isumbras, as a good Christian lord-in-training, must first learn those boundaries before he can seek to expand them through contests in the Holy Land. Indeed, the poem’s climactic central battle (ll. 400ff), which charts Isumbras’ travel from the Christian mountain to the Saracen mountain and back again, describes the successful maintenance of the Christian boundaries that Isumbras has come to learn.

The cultural status of landmarks provides a literary analogue to the contemporary English village practice of self-identification with local landscapes. As historians Barbara Hanawalt and Charles Phythian-Adams, among others, have suggested, annual events such as “beating the bounds” and boundary games were extremely important to the process by which inhabitants of late-medieval English villages and parishes identified themselves as members of a community.²² George Homans explains that such Rogation Day or “Gangday” processions often took place on the Monday, Tuesday, or Wednesday before Ascension or Holy Thursday, and represented a tradition whose practice stretched

²¹ Interestingly, the linguistic antecedent of “lowe,” the Old English word “hlaew/hlaw,” occurs almost entirely within land-grant charters, reinforcing the linguistic association of this word with the definition of property via distinguishing landscape features. See the relevant entries in Antonette diPaolo Healey, John Price Wilkin, and Xin Xiang, eds., *The Dictionary of the Old English Corpus on the World Wide Web* (Toronto, ON: Dictionary of Old English Project, 2009). Similarly, more than 50% of the occurrences for the related terms “beorg/beorh” come from land-grant charters.

²² See further Barbara Hanawalt, *The Ties that Bound: Peasant Families in Medieval England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 21-23, and Charles Phythian-Adams, *Local History and Folklore: A New Framework* (London: Bedford Square Press for the Standing Conference for Local History, 1975), pp. 17-21.

continuously for centuries after 1066.²³ These processions, led by the parish priest, “went in perambulation about the boundaries of the village.”²⁴ The priest would stop to pray for crops at various prominent landmarks, leading to such names as the Holy Oak, Gospel Tree, and Amen Corner.²⁵ Certainly, the intent of such a practice to reiterate the bounds of the community within the actual local topography is self-evident.

However, these ritualized aids to memory often involved an undertone of mnemonic violence that could quickly flare out of hand. In order to impose an intimate connection with the socially coded landscape on the subsequent generation, young boys would be dunked or thrown into ponds and streams along the route, or have their hindquarters hit against or rubbed across prominent trees and stones.²⁶ This association between boundaries and physical action further extended to “boundary games” such as football matches along the boundary between two villages by the denizens of both communities.²⁷ Notably, the goal of such contests was to return the ball to one’s “home” side (as opposed to the modern practice of scoring on an opponent’s goal),²⁸ thereby symbolically reiterating the importance of maintaining the control of a community’s spatial identity and natural resources. These competitive spirits would often boil over into violent disputes between the denizens of different villages, leading to fights along such “emotional boundaries.”²⁹ As Hanawalt notes, these meetings could quickly devolve into violence, as standing grievances concerning territory-incursions were brought to

²³ *English Villagers of the Thirteenth Century* (New York: Norton, 1975 [Orig. 1941]), p. 368.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.* and Phythian-Adams, *Local History and Folklore*, p. 19.

²⁶ Homans, *English Villagers*, p. 368.

²⁷ Phythian-Adams, *Local History and Folklore*, p. 19.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Hanawalt, *The Ties that Bound*, p. 23.

light in the context of physical competition along those same boundaries; for instance, she reports that 59% of homicides occurred in fields, especially during times of plowing and harvest.³⁰

Manorial accounts also took notice of such local practices, even requiring tenants to enact such annual perambulations of the lord's territory. In one late thirteenth-century account from the prebendary of Donigton (modern Dunnington), Yorkshire, for instance, the lord's accountant completes his description of the tenants' agricultural duties with a particularly interesting command, declaring that: "the said tenants shall form a procession on Thursday in the week of Pentecost, and shall sing the following song: *Gif i na thing for mi land*, etc."³¹ This procession, complete with a Middle English song so familiar that it needed not (unfortunately for modern readers) to be recorded in its entirety, clearly demonstrates that a core element of the proper management of the land and its resources was the beating of its bounds. Tenants and lords knew the land by delineating their places within it and on it – and Middle English verse helped to remind them of this duty at the same time it led them through the performance of self-definition vis-à-vis the local landscape.

Sir Isumbras echoes this English practice of looking to the landscape when establishing one's identity as part of a larger social and religious community. As noted above and examined further below, the seashore hills at the heart of the romance provide

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ T.A.M. Bishop, ed. and trans., *Extents of the Prebends of York [c. 1295]*, from *The Yorkshire Archaeological Society Record Series Vol. 94, Miscellanea Vol. 4* (Leeds: Yorkshire Archaeological Society, 1937), pp. 1-38, at p. 7. Homans, *English Villagers*, pp. 456-7, n.28, also notes this sentence, observing that "we would give a good deal to know the rest of the song." My own consultation of the manuscript (London, British Library MS Cotton Claudius B.iii) has confirmed, unfortunately, that no further parts of the song survive.

a place of trial for the protagonist, and a site of violent contest between Christian and Muslim communities. Moreover, as the text imbues Isumbras' loss of his family, and especially his sons, with extreme pathos, this string of scenes emphasizes the text's connections with traditions of tracing community boundaries. In particular, the young boys lost at the crossing of a river or at a stone on the top of a hill recall the traditional practices of dunking youths in boundary waterways, or striking them against boundary stones. The romance also reminds the reader of the costs of Isumbras' shortcomings as a warden of his lands. In order to care for his family, to protect his community, he must first know (via experience) the place, the topography, of the land upon which their livelihoods all depend. This need to strip Isumbras down to the solitary penitent corresponds with the religious themes of the text charted by other scholars, while also reflecting the real-life experience of medieval readers. This reflection, in turn, provides Middle English audiences with a way of relating to and engaging with the protagonist, teaching them lessons about the importance of recognizing their place within the natural world, while also drawing them further into the story of penance and redemption.

This romance's understanding of the landscape's significance for community and self-identity, then, has a firm grounding in the economic significance of managing and harvesting natural resources. As such, let me return momentarily to economic evaluations of landscape. In these highlands at the heart of the romance, the prominence given to a community of (iron-)smiths reinforces the texts' desire to embody and react to the experiences of a mercantile and lower gentry readership.³² The text also firmly associates

³² A. Trounce explains how accurate the account of iron- (not black-) smithing in *Sir Isumbras* is, concluding that the felicity of detail suggests an origin for the poem in Northamptonshire, abutting Norfolk, sometime in the thirteenth century ("The English Tail-Rhyme Romances (concluded)," *Medium Aevum* 3

this town with boundary landmarks. In response to the prayer cited above, the hero discovers this settlement “As he wente be a lowe” (l. 376), and, when he agrees to join them in return for food, the smiths “taughten hym to bere ston; / Thenne hadde he schame inough” (ll. 386-7). Here, the text clearly ties issues of economic and social class to specific elements of the local landscape, and the inherent systems by which elements of that environment derive meaning, a point that other scholars have missed.³³ The proximity of the work-settlement to a hill establishes a firm foundation for the hierarchical steps in the economic metamorphosis of raw materials (iron) into the finished products of knighthood, Isumbras’ “armes dyght, / Al that fel for a knyght” (ll. 397-8). The foundation of this social connection is anchored in the fact that the smiths depend upon harvesting and manipulating the “crops” of that hill (literally stones, but with the implication that these stones and hills serve as sources of iron ore for use in the smiths’ craft). The version of *Sir Isumbras* found in Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Ashmole 61 makes this point explicit, describing how “They [smiths] made hym to bere a stone / Oute

(1934): pp. 30-50, at p. 37). Trounce also observes that the wages of different levels of ironsmithing (which Isumbras progresses through) were strictly hierarchical and regulated (p. 37). This process, then, provides a perfect model for demonstrating Isumbras’ step-by-step rise back up the social ladder at the same time his experiences provide both for him and for the reader a greater appreciation for (and perhaps championing of) the natural resource collection, refining, and production processes. For an in-depth discussion of the process and products of iron work in medieval England, see further Jane Geddes, “Iron,” in *English Medieval Industries: Craftsmen, Techniques, Products*, eds. John Blair and Nigel Ramsay (London: The Hambleton Press, 1991), pp. 167-88.

³³ I suggest that this context of evaluating landscape gives meaning to the smith scene, apart from the straight-forward moment of suffering it is usually interpreted to be by other scholars. Even allowing for a variety of interpretations, modern critics omit the landscape frame; see for instance Anne Thompson’s remark that “when the poet fails to make any explicit statement at a later point in the narrative about the significance of Isumbras’s career as a smith, including the manufacture of a suit of armor, we are left uncertain about which generic model to privilege. We could assume that this labor, which is socially degrading for a knight, is further evidence of God’s chastisement of Isumbras. On the other hand, perhaps Isumbras’s forging of a suit of armor suggests that the hero remains mindful of his wife’s injunction that he avenge her abduction, but nothing in the text makes this obvious” (“Jaussian,” p. 393). As I argue, this scene is instead indicative of the ecological economy that characterizes many Middle English romance’s views of the natural world.

of a depe slow. // Thus he bore irene and stone / Till two yere were comen and gon; / He wrought thus with myche wo” (ll. 407-11).³⁴ Isumbras has been taught to mine for ore from a “depe slow” or hole in the hillside abutting the smiths' settlement; in the process, he learns via experience the inherent (and often hidden) economic value of these landscape features, and their concordant importance to the maintenance of his corporeal identity as a human, and, ultimately, his “true” cultural identity as a knightly lord of that landscape.

This iron-work (and the nearby hill which supports it) establishes and maintains the identities of the smiths as craftsmen, while simultaneously providing them with sustenance by means of economic exchange. “They bad hym swynke for "so doo wee, / We have non othir plowe” (ll. 380-1): the act of gathering material from the nearby land in turn allows the “plowless” smiths to obtain food by working that landscape in another fashion (here echoed by the concordant meaning of “plowe” as farmland³⁵). The representation of this alternate means of gaining sustenance allows the text to supplement its constant laments regarding the lack of food, which develops from Isumbras' loss of his agricultural estates, with a recognition of the land's ability to provide sustenance through other models of resource management. It also specifically places the work of the smiths in the context of an intimate relationship with the local environment, one characterized by the hard physical labor and development of the earth that the plow symbolizes. As such,

³⁴ This citation and all other quotations of the Codex Ashmole 61 text of *Sir Isumbras* are taken from Shuffleton's edition. While Maldwyn Mills, editing the romance as witnessed in British Library, MS Cotton Caligula A.ii, presents for that manuscript's “Out of a fowl depe slowghe” (l. 396) a gloss of “slowghe” as “bog,” I think that, giving the mining context (in *Six Middle English Romances* [London: Dent, 1973]), Shuffleton's gloss of “muddy hole” more accurately captures the romance's presentation of the scene in both versions. See also *MED* “slough (n.(1)),” meanings 1a: “A muddy place, mudhole; a swamp; also, mud, mire.”

³⁵ *MED* ‘plough (n.)’, definition 3a, “a unit of land measure, a carucate,” and 3b, “arable land.”

it provides an important step in the process of educating Isumbras (and through him, the audience) about the value of different elements of the landscape, as well as the value and necessity of those inhabitants who work these often less “textually visible” professions and crafts. Isumbras' work with the smiths, and his progression among their ranks from rock-bearer to metal-worker (ll. 382-399),³⁶ allows him (and thus again the reader) to become intimately familiar with each stage in this production process, making concrete the connection between the stone of the hills and the material arms that are integral to both the practical function and social symbolism of the knightly identity. Thus, the episode of Isumbras' involvement with the smiths illustrates the value of hills (and those who work them) to those who own or manage estates. Although the work of the stone-bearer may be the means by which Isumbras “hadde... schame inough,” it nevertheless serves an integral role in the maintenance of social and economic systems of value – adding two more layers of significance to the boundary-defining landmarks of stony hills.

After this narrative of production, the text returns to descriptions of elevation to establish once again the opposing forces of Christians and Saracens as groups differentiated by their association with prominent local landmarks. This mode of topographical determination emphasizes how the two neighboring communities have each come to the border with the “other.” The poem explicitly places this contest of arms in the context of a territorial boundary dispute. “Al the sevene yer long / The Sawdon werryd on Crystene lond / And stroyede it ful wyde” (ll. 400-2): the Saracens have been desecrating the “Crystene lond” which is, in turn, itself an embodiment of the Christian

³⁶ Fowler notes Isumbras' professional progression in a different, yet concordant context, positing that “His role as a smith is instrumental in his reacquisition of the martial abilities of his knighthood. He forges armour as if he were reconstituting the social person of the knight he once was: he rebuilds his social body as he builds the armour” (“Romance Hypothetical,” p. 102).

community. The Saracens have failed to recognize the legitimacy of the topographical features delineating the Christian community as a separate entity, and the Christian forces now seek to re-establish the primacy of their narrative of meaning for the local hills as a feature marking their faith (and their land) as different from those of the Saracens. The two communities thus gather at prominent landmarks, in order to pit their competing cultural narratives of landscape definition against one-another.

The entrance of Isumbras into this context serves to integrate two different systems through which the local landscape gains cultural significance. On the one hand, Isumbras arrives with the (literal) fruits of his labor within that landscape, as “In hys armes that he hadde wrought / [and] On hors that coles hadde ibrought / To batayle faste he hyde” (ll. 409-11). Isumbras's martially enabling and determining assemblage, representing the “homemade knight,”³⁷ also stands as a signifier for the process of production and economic (e)valuation of those markers of social identity from the raw materials of the nearby hills. Such equipment, then, embodies the culmination and narrative development of knightly identity from the raw materials of the environment that makes up one's domain. This system is then brought into a broader cultural context of defining a community vis-à-vis distinguishing landmarks:

Betwen twoo hyllys tho come hee,
Crystene and hethene ther he see,
The twoo kynges hadde brought
Ayther batayle on a lowe (ll. 412-15).³⁸

³⁷ Again, see also Fowler, who argues in a concordant vein that, when this construction of the knightly assemblage is underway, Isumbras “begins to ‘own’ the social person of the knight by virtue of his labour,” forming “another link in the chain of forms of dominion that are dramatized by the poem” (“Romance Hypothetical,” p. 102).

³⁸ The Ashmole 61 version of the text instead places the emphasis on the elevation of Isumbras (and through him the audience) as observer, detailing how “He rode uppe to an hylle hyghe; / Hethen and Crysten ther he seygh / That the knyghtys hade brought” (ll. 433-5). Yet the specific mention of the hill

Here, the text links both forces to particular hills along the boundary between their two realms. Quite literally, the Christian king has gathered his forces so as to “beat the bounds” of his realm into the collective memory of the neighboring Saracen community.

Once the battle itself has begun in earnest, the poem measures its eponymous hero's progress in terms of both martial prowess and social status through a narrative of his topographical progress. Isumbras proves an unstoppable force of violence until his horse is cut from beneath him (ll. 425-9). At this point, “Whenne he to the erthe soughte, / An eerl off the batayle hym broughte / To an hygh mountayn” (ll. 430-2). On this summit, presumably the same mountain upon which Isumbras saw the Christian forces arrayed before the battle began, Isumbras is given a new set of arms, and a new steed worthy of his accomplishments on the field of battle. As such, the poem uses the detail of this elevated site of receiving new, superior equipment to demarcate Isumbras' transition from a narrative of deriving personal value from the materials of the local landscape, to participating in the communal project of imposing a narrative of boundaries and Christian self-identification onto the most prominent features of that landscape's topography. Arriving with the products of his individual endeavor vis-à-vis the landscape, Isumbras's accomplishments demonstrate both to him and the poem's audience a hierarchical, Russian-doll series of nested narratives for determining the significance of that landscape. Proven worthy by these accomplishments, Isumbras is finally able to cross these mountains, and move into the second half of the romance, focusing on spiritual purity (in

serves to remind the readers of this battle's role within the context of a larger boundary dispute between the two religious communities – a focus on elevation that is soon echoed by the narrative of the battle itself, in the texts of both the Ashmole and the Cambridge manuscripts. The Cotton Caligula A.ii text combines both views: “Tyll he come on a hyll so hye, / The Cristen and the hethen he sye: / Two kynges thydur were broughte. / They battelled hom on a lowe” (ll. 421-4).

his time as a pilgrim in the Holy Land) and eventually both familial and Christian reconciliation through (re)conquering the Sultan's lands in the East. The boundaries that define the text's center have been breached and left behind, but their prominence in the text ensures that the lessons they imparted are not left with them. Thus, *Sir Isumbras* ends with the eponymous hero back in control of a rich estate – but his trials have ensured that he (and the text's audience) recognize and understand the issues of resource management and boundary definition that arise for lords and all others who make their living from – and in – the medieval landscape.

A World of Opportunity – Economies of Natural Resources

Despite their explicit interest in chivalric, baronial, or religious ideals, late-medieval Insular romances have a pervasive tendency to present the world in expressly economic terms. The ecological context that encompasses and permeates these plots is no exception. Indeed, beyond the romances' near-universal interest in the ownership and exchange of landed property, many of these works demonstrate a notable fascination with economic networks. Some heroes even participate in this process themselves, engaging in (and implicitly honoring) professions focused on the harvesting, refinement, and sale of natural resources. As I have shown, the significance of boundary hills in *Sir Isumbras* quickly leads into an examination of the laborers who harvest those hills for the socially symbolic and economically valuable raw materials of iron ore that, when processed, compose the core elements of a knight's material accoutrements. Consequently, topographical features and identifiably British environments loom large in the worlds of these texts, and their plots often expose the ways in which human characters value, and

indeed depend upon, their natural surroundings. Forests produce wood, charcoal, prey, and pasture; quarries produce stone; hillside mines produce ore; moors produce peat; the sea produces animal wealth; and the city is clearly and firmly tied to the economic activities of the countryside.

A number of romances seed their narratives with mentions of the economic significance of woodland and seaside spaces that reveal a real-world foundation beneath these texts' presentations of landscape. The Lincoln Cathedral MS 91³⁹ romance *Sir Perceval of Galles*, for instance, initiates the infamously naïve protagonist's emergence into chivalric knighthood by having him stray from the idyllic pastoral existence he lives with his mother into evidence of a broader socioeconomic means of interpreting the woodland space:⁴⁰

And als he welke in the wodde,
He sawe a full faire stode
Offe coltes and of meres gude,
Bot never one was tame;
And sone saide he, "Bi Seyne John,

³⁹ One of the now famous manuscripts compiled by the fifteenth-century Yorkshire gentry man, Robert Thornton. For a recent discussion of this man and his manuscripts, see Michael Johnston, *Romance and the Gentry in Late Medieval England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 159-205.

⁴⁰ Ryan Harper argues that the Middle English *Perceval* is markedly less realistic in its representation of woodland lifestyles than its Old French forebear by Chretien de Troyes; see his *The Representation of Woodland Space in Middle English Popular Narrative* (Ph.D. Diss., University of Rochester, 2012), at pp. 51-61. However, while Harper argues that "The sort of woodland we see in Middle English "chivalric" literature [including *Sir Perceval of Galles*] can be read not only as a universal, mythic space, but also as a contextually-disembodied carry-over from the popular Francophone literature of the twelfth century, creatively adapted by poets working within their own immediate cultural contexts" (pp. 60-1), the scene that I discuss here reveals that even the "universal" or "mythic" forest of *Perceval* may still represent an economic appreciation of landscape spaces relevant to late-medieval English readers. Thus, while some literary "woodlands, whatever the degree of "realism" read into their immediate contexts, tend to function as outside spaces, which separate one from civilization" (Harper, *Representation*, p. 60), Middle English romances such as *Perceval* cannot avoid undercutting or interrupting their "mythic" forests to present moments of real-world practices for managing and harvesting forest resources that ultimately link "wild" and "civilized" spaces together through networks of exchange.

Swilke thynges as are yone
Rade the knyghtes apone” (ll. 325-31).⁴¹

Perceval quickly steals a pregnant mare to serve as his steed, demonstrating his ignorance both of a proper knightly mount (stallion) and of human ownership laws. Moreover, the economic nature of this space is clearly delineated in even the brief description that the text provides. This “full fair stode”⁴² contains “coltes and... meres gude,” demonstrating the fact that the woodland corral exists as a breeding and raising ground for horseflesh. The broader network of exchange into which these horses will later be entered is even implied (albeit comically) when Perceval rides his mare into Arthur’s nearby court, where “His mere, withowtten faylynge, / Kyste the forhevede of the Kynge - / So nerehande he rade!” (ll. 494-6). Apart from the buffoonish and amusing qualities of this scene, the act of riding this mare into court reminds the audience that the value of horses, both pregnant mares and their more knightly mates, derives from the fact that the denizens of the court desire them.⁴³ While the many uses of horses at other levels of society may be elided here, the mare nonetheless physically enacts the movement from woodland corral to court society that caricatures the economic exchange process that clearly links rural and urban space in real-life late medieval England. The existence of the

⁴¹ All citations of *Sir Perceval of Galles* are taken from Mary Flowers Braswell, ed., *Sir Perceval of Galles and Ywain and Gawain* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995).

⁴² *MED* “stod(e n.(1)),” meaning 1a: “A place where horses or other animals are kept.” For more on such horse-rearing practices, see further Esther Pascua, “From Forest to Farm and Town: Domestic Animals from ca. 1000 – ca. 1400” in *A Cultural History of Animals*, ed. Brigitte Resl, Vol. II: In The Medieval Age (Oxford: Berg, 2007), pp. 81-102; and also Charles Gladitz’s *Horse Breeding in the Medieval World* (Dubin: Four Courts Press, 1997), pp. 141-92.

⁴³ Many studies detail the worth of horses (especially knightly destriers) to medieval aristocrats, for their economic and practical values, and as a symbol of status; see for instance R. H. C. Davis’ *The Medieval Warhorse: Origin, Development and Redevelopment* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989) and Susan Crane, “Ritual Aspects of the Hunt ‘à Force’” in *Engaging with Nature: Essays on the Natural World in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, eds. Barbara A. Hanawalt and Lisa J. Kiser (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), pp. 63-84.

woodland corral, then, undercuts the “wild” nature of the woods that Perceval inhabits, and reveals that the late medieval English poet (or translator) could not avoid revealing the economic nature of the carefully managed woodlands familiar to him and to his audience.

Seashores are another category of landscape space in romance that naturally seems to invite acknowledgments of economic activity.⁴⁴ In a romance that again survives in the Thornton MS, the (*Northern*) *Octavian*, the forest outlaws who abduct the young hero (Florent) know precisely where to turn to fetch a price for him:

Those outlawes sett tham on a grene,
The child thay laide tham bytwene,
And it faste on tham loghe.
The mayster owtlawe spake then,
“Grete schame it were for hardy men,
If thay a childe sloghe.
I rede we bere it here besyde
To the se with mekill pride,
And do we it no woghe;
It es comyn of gentill blode;
We sall hym selle for mekill gude,
For golde and sylver enoghe.”

Two owtlawes than made tham yare,
To the Grekkes se thay it bare;
Thay couthe the way full ryghte. (ll. 556-70).⁴⁵

The shore of the “Grekkes se” (or Mediterranean) here emerges as a space for trade of all varieties, including that of human flesh. Moreover, the romance immediately demonstrates that such economic activity is not divorced from the mercantile networks closer to a Northwestern European audience’s home – for, as soon as Florent is displayed

⁴⁴ For a more detailed discussion of the multifaceted valences of seaside spaces in Middle English romances, see further Chapter 3, below.

⁴⁵ Unless otherwise noted, citations of *Octavian* are taken from the edition in Harriet Hudson, ed., *Four Middle English Romances*.

at the seaside market, a Parisian citizen (Clement) discovers him, and brings the boy home to raise him as a merchant. Thus, the seashore serves as a place for the sale of both inland “goods” or captives and those harvested from the sea.

A more developed example of the economic association considered inherent in medieval seaside environments – one that moves beyond the market of slavery – appears in the fifteenth-century Middle English adaptation of *Partonope of Blois*. Here, as a prelude to a tournament, and as a way to draw knights into the event, the knight Armelus suggests that a fair be held:

At witsonetyde þe next yere,
Be writte lette be charged to be here
Marchauntes of all maner degree,
That of þe queen holde any maner fee,
Where they be fre or Elles bounde,
With her marchaundise vpon þe stronde,
And that a fayre here holden be
Of marchaundise of all maner degree,
And xv. dayes it shall be holden here (ll. 8037-45).⁴⁶

The romance goes on to describe how merchants will erect their booths on the beach, and how “There moste be plente of all vitayle, / Hors, armour that longeth to Chevalry” (ll. 8052-3) for sale, in addition to wine, and many items of clothing (ll. 8046-58). As such, the knight concludes, “Be þen pore men her bopes vp haue / Her good þerin forto save, / And eke grete marchauntes her pavylone, / It shall seme a right wele fayre towne” (ll.8059-62). This passage demonstrates, then, how the seaside marketplace explicitly links the chivalric identity to the exchange of particular goods that then compose that identity, since they “longeth to Chevalry.” Moreover, the event of a

⁴⁶ Citations of *Partonope of Blois*, unless otherwise noted, are taken from the British Library Additional MS 35,288 version, as edited by A. Trampe Böttker in *The Middle-English Versions of Partonope of Blois*, EETS (e.s.) 109 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1912).

tournament itself (here planned to be three days long) must be preceded by a fair five times as long – implying thereby the relative importance of the economic system to capturing and keeping both audience and participants for the tournament, in addition to constructing an identity for the nearby settlement as a “right wele fayre towne” – with a pun on fair as both a physical element and a descriptive attribute of the town.⁴⁷ Even for a settlement, then, identity is shown to depend upon economic exchange – and the seaside emerges as the perfect incubatory space for such a development of chivalric identity from its mercantile roots, since the shore itself marries the markets involved in exchanging local (inland), oceanic, and foreign goods.

Yet what of the processes behind the harvest and exchange of natural resources from specific landscape features, as seen in the iron mines of *Sir Isumbras*? For such representations of valuable natural resources and the laborers who work them, I turn to the romances *Havelok the Dane* (late thirteenth century) and *William of Palerne* (mid-fourteenth century), which explicitly engage with numerous social and economic procedures by which their contemporary societies invested the natural world with worth. These texts also encode sympathetic presentations of those people working directly with these resources. As such, they espouse a worldview that, while still conservatively aristocratic and hierarchical, nevertheless encourages readers to consider each level of society, right down to its roots in the land itself. The heroes of these romances, then, emerge as those who not only value social standing and material possessions, but also understand and appreciate the environmental labor upon which such accomplishment depends.

⁴⁷ See *MED* “feire (n.)” and “fair (adj.)”

Havelok is the earliest of these two romances, and indeed one of the earliest Middle English romances. An adaptation of multiple Anglo-Norman sources,⁴⁸ this romance follows Havelok, heir to the Danish throne, as he is disinherited, saved by Grim the fisherman, married to the English heiress, and finally spurred to reclaim the thrones of both Denmark and England. Throughout, the often-comedic text presents a fairly sympathetic (albeit decidedly aristocratic) view of various laboring professions, as Havelok is supported by or inhabits them. In two of these scenes describing such professions, descriptions of labor reveal a romance finely-attuned to the economic value of the natural world.

The first of these episodes occurs soon after Grim and his family flee to England, taking Havelok with them. Once settled, Grim demonstrates his abilities as a fisherman, catching a diverse array of local sea life:

He tok the sturgiun and the qual,
And the turbut and lax withal;
He tok the sele and the hwel -
He spedde ofte swithe wel.
Keling he tok and tumberel,
Hering and the makerel,
The butte, the schulle, the thornebake (ll. 754-60).⁴⁹

⁴⁸ See Ronald B. Herzman, Graham Drake, and Eve Salisbury, eds., *Four Romances of England*, (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1999), p. 73, and also Thorlac Turville-Petre's *England the Nation: Language, Literature, and National Identity, 1290-1340* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp. 143-55.

⁴⁹ Unless otherwise noted, citations of *Havelok* are given from the edition of Herzman et al., eds., *Four Romances of England*. On the intimate relationship between marine fishing and the rise of commercial markets in England (and also Northern Europe), especially from the eleventh-century on, see James H. Barrett, Alison M. Locker, and Callum M. Roberts, "Dark Age Economics' revisited: the English fish bone evidence AD 600-1600," *Antiquity* 78 (2004): pp. 618-636. For more on the collection, sale, and consumption of specific fish species (but especially the major catches of herring, sea eel, and cod), see further D. Serjeantson and C. M. Woolgar, "Fish Consumption in Medieval England" in *Food in Medieval England: Diet and Nutrition*, eds. C. M. Woolgar, D. Searjeantson, and T. Waldron (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 102-130, and also the essays in D. J. Starkey, C. Reid, and N. Ashcroft, eds., *England's Sea Fisheries: The Commercial Sea Fisheries of England and Wales since 1300* (London: Chatham, 2000), pp. 18-44, and especially the discussions of Grimsby's thriving fish market (p. 21) and competition with the new port of Ravensrodd for fishing business – specifically, the right to sell fish inland

This devotion to detail demonstrates a sincere interest in local fishing practices on the part of the romance's author (and, presumably, its audience). Such a mindset accords with Thorlac Turville-Petre's observation that both this poem and its chronicle sources seem particularly invested in anchoring Havelok in the identifiable locale of thirteenth-century Lincoln.⁵⁰ Roy Liuzza provides a concordant reading of this scene's framing of the poem's economic worldview. Noting that the list is hyperbolic yet believable, he posits that:

What makes the list seem realistic, however, is the context in which it appears – economic rather than symbolic. The bounty of the sea is not a gratuitous detail; it is the object of Grimm's hard work and the source of his prosperity. Inseparable from material motivation or production, the catalogue of fish is part of a system of exchange in which money rather than chivalric honor is the source of value. Throughout *Havelok* narrative details are connected in this way to a world in which labor and survival, power and prosperity, are interrelated, and the underpinnings of the everyday world are conceived in economic terms.⁵¹

Havelok demonstrates yet another way in which late-medieval readers from the North-Eastern English coast could engage with the story: as they learned of the sea's produce through everyday experience, so too could they celebrate that world as worthy

to the Lincolnshire market as Grimm does – in the late thirteenth century (p. 30). See further S. H. Rigby's *Medieval Grimsby: Growth and Decline* (Hull: University of Hull Press, 1993) for the town where Grimm settles; and, for a detailed analysis of fishing's influence on the development of communities in other regions of medieval England, see Harold Fox's *The Evolution of the Fishing Village: Landscape and Society along the South Devon Coast, 1086-1550* (Oxford: Leopard's Head Press, 2001).

⁵⁰ Turville-Petre, *England the Nation*, pp. 146-7.

⁵¹ Roy Liuzza, "Representation and Readership in the Middle English 'Havelok,'" *JEGP* 93.4 (1994): pp. 504-519, at p. 510. I agree with Liuzza's reading of the poem's earnest appreciation of what he terms "bourgeois" labor, as it is from this tone in the work that its definition of landscape spaces derives. I would take issue, however, with Liuzza's claim that *Havelok*'s "narrative strategy of mirroring the world of its assumed audience is striking and atypical" amongst Middle English romances (p. 507). While *Havelok* may employ this technique in a manner that is uniquely forward and explicit, I argue that many other romances demonstrate similar techniques in their presentations of landscape – just in what are often more subtle ways.

within romance. Of course, I am not the first to argue this interpretation of the poem's celebration of the laboring class, as the above citations demonstrate. However, what other scholars have often elided has been how the poem's explicitly practical, economic worldview establishes a particular framework by which both the text and its audience define landscape features. The seashore (and the sea itself) in *Havelok* becomes a space understood primarily in terms of the natural resources it provides and the local economies it supports. As I have shown, such a view of the sea in fact accords with similar, if less elaborately detailed scenes from a number of later romances. Consequently, examining the economic valences of this scene does not simply retread well-worn ground, but reveals an early example of how Middle English romances reflected and reinforced real-life worldviews that defined the natural world into zones of economic value. Far from serving as just the symbolic and fantastical boundary realm between domestic and wild space, or between safety and adventure, the seashore and other landscape spaces of Middle English romances are acknowledged by *Havelok* and other texts as integral parts of local economies. Following the path of Grimm's catch in *Havelok* will demonstrate one example of this practical view of the natural world.

Having returned with his diverse catch, Grim immediately carries these natural resources "Up o londe to selle and fonge" (l. 764), where his movements show a complex network of economic supply-and-demand that knits Lincoln to the settlements and farms of the surrounding countryside:

Forbar he neyther tun [town] ne gronge [farm]
That he ne to yede with his ware.
Kam he nevere hom hand-bare,
That he ne broucte bred and sowel
In his shirte or in his cowel,

In his poke benes and korn -
Hise swink he havede he nowt forlorn.

And hwan he took the grete lamprey,
Ful wel he couthe the rithe wei
To Lincolne, the gode boru;
Ofte he yede it thoru and thoru,
Til he havede wol wel sold
And therefore the penies told.
Thanne he com thenne he were blithe,
For hom he brouthe fele sithe
Wastels, simenels with the horn,
His pokes fulle of mele and korn,
Netes flesh, shepes and swines;
And hemp to maken of gode lines,
And stronge ropes to hise netes,
In the se weren he ofte setes (ll. 765-85).

These lines present us with a veritable grocery list of goods available in the local area. Importantly, each item is shown to be integrated in a large regional network of exchange, where natural resources are traded for “penies,” which in turn are used to purchase necessary goods and food for the fisherman’s home. The extreme specificity of its references – to places, to animal species, to the goods purchased and materials employed – delineates an intimate association between the world of the text and its Lincolnshire roots. Indeed, this process of harvesting and exchanging natural resources becomes in some sense the spirit of the locale: Lincolnshire, in the text, is literally composed of this exchange. The landscape (and seascape) provides the source, stage, and end point for the entire production of economic value. *Havelok*, then, showcases how integral the local sea is to the maintenance of life on land: it helps to drive an economic system that ultimately reaches all the way up to the city itself.

The hero himself also takes part in the collection of resources from the local landscape. Working as a kitchen knave at the local castle, Havelok makes explicit the

household's economic ties to the environment, as "He bar the turves, he bar the star, / The wode fro the brigge he bar" to use for fuel (ll. 940-1). Here, "turves" refers to peat,⁵² "star" to star-grass,⁵³ and wood rounds out the collection of vegetable resources that demonstrates, once again, an understanding of how the landscape contributes elements necessary to the maintenance of noble lifestyles. Working like "a best" (l. 945), Havelok's experiences in the very lowest levels of menial labor implicitly include these activities as valuable elements in the poem's cultural perspective. These scenes not only demonstrate the depth to which Havelok has fallen in terms of social class, then, but demonstrate how those higher classes to which Havelok will return depend upon the work of those who harvest raw materials from the local landscape.⁵⁴ Both land and sea are worthwhile because they support and permeate human economies. Thus, when Havelok promises Grim's sons that "Ilk of you shal have castles ten, / And the lond that thor til longes – / Borwes, tunes, wodes, and wonges [villages]" (ll. 1443-5), he promises microcosms of the economic network that the romance has already explained.

William of Palerne also presents a hero whose youth provides him with experiences in the management of natural resources. Abducted from his parent's noble park by a well-meaning werewolf (Alfonso), William is found in the woods outside of Rome by a cowherd. The cowherd and his wife take the young boy in as their own, and raise him "Til hit [William] big was and bold to buschen [hurry] on felde, / And coupe ful

⁵² *MED* "turf (n.)," meaning 3.

⁵³ *MED* "star(e (n.(1))," probably definition a: "Any of several sedges or reed grasses, sometimes used as thatch: marram grass (*Ammophila arundinacea*), or sand sedge (*Carex arenaria*), or the greater fox sedge (*Carex vulpina*)," but also perhaps b: "a weed growing in grain fields, darnel (*Lolium temulentum*)."

⁵⁴ Again, this observation accords with Liuzza's conclusion that *Havelok* "exploits the connections and disjunctions between genre and social hierarchy inherent in the medieval discourse of style to create a tale whose reality can include both the castle and the kitchen, and show not only their respective virtues but their interdependence" ("Representation," p. 518).

craftily kepe alle here bestes” (ll. 173-4).⁵⁵ In addition to his herding abilities, William soon proves himself adept at the implicitly noble, yet also economically valuable practice of hunting:

...briddes and smale bestes wiþ his bow he quelles
so plenteousliche in his play þat, pertly to telle,
whanne he went hom eche niȝt wiþ is drove of bestis,
he com hymself ycharged wiþ conyng and hares,
wiþ fesauns and feldfares and oþer foules grete,
þat þe herde and his hende wif and al his hole meyne
þat bold barn wiþ his bowe by þat time fedde (ll. 179-185).

Both hero and poet demonstrate knowledge of the various types of edible wildlife to be found in an English forest. Indeed, in contrast to the plain “bestes” of the domestic herd, the poem seems to celebrate the diversity of sylvan life. This interest in diversity, in turn, suggests both an aesthetic and economic interest in cataloguing the goods that woodlands produce. The mention of “conyng and hares,” however, brings up an interesting historical quandary. According to historian Mark Bailey, medieval rabbit populations in England were actually rather controlled, and rabbits did not move much beyond human-made warrens until perhaps the eighteenth century.⁵⁶ The presence of rabbits and hares in William’s forest, then, reveals an element that the narrator omits from the woodland’s explicit description: namely, the fact that it must be part of, or adjoin, a managed estate (as the arrival of the Roman Emperor himself would later suggest). Such a situation only serves to reemphasize the fact that late-medieval English

⁵⁵ Unless otherwise noted, citations of *William* are taken from G.H.V. Bunt, ed., *William of Palerne: An Alliterative Romance* (Groningen: Bouma’s Boekhuis bv, 1985).

⁵⁶ See Mark Bailey, “The Rabbit in the Medieval East Anglian Economy,” *Agricultural History Review* 36 (1988): pp. 1-20, at pp. 1-2. This citation, and other discussions of introducing rabbits into late-medieval Northwest Europe, are presented in Sharon Farmer’s “Aristocratic Power and the “Natural” Landscape: The Garden Park at Hesdin, ca. 1291–1302,” *Speculum* 88.3 (2013): pp. 644-80, at pp. 655-58; Bailey is cited at n. 62.

woodlands were ultimately the products of careful human management⁵⁷ – as they too prove to be in the nominally “Italian” landscape of this romance. William himself partakes in this process of management, even when living with the cowherds, and thus reveals the spectrum of society that benefited from such husbandry.⁵⁸ The forest, then, is a space that rewards those who learn it well, as William does. This combination of pasture and hunting reflects what Corinne Saunders calls the “historical,” economic forest.⁵⁹ However, where Saunders posits that romances often display the idealization of the forest as a place outside the workaday, non-aristocratic world⁶⁰ – even in the case of *William*⁶¹ – I argue that *William* often demonstrates a keen awareness, and even celebration, of wooded and other environments’ economic significance.

Obvious signs of his noble heritage, William’s skills as a manager of natural resources also put him in league with the everyday experiences of those who live and work in the woods. Beyond his foster parents, William “3it hadde fele felawes in þe forest eche day / 3ong bold barnes þat bestes also keped” (ll. 186-7). The poem again expresses knowledge regarding the economic utilization of woodland spaces, as the young friends

⁵⁷ As Oliver Rackham has noted in a number of studies, the English landscape, and especially its woodlands, were entirely the products of human management by the later Middle Ages; see especially “The Medieval Countryside of England: Botany and Archaeology” in *Inventing Medieval Landscapes: Senses of Place in Western Europe*, eds. John Howe and Michael Wolfe (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2002), pp. 13-32, and also *Trees and Woodland in the British Landscape*, rev. edn. (London: Phoenix Press, 2001), particularly pp. 59-83.

⁵⁸ But, by hunting these rabbits, William may have been considered as making a foray into poaching – and his sharing of these catches with his cowherd family and fellow children suggests that such societies were considered to skim off the top of local animal populations, reminiscent of the “King in Disguise” romances. Here, however, *William of Palerne*’s sympathetic presentation of the lower classes shines through, as its presentation of their consumption of William’s catches is not disrupted by any official charge of poaching – perhaps also suggesting William’s ability to catch enough, but not too many rabbits, and thus to escape official notice.

⁵⁹ See Corinne Saunders, *The Forest of Medieval Romance: Avernus, Broceliande, Arden* (Cambridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 1993), pp. 1-10.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

herd their animals “in þe forest” for pasture, in addition to the “feldes” noted above.

William, then, is part of a local economic community, and his actions help to support that community. He even, in a display of innate nobility, makes sure his friends are fed from his daily hunting catches (ll. 190-4). The generous acts that foreshadow William’s role as a hero, then, are inextricably entwined with his successful management of the forest’s economic resources.

Later on, when William and his beloved Melior dress in white bearskins and flee Rome under the guidance of the werewolf Alfonso, the plot encompasses two more professions dependent upon natural resources. Indeed, the romance not only explores the laborers themselves, but also the spaces affected by their manipulation of the natural environment.

The first scene takes place at a stone quarry. Having traveled “out of forest and friþes [parks/woodland] and alle faire wodes” (l. 2216), the couple finds themselves stuck at daybreak in open country, within sight “of a cite nobul, / enclosed comeliche aboute wiþ fin castelwerk” (ll. 2219-20). Desperate for a hiding place, they come upon “a semliche quarrere / under a heiȝ hel, al holwe newe diked” (ll. 2232-3), and fall asleep there. However, as “newe diked” suggests:

...þei ne hadde redly rested but a litel while,
þat werkmen forto woche ne wonne þidere sone
Stifly wiþ strong tol ston stifly to digge.
And as þei come to þe cave to comse to wirche,
On of hem sone ofsei þo semliche white beres (ll. 2241-5).

The workmen run back to report in town that they have found the fugitives, and only diversionary action by Alfonso allows the lovers to escape.

Here, the poem encodes some complex commentary on economic landscape evaluation and implied networks of exchange into a relatively small number of lines. It identifies the “heiz hel” as a proper place to build a quarry, associating this harvesting activity with a particular topographic feature. The plot also illustratively provides workmen going “forto woche” digging “ston stifly.” This is, in no uncertain terms, the place where building stone comes from, the foundation of one particular economic chain of production. Yet where does this resource end up? Refined and employed as the “fin castelwerk” of the city wall. With a tidy mixture of explicit details and implicit relationships, this romance shows the source, process, and product of a raw material taken from the natural world and entered into the human economy. The naïveté of the heroes, who seem at first oblivious to the “newe diked” nature of the quarry and its consequent economic associations, is soon replaced with an understanding of this natural space’s uses – which can serve a didactic or honorary role for readers as well, based on their level of familiarity.

The second scene occurs when the runaways have taken shelter in a forest grove. This time, “er þe sunne gan schine, / choliers [colliers] þat cayreden col com þerebyside, / and oþer wizes þat were wont wode forto fecche” (ll. 2519-21). In a scene that mixes humor with suspense, the lovers “darked still in hire den for drede, bote noyse” (l. 2543) while the workmen engage in a debate over what they would do if they caught the fugitives, on whom there is a great bounty. One man, with classic bravado, claims that he would turn them in them regardless of the werewolf (ll. 2538-40). Yet the ‘good’ workman is the one who gets the last word. Arguing that the fugitives have already been through many trials, he says that he would let them go in good will. Notably, he ends this

speech by reminding his fellows of their own livelihoods: “Do we þat we have to done, and diȝt we us henne / sum selver for our semes [burdens] in þe cite to gete” (ll. 2553-4).

The workmen then move on.

Clearly, this moment moves beyond simple comic relief. While at least one of these peasants talks like a burlesque character, he, his well-spoken companion, and their fellows are all explicitly engaged in the harvest of particular resources to be taken from the woodland environment: coal and wood. Moreover, the poem leaves no doubt as to the goal of these activities; the peasants gather resources not to supply themselves, but to get “sum selver... in þe cite.” These laborers participate in an economic network that links the city to the countryside, and their very existence reveals the dependence of that urban society on rural labor and, ultimately, on the natural world. As before, the heroes learn of this relationship through first-hand experience (or at least discussion), further deepening their understanding of forests as multifaceted spaces full of economic value. Thus, at the end of the romance, when William rewards his herder foster parents with “a kastel ful nobul / ... and al þat touched þer to a tidi earldome” (ll. 5381, 5384), both hero and reader know the value of that landed estate, and how it allows the cowherd “and his wilsum wif, wel to liven for ever” (l. 5394).

An important consequence of such inherited textual traditions that acknowledge the economic significance of landscape features arises in *Partonope of Blois*' strikingly detailed, if idealistic, estate description. Partonope, having just been granted the run of Melior's kingdom by the queen herself, immediately repairs to the top of a tall tower, “There as he myghte se rownde a-bowte, / The castelle wyth-In, þe cyte wyth-owte” (ll. 2021-2). After a long description, detailing the ships sailing off the nearby coast (and

their various types of merchandise), a mountain covered in gardens, a meadow abutting the castle, and a port big enough for a thousand ships with an ornate stone bridge (ll. 2023-64), Partonope looks beyond the immediate surroundings, discovering “He myȝte see no-þynge x myle a brede / Butte alle was corne and grene mede; ... [while] Be-ende all þys was huge fforeste” (ll. 2065-6, 2069). The enjoyment that both protagonist and poet derive from this scene⁶² culminates in the text’s summary and evaluation of the sights seen:

Thys yonge man alle þys be-helde,
 The towne, þe castelle, so well I-byldde,
 þe See, þe vynes, þe gardynes large,
 The haven so fulle of shyppe and barge,
 Off corne, of mede so grette plente.
 He þoȝte þys was a delectabell contre.
 Thys droffe he fforþe with ffayre syghte
 The longe day, tylle hyt was nyghte (ll. 2071-2078).

The significance of such landscape features resides in both their aesthetic *and* their economic value. Indeed, all of the land (and sea) spaces described are carefully categorized as economic spaces, providing merchant goods, vegetables, grain and valuable hay.⁶³ The only space that escapes such explicit economic evaluation is the distant forest, which, the poet declares, contains “No-þynge þer but brydde and beste” (l. 2070). Both the examples set forth in romances such as *William of Palerne* and the

⁶² The later revelation by Melior that she “lefte besynes of other þynge, / And made þys place so fresshe and gaye / Thynkyng, me herte, þat ye yowre playe / Shulde haue þer-In and I also” (ll. 2134-7) – carrying its possible implication that she used her magic to make such “preparations” – still does not serve to undermine the significance of the designed landscape’s economic value. Instead, her “designs,” magic or otherwise, serve to illustrate how important it was for late medieval aristocrats to arrange and control the layout of the landscapes they owned – for both aesthetic and economic reasons.

⁶³ Indeed, “of mede so grette plente” is a particularly valuable resource, because of the importance of meadows in providing hay fodder for work animals. As the environmental historian Tom Williamson has shown, the existence of the soggy ground (“morass and moss”) necessary for sustaining successful hay-crops was even a major factor in determining the structure and organization of communal settlement and agricultural production throughout medieval Britain; see his *Shaping Medieval Landscapes: Settlement, Society, Environment* (Bollington: The Windgather Press, 2003), all, but especially pp. 160-79.

experiences of real-life late medieval woodlands, however, would have prepared *Partonope*'s audience to understand the economic significance of even a "brydde and [a] beste" as foodstuffs, while the forest space itself would recall the plethora of contemporary professions associated with managing and harvesting its abundance of natural resources. Thus, even in such an idealizing romance as *Partonope* cannot escape celebrating landscape features and spaces as places redolent with economic value – a value that, in turn, helps to create and support the chivalric identity that it explicitly espouses.

Restoring the Land in Sir Degrevant

The economic significance attached to landscapes throughout the corpus of Middle English romances serves, on one level, to add even greater weight to the battles over land inheritance and ownership that compose the keystones of so many romance plots. Yet, in engaging with these issues, the landscape descriptions provided by these texts often betray real-world concerns about the changing nature of post-Plague England that creep even into the countryside of fantasy, wrestling with the multiple values attributed to landscape in the scenes that I have discussed above. The fifteenth-century romance of *Sir Degrevant*, as I shall demonstrate, is a particularly good example of how even chivalric Middle English romances could not escape reflecting contemporary anxieties over the consequences of perceived limits to human control over the landscape.

Sir Degrevant presents readers with a carefully constructed narrative that combines thematic and formal elements from courtly, tail-rhyme, and alliterative

romances.⁶⁴ As modern scholars have noted, this text thus illustrates the tendency of late medieval romances to present a composite narrative that layers together a number of different literary traditions in an attempt to appeal to the genre's ever broadening range of fifteenth-century audiences.⁶⁵ Indeed, *Degrevant* shows a marked interest in granting a large role to female characters, allowing them to chart the course of the text's plot at crucial moments.⁶⁶ The text presents a story of confrontation and reconciliation, intertwined with the struggle for and achievement of matrimony. Degrevant's lands are attacked by a neighboring Earl, whose assault leads Degrevant's tenants to call him back from his Crusade. Degrevant returns, fights off the Earl, and wreaks vengeance upon the latter's lands, only to fall in love with the Earl's daughter, Melidor. Degrevant then defeats Melidor's suitor, a foreign Duke, in both a tournament and a duel, and begins a series of secret – yet platonic – liaisons with Melidor in her father's castle. Ambushed one evening when returning from such a meeting, Degrevant slays the Earl's steward and many of his men, leading the Earl to denounce his daughter as a traitor and sentence her to death. However, at his wife's insistence, the Earl relents, instead reconciling with Degrevant, who then marries Melidor and becomes the Earl's heir. The Earl and his wife soon die, leaving Melidor and Degrevant to rule for thirty years until, with Melidor

⁶⁴ See Erik Kooper, ed., *Sentimental and Humorous Romances* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2005), pp. 57-9. See also W.A. Davenport's "Sir Degrevant and Composite Romance" in *Medieval Insular Romance: Translation and Innovation*, eds. Judith Weiss, Jennifer Fellows, and Morgan Dickson (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000), pp. 111-31.

⁶⁵ Davenport, "Sir Degrevant," all, but especially pp. 111-14.

⁶⁶ On which see further A.S.G. Edwards' "Gender, Order and Reconciliation in *Sir Degrevant*" in *Readings in Medieval English Romance*, ed. Carol Meade (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1994), pp. 53-64; Arlyn Diamond, "Sir Degrevant: What Lovers Want" in *Pulp Fictions of Medieval England: Essays in Popular Romance*, ed. Nicola McDonald (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), pp. 82-101; and also Davenport, "Sir Degrevant," pp. 114-15, who argues that that the poem expertly appeals to both male and female readers in turn.

deceased, Degrevant leaves the land to his seven children, and ventures forth to die fighting heathens in the Holy Land.

As even such a brief overview of the plot makes clear, characteristic romance scenes focused on physical violence and courtly love abound in this text. Such moments, particularly the elaborate descriptions of Melidor's bedroom and the lovers' interactions, have thus attracted the lion's share of modern scholarly attention.⁶⁷ Yet throughout its interwoven tales of martial prowess and requited love, *Degrevant* reveals in its careful and frequent descriptions of topographical details a close eye for contemporary human relationships with the English countryside. Depictions of battered parks, looted rivers, and food supply lines demonstrate a keen awareness of the economic significance of various local environments, while a fascination with hills as centers of settlement and activity emerges in descriptions of approaches to castles and secret transformations in the greenwood. In sum, human perceptions of landscape's economic and social value permeate *Sir Degrevant*, and firmly ground its narrative in the context of fifteenth-century concerns and anxieties regarding the perceived degradation of the English countryside.

Almost as soon as the text introduces Degrevant, it shapes the reader's conception of him through a description of his landholdings:

Ther was sesyd in hys hand
A thousand poundus worth of land
Of rentes, well settand,
And muchell dell more:

⁶⁷ Almost all scholarly discussions of the poem focus on these elements at least to some extent. See again all sources in the previous footnote, along with Kim M. Phillips' "Bodily Walls, Windows, and Doors: The Politics of Gesture in late fifteenth-century English Books for Women" in *Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts in Late Medieval Britain – Essays for Felicity Riddy*, eds. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, R. Voaden, A. Diamond, A. Hutchison, C. Meale, and L. Johnson (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000), pp. 185-98.

An hounded plows in demaynus,
Fayer parkes inwyth haynus,
Grett herdus in the playnus,
 Wyth muchell tame store,
Casteles wyth heygh wallus,
Chambors wyth noble hallus,
Fayer stedes in the stallus,
 Lyard and soore (ll. 65-76).⁶⁸

The “thousand poundus” of rent clearly places Sir Degrevant in the realm of a member of the upper peerage,⁶⁹ an unachievable fantasy for many of the text’s original readers. Yet here the text also reveals in its delineation of spatial categories an obsession with definition by division. The arable land is organized into “demaynus;” “fayer parkes” exist only “inwyth haynus [enclosures];” his herds remain “in the playnus;” and “casteles wyth heygh wallus” are themselves further segmented into “chambors” and “noble hallus.” Even the eponymous knight’s horses are characterized as “in the stallus.” The text’s description here suggests that Degrevant runs a tight ship, as the narrator clearly organizes Degrevant’s physical possessions and local environment into discrete sections. This attitude towards the protagonist’s holdings is echoed somewhat in the control he exercises over his own body. As the narrator observes in the lines immediately preceding his description of Degrevant’s lands, “Certus, wyff wold he non, / Wench ne lemon, / Bot as an anker in a ston / He lyved ever trew” (ll. 61-4). Of course, as Degrevant’s heart will fall prey to love, so too will the categorical barriers with which the text initially surrounds

⁶⁸ This and all following citations of *Sir Degrevant* are taken from Kooper’s edition of the text in Cambridge, Cambridge University Library MS Ff.1.6, unless otherwise noted. In the Lincoln, Lincoln Cathedral MS 91 version of *Sir Degrevant*, these lines also mention Degrevant’s “Faire bares [boards] in þe playnes” (l. 71); for a parallel edition of this and the Cambridge text, see L. F. Casson, ed., *The Romance of Sir Degrevant*, EETS (o.s.) 221 (London: Oxford University Press, 1949).

⁶⁹ See Geert van Iersel’s “The Twenty-Five Ploughs of Sir John: *The Tale of Gamelyn* and the Implications of Acreage” in *People and Texts: Relationships in Medieval Literature*, eds. Thea Summerfield and Keith Busby (Costerus New Series, 166; Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2007), pp. 111-22, at p. 117. Indeed, 100 plows worth of land should mean that Degrevant’s holdings amount to approximately 12,000 acres (p. 113).

and permeates his property prove a small defense before the Earl's rampages. The narrator here seems to suggest that part of Degrevant's problem, then, is that both the protagonist's body and, to a lesser extent, his land, is isolated (and insulated) from the outside world. In an economic environment where land gains its value from the exchange of the goods and resources it produces, however, this avoidance of a broader network (and world) of exchange that defines the hero's social value cannot last if the narrator is to craft a satisfyingly successful hero. Instead, this view will be subtly altered – for, as it progresses, the romance reveals a greater awareness of the land's role in economic networks of exchange, and the dependence of noble identity upon the products of the local landscape. Consequently, this romance further develops a perspective that acknowledges the relationship between human social class and the landscape that I have discussed in a variety of contexts above.

The first acknowledgement of this relationship arises in the introduction of the Earl, and an account of how he plunders Degrevant's lands (ll. 97-120). Indeed, his debut develops from his relationship to the boundaries that Degrevant has sought to erect, since “Ther wonede an Eorl him [Degrevant] besyd, / Ye, a lord of mechell pryde, / That hadd eight forestes ful wyde / And bowres full brode” (ll. 97-100). The distinctions between the categories of land-spaces that the Earl owns are less distinguishable, and establishing him as a man of “mechell pryde” who lives “besyd” our hero's holdings suggests that the Earl views the boundary between his own and Degrevant's lands as more of an incentive than a deterrent. Thus, when the Earl “brak hys [Degrevant's] parkes about, / The best that he hade” (ll. 107-8), the Earl's actions follow his attitude toward landscape. The “haynus” of

Degrevant's parks are no barrier to the Earl, who desires all lands as part of his amorphous legal whole – namely, the Earl's own possessions.

The representation of warring barons laying waste to each other's landholdings, of course, calls to mind the common practices of total warfare that the careful work of Jeremy Withers has shown was considered common to late medieval conflicts, and especially the Hundred Years War.⁷⁰ Jean Froissart's *Chronicles*, for example, include numerous examples of neighboring nobles and invading armies laying waste to lands in the pursuit of plunder or the execution of sieges.⁷¹ However, as Withers notes, such violence against the landscape was increasingly condemned, particularly in the fifteenth century, and numerous English and French decrees, chronicles, and works of literature seek to prohibit or lament such destruction of the natural world.⁷² Similarly, in *Sir Degrevant*, both the Earl and, as I shall show, the vengeful hero as well, act upon an awareness of landscape's strategic and economic significance that reflects contemporary abuses of and concerns about the natural world. The Earl, however, stands out for the fact that his relationship with the local environment is almost entirely defined by violence,

⁷⁰ See Jeremy Withers, *The Ecology of War in Late Medieval Chivalric Culture* (Ph.D. Diss., The Ohio State University, 2008). Among other sources, Withers examines criticism of violence against the environment, and the detrimental effects of medieval warfare on nature, in Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Knight's Tale" (pp. 160-191).

⁷¹ References to Froissart are taken from Keira Borrill, trans., "Jean Froissart, Chronicles," in *The Online Froissart*, Version 1.5, eds. Peter Ainsworth and Godfried Croenen, (Sheffield: HRIOOnline, 2013). See for example "Translation of Book I," Folio 145v of Besançon BM, ms. 864, for an account of how invading Scots "came next to lodge between Percy and Rothbury by a river situated there, and they began in contemptible manner to devastate and burn the land of Northumberland, sending their scouts off as far as Berwick, and burning everything which lay outside the walls and along the shoreline before returning to their host."

⁷² Withers, *The Ecology of War*, pp. 138-41. Withers notes condemnation of violence against agricultural plants from a variety of sources, including Thomas Hoccleve's *Regement of Princes* and ordinances issued by both English and French authorities in the 1420s and '30s. This discussion takes place within a broader analysis of how a Middle English romance, the *Alliterative Motre Arthure*, condemns its eponymous monarch for his violent destruction of Tuscan vineyards (pp. 133ff), demonstrating that *Sir Degrevant* is not alone among late-medieval Insular romances in its critical consideration of the effects of warfare on the landscape.

while Degrevant balances his destruction with efforts to repair the damage done to the holdings of his tenants.

As noted above, the Earl and his men clearly recognize the economic and practical value inherent in the land they plunder, beyond the noble symbol of deerflesh. When “He drowhe reveres with fysh / And slogh hys [Degrevant’s] forsteres ywys” (ll. 113-114), the Earl strikes at the resources that the environments under Degrevant’s command supply, along with the labor force that helps to manage, and perhaps to harvest, those resources. Sir Degrevant complains of these specific injuries when he repairs to the Earl’s castle upon his return (ll. 433-40). When the Earl refuses to address Degrevant’s concerns, the latter knight wreaks vengeance by enacting a similar sort of plundering upon the Earl’s holdings:

Sir Degreevant, ar he reste,
Tenede the Eorl on the beste,
And hontede his foreste
Wyth bernus full bolde.
His depe dychys he drowe,
Hys whyght swannes he slow,
Grete lucas [pikes] ynowe,
He gat hom in wold (ll. 513-20).

Harvesting the pike and slaughtering the swans of the Earl’s waterways, Degrevant’s actions call to mind many of the legal cases regarding the use of “ditches” and other waterways in late medieval England.⁷³ Moreover, the pike and swans clearly place this

⁷³ Philippa Maddern, studying legal records in East Anglia, notes a dramatic increase in cases regarding the “diversion/obstruction of watercourses” in the late fourteenth century, finding 15 such incidences for the period 1340-1399 as opposed to only 4 such cases in the period 1250-1339; see her “Imagining the Unchanging Land: East Anglians Represent their Landscape, 1350-1500” in *Medieval East Anglia*, ed. Christopher Harper-Bill (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2005), pp. 52-67, specifically p. 61, Table 1. For a discussion of one example case concerning “the state of a stream ‘called Smale’ (the Ant)” from 12 June 1360, see Maddern’s discussion at pp. 63-4. Maddern convincingly links the rising numbers of such cases with the onset of the Little Ice Age (pp. 56ff). For the effects of the Little Ice Age in silting up the harbor of

action in the backyards of the poem's audience. Contemporary English readers, then, could use the romance to elevate (sincerely or parodically) their own land disputes to the heights of romance. While the characters' purported wealth may be beyond the dreams of many of the text's readers, these squabbles over and raids of specific waterway resources allowed smaller landowners to empathize with the action, and place themselves – and their local landscapes – into the romance.

Beyond presenting a recognizably English setting, however, this scene also demonstrates the text's aristocratic perspective on the natural world. The Earl's "foreste" that Degrevant hunts here appears to function as a space set aside for the Earl's recreation – suggesting a carefully managed woodland space, stocked with the game that Degrevant now slaughters. The affront here, clearly, is to both the Earl's material wealth and to his pride. Moreover, the "depe dychys" full of "lucis" and "swannes" that Degrevant "drowe" suggest that this landscape has indeed been carefully designed by the Earl. Instead of "natural" streams, the waterways are marked as the products of human endeavor, and have clearly been stocked with the animal wealth that such designed landscapes were created to support.⁷⁴ The desire to present a world entirely controlled by human will, then, extends even to the landscape features that may seem "natural" at the first glance – and reflect the fantastical or designed spaces that fifteenth-century aristocratic audiences would have desired for themselves.

Sandwich and other English ports, see especially Peter Brimblecombe, "A Meteorological Service in Fifteenth Century Sandwich," *Environment and History* 1.2 (1995): pp. 241-9, at p. 243.

⁷⁴ See O. H. Creighton, *Designs Upon the Land: Elite Landscapes of the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2009), especially "Chapter 4: Shaping Nature: Animals and Estates" at pp. 100-121. For a recent case-study of the international roots of such Norman noble practices, see also Sharon Farmer, "Aristocratic Power."

Another moment when the romance recognizes the foundational role that landscape plays as an underpinning of noble identity (and human survival) occurs when Degrevant returns home to address his tenants' concerns over the effects of the Earl's initial rampage. Before he ambushes the Earl's forces, or petitions the Earl for redress, Degrevant attends to the needs of his free-holding renters, lending them oxen, wagons, horses, and seed:

Tyll his maner he went:
A feyr place he fond schent,
Hys husbondus that gaf rent
Was yheryyed dounryght.
His tenantrie was all doun,
The best in every toun;
His fayr parkes wer comen
And lothlych bydyght.

He closed hys parkes agen.
His husbondus they were fyen:
He lent hem oxon and wayn
Of his own store,
And also sede for to sowe
Wyght horse for to drow,
And thought werke be lawe
And wyth non other schore (ll. 137-52).

As Forste-Grupp observes, "Degrevant is merely doing in the fictional local community of the romance what lords had to do in the real world of late medieval England—treat the tenants with respect, address their problems, and help them in times of trouble."⁷⁵ Yet

⁷⁵ See S. L. Forste-Grupp's "'For-thi a lettre has he dyght': Paradigms for Fifteenth-Century Literacy in *Sir Degrevant*," *Studies in Philology* 101 (2004): pp 113-135, at p. 119. Forste-Grupp also notes, in her discussion of the romance's uses of literacy, that the language of the poem's presentation of Degrevant's complaints against the Earl mimics the language used in a thirteenth-century case against a baron who trespassed and hunted (p. 124). Indeed, the ways in which this romance in many ways reflects social and legal realities of late medieval England are noted by many scholars; see for instance Dieter Mehl, who notes that "there are a number of realistic scenes in the poem which seem to owe their existence more to a close observation of reality than to literary borrowing," although Mehl discusses the social acts such as Melidor's "bundling" scene, and not treatment of the landscape (*The Middle English Romances of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries* [London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968], p. 94).

lingering upon this moment in the romance also, I would argue, reveals a testament to contemporary perspectives of the changing English landscape. As other scholars note, the post-Plague slump in labor meant that lords had to work harder to attract and keep tenants, attending to their needs by performing exactly the sort of services that Degrevant does.⁷⁶ In addition, however, the romance's list of grievances gives voice in its presentation to the complaints of contemporary landholders, particularly with regards to decrepit property. As with the *Tale of Gamelyn* (which I discuss below), *Degrevant* demonstrates a desire to ascribe the perceived changes in English countryside use, and the piecemeal abandonment of manors and villages,⁷⁷ to the agency of a guilty human party. More than just a laundry list of actions that the good (or financially savvy) lord performs, this scene creates another fantasy of returning the fifteenth-century English landscape to its carefully divided and well-maintained spatial categories of times past. In the face of encroaching enclosure and dwindling population, this romance offers the tantalizing possibility that, if the person responsible for such damages can only be found, then a proactive lord such as Sir Degrevant can make amends not just by executing

⁷⁶ Forste-Grupp also makes the valid point that Degrevant's landholders being renters reflects the increasing shift of large landholders towards leasing their property to be worked in the generations following the Black Death and subsequent increase in the value of surviving laborers (pp. 118-19). See also Stephen Knight's passing comment that "in *Sir Degrevant* the hero's initial nadir is caused by an unusually realistic oppressive neighbor," although "the penetratingly real threat is resolved in a fully ideological way," since the protagonist "comes to love the neighboring villain's daughter" in Knight's "The Social Function of the Middle English Romances" in *Medieval Literature: Criticism, Ideology & History*, ed. David Aers (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1986), pp. 99-122, cited at p. 109.

⁷⁷ For an explanation of how "English villages, as well as falling victims to acquisitive landowners, were abandoned because they were adversely affected by long-term changes in land-use, population and social structure that were widespread in the medieval countryside," see further Christopher Dyer's *Everyday Life in Medieval England*, 2nd edn. (London: Hambledon and London, 2000), especially "Deserted Villages in the West Midlands" at pp. 27-46 (quoted at p. 27).

immediate repairs, but also by beating the perpetrator (and his lands) into submission.⁷⁸ The willingness of this courtly love story to get down and dirty, as it were, with the specifics of local warfare embodies this angry desire for a way to arrest the changes that late-medieval English audiences undoubtedly saw occurring in their local environments.

A further tension exists here, however, as the audience observes Degrevant perform many of the same destructive activities upon animals and landmarks that the Earl had visited upon the hero's own holdings. As I have already suggested, the text seeks to balance out Degrevant's ferocity with passages where he earnestly helps his own tenants to rebuild, replant, and restock. Understanding the economic value of landscape and natural resources, Degrevant puts that knowledge to use in order to help himself and hurt his enemies. Yet the juxtaposition of two such contradictory understandings of human relationships to the environment – as steward and as destroyer – reveals a decidedly unsentimental view of the nature's usefulness to the romance's human actors. Such a perspective prevented medieval authors and audiences from recognizing the roots of environmental or topographical changes as extending beyond the actions of individual parties – and fueled fantasies of ascribing guilt and punishment to evil people as a way to undo or reverse landscape changes endemic to the late-medieval period. Such a cycle of reciprocal violence and legal action stood at odds with the desire to repair the land and promote the careful management of natural resources – and thus provides a source of implied anxiety in *Sir Degrevant* and many other late-medieval British romances.

⁷⁸ These elements are both emphasized when juxtaposed with the acts of the villainous Earl, who, the day after Degrevant destroys the Earl's lands, merely "buskede on hys way, / Out at a posterne to play, / With knyghth of pryde" (ll. 614-16), and gives no apparent thought to enacting repairs.

Sir Degrevant also marks the spaces of boundaries, especially enclosures, as nostalgic symbols of the imagined past. This concept stands in contrast to the purportedly sympathetic view that the romance at times provides in its presentations of lower-level tenants and works, and reinforces the conservative aristocratic bent to the romance's perspective of late-medieval English society. Such a worldview would surely seem amiss to fans of the "King in Disguise" romances such as *Raulf the Collier*, for instance, where heroes poaching the king's game often end up rewarded for such brazen breaches of social boundaries. Yet even in such a conservative text as *Sir Degrevant*, the dependence of the nobility (and its boundaries, physical or cultural) upon the labor of the lower classes in the local landscape cannot be entirely erased. Consequently, at one time or another, almost every boundary in the text proves permeable – and not just to the martial power of a lord, but also to the economic networks of exchange that link the countryside to urban or castle spaces.

Two scenes that best illuminate the implicit role of landscape features in determining economic networks of exchange and the relationship between labor and landed power occur at one of the text's most visible boundaries: the Earl's castle wall. When it first appears, the wall serves to delineate the vengeful, petitioning Degrevant from the women of the Earl's household, who address him from its ramparts (ll. 417ff). Soon after, however, once Degrevant has fallen in love with the Earl's daughter, he sneaks into the castle for a surprise meeting with Melidor in the latter's private orchard. Utilizing his knowledge of the terrain and the connection between a castle's noble

inhabitants and the surrounding countryside,⁷⁹ Degrevant lies in wait for the Earl to fall prey to that governing aristocratic obsession, the hunt:

And forthe here weys thei [Degrevant and his squire] wente
Undir a lynd, or thei lente
By a launde syde.
Whyle hyt dawed lyghth day
The Eorle buskede on hys way,
Out at a posterne to play,
With knyghth of pryde.
Sir Degrivaunt helde hym styll
Whyle the Eorle passyde the hyll,
And seid hys squier hym tyll
Pryvaly that tyde:
“I rede we hye us ful yerne
In at the yond posterne.
And let us halde us in derne
The burde tyll abyde” (ll. 610-24).

Observing the “launde syde,” Degrevant and his squire hide beneath a linden tree, and keep watch over a small “posterne” gate in the castle wall that, due to its proximity to the wood, Degrevant apparently expects the Earl’s hunting parties will use to issue forth from the castle. When the party does depart, Degrevant is careful to keep a hill between himself and the Earl’s men so as to avoid detection, before springing for the unguarded postern (where the reader learns that the guard had gone back to bed, on account of the early hour). In effect, the text here creates, with just a few, seemingly vague details, a surprisingly vivid illustration of the space and landmarks that Degrevant navigates while

⁷⁹ Degrevant’s clever utilization of terrain at a number of points in this romance echoes the tactical use of forests and landscape in the outlaw narrative *Tale of Gamelyn*. The two tales are also linked by the frequent mention of the greenwood, wherein both Gamelyn (as outlaw) and Degrevant (as vengeful lord) use their knowledge of the landscape to their advantage. While Gamelyn robs passing clerics and rude landlords, à la Robin Hood, Degrevant uses the forest to enact an ambush of the Earl’s troops (ll. 241ff), wins many battles in the woods against the Earl’s troops, successfully defends himself from an ambush (l. 1625), and rushes back into the woods after defeating Melidor’s foreign suitor in a joust (ll. 1353-6). Indeed, Degrevant is sometimes mentioned emerging with his forces from the woods, almost as if he were some woodland lord, such as when he “Broughth out of the forest / Thre hundred knyghttus of the best, / Was greythed al on grene” (ll. 1085-8). Thus, while Degrevant is no outlaw, his clever use of woodland terrain inspires the Earl to lament his proximity to the “fryththus unfayn” (l. 1732).

breaching the castle wall. Far from an impregnable fortress divorced from the outside world, the Earl's castle is instead shown to be intimately connected to the surrounding countryside – so closely connected, indeed, that the Earl does not exercise the control of access that he seems to presume. This impression is compounded, moreover, by the fact that the hills and carefully placed trees – indeed, the very concentration of visual detail on the topography of the castle's surroundings – suggests once more that the Earl's landscape has been carefully chosen and crafted by human design.⁸⁰ It is appropriate, then, that after crossing the castle wall “The knyght and the squiere / Resten in a rosere” (ll. 633-4) until catching sight of Melidor and her handmaiden. Degrevant's keen eye for landscape details both without and within the castle sets him always a step ahead of the Earl's household.

Noble characters such as Sir Degrevant are not the only ones to possess the ability to breach boundaries between countryside and purportedly protected, “urbanized” space. When Degrevant goes to escape the castle and return to the woods, it is Melidor's maid that leads him to the proper exit, while the narrator explains the gateway's role in linking the community within the castle to the laborers and produce of the countryside beyond:

“Damesel, for Godus grace,
Teche me to that ylke place!”
The maid privaly apace
Passes byfore,
And ledes hym out at a gate,
In at a waturgate,
Ther men vytayled by bate
That castel with cornes.

⁸⁰ Creighton notes the importance of even the illusion of hills to the layout of castle landscapes via a discussion of fake-embankments thrown up around castle walls to give the illusion of elevation (*Designs*, pp. 20-1). He also notes that landscapes immediately surrounding castles were often purposefully crafted to contain many small hills, mounts, walkways, and other viewing platforms, to allow alternate perspectives from which to appreciate the estate grounds and their more distant surroundings (pp. 190-92).

“At ebbe of the see
Thou shalt not wad to the kne.”
The knyght kyst that fre;
Erly at the morow,
Fayir thei passed that flode.
To tho forest thei youd,
And toke here stedus wher thei stod,
Undur the hawthrone (ll. 929-44).

As Degrevant is able, through his actions, to link the interior of the castle to the forest, so too do the men who “vytayled by bate / the castel with cornes” connect the aristocratic space to the countryside. Moreover, in having the maid serve as the character who explains the ebb and flow of the sea-water in the castle’s moat to Degrevant, the text emphasizes the perspective that truly noble knights such as Degrevant learn about the economic and practical value of their local environments from those who work beneath them. Thus, Degrevant emerges from these two scenes as an aristocratic exemplar whose actions communicate to the reader both a savvy awareness of the strategic value of local topography, and the ability to recognize the valuable insight of servants and laborers vis-à-vis the management and operations of natural resources. As such, the romance implicitly encourages noble readers to honor their land and their workers, while also perhaps allowing more middling audience members a moment to celebrate the worthiness of their labors. Knights, at times, must follow the same routes as those of lesser status - and humans of all stripes depend upon the “cornes” that the countryside provides under proper management. The visibility of the Earl’s supply chain to Degrevant once again calls to mind the effects of Degrevant’s and the Earl’s respective rampages, delineating the reasons why Degrevant was a good lord for responding so quickly to repair such

economically and practically important networks, while the Earl ignores the implications of his rival's raids in favor of the hunt.

Throughout the scenes discussed above, the prevalence of hills and hawthorn trees as topographical features has been hard to ignore. Indeed, both in these and other episodes, the text demonstrates a pronounced fascination in recording the position of such solitary landmarks. Of course, many modern readers might suggest that such features are merely metonymic stand-ins for different local environments, and this may indeed be a part of their original effect. More importantly, however, I would like to reiterate that contemporary fifteenth-century readers of *Sir Degrevant* (like audiences of the earlier, yet still popular *Sir Isumbras*) would have noted in these frequent, singular topographical details an echo of real-life practices such as beating the bounds, wherein both human communities and physical property were bounded and defined via the otherwise mundane landmarks – trees, rocks, small hills, creeks, and bogs – that surrounded them.⁸¹ The importance of boundaries to this text hardly needs to be emphasized, seeing as the central conflict at the text's opening derives entirely from the difficulties inherent in preserving such divisions of landscape space. Consequently, the constant recitation of features that would stand out to contemporary audiences as boundary markers helps to keep this theme well at the forefront of the text's every movement. Such landmarks also help readers to place the texts' events within the context of their own lives, allowing them to map the narrative (perhaps quite literally) onto local landscapes more familiar to them. Whether conscious or no, this textual tendency towards recording landmarks reveals the perspectives of its original writers and audiences towards the natural world. Categorized

⁸¹ On "beating the bounds," see further my extended discussion in the first section of this chapter.

into numerous matrices of divided spaces, the trees, hills, and stones of the medieval countryside brimmed with data regarding the relationship between individuals or communities and the natural environment.

That the details provided in *Sir Degrevant* are not entirely divorced from reality via abstraction may be seen, for instance, in a passing mention of another castle that the eponymous hero occupies himself “In the syde at a fel / At a wel feyre castel, / Whyle hym was lef for to dwel / For to sle care” (ll. 1165-8). Here, the text notes the position of the castle beside, and not directly atop, a “fel” or hill. As Oliver Creighton has observed, contrary to many modern misconceptions, medieval English castles were often built into the side, and not at the top, of hills or ridges, allowing the castle to appear to spring from the landscape when seen from afar.⁸² The romance thus stays faithful to the real-life relationship between castles and topography, suggesting that the landscape details of the text are not the random mish-mash that they often strike modern, urbanized readers to be.

One hill stands out from this trend towards implying or explicitly representing landmarks as human property boundaries, however. Inside the forest alongside the Earl’s castle, Degrevant pauses on top of a hill to disguise himself, before riding on to interrupt the Earl’s feast and ask for Melidor’s hand. The scene drawn by the text calls up allusions to a further boundary with an otherworldly realm:

And syen thei ryden even west
Thorw a fayr forest,
With two trompess of the best
That range as a bell.
On an hull he gan hym rest.

⁸² Analyzing the layout of Restormel, a Norman castle in Cornwall, Creighton observes that, in order to craft the most dramatic visual impact on a viewer, a castle-builder’s “visual needs were not always served by a location on the highest point within a locality, but more often by places that were intervisible with valley floors and sides” (*Designs*, p. 17).

Thei gaf hym hys helm and hys crest;
He was the sternest gest
Fro Heven to Helle (1205-12).

The fact that Degrevant, disguised as this “sternest gest,” rides on to interrupt a feast calls to mind the famous scene from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, while the word “gest” suggests such grisly woodland characters as the ghost of Guinevere’s mother in the early fifteenth-century romance *The Awntyrs off Arthure*. Indeed, the woodland hill also distantly echoes the “Green Chapel” where Sir Gawain must confront the Green Knight in *Sir Gawain*. Here, however, unlike with those romances, the audience sees the hero pausing within the forest to transform himself into such a “gest,” whose otherworldly nature is emphasized in the phrase “Heven to Helle.” Yet once again, I posit that this bizarre scene reflects the tendency of this text to incorporate the experiences of contemporary readers into the world of the text. The location and nature of this transformation are ultimately relatable and mundane: a hill, set within a forest that sees a fair amount of explicit noble traffic and implicit labor traffic (especially foresters) over the course of the romance. The balance between abstract and specific in this scene description, then, along with the perspective in the transformation that it adopts, allows the reader to imagine either themselves or the local lord performing such a task. In this way, it alludes to the romance motif of the otherworldly wood while also engaging empathetically with its audience, providing a fairly believable scene that readers could easily place within the landscape familiar to them. Looking “behind the scenes,” therefore, allows the reader to recognize the narrative potential in their own, local countryside, while implicitly alluding to beliefs of woodland spaces as borders to otherworldly spaces.

Overall, *Sir Degrevant's* landscapes prove to be places of contest and violence, of boundaries penetrated almost as soon as they come into being. Degrevant himself demonstrates a keen eye for the tactical uses of hilly or forested terrain, while both Earl and hero occupy themselves in the looting of specific elements of one another's landscape. Notably, however, readers have seen that Degrevant tempers his actions when seeking vengeance against the Earl – the hero may slaughter his neighbor's game animals and loot the designed landscape of his estate, but the narrator provides no report of Degrevant destroying the holdings of the Earl's tenants. Of course, the Earl does not balk from such behavior, clearly demonstrating his evil disposition by not only pillaging Degrevant's aristocratic landscape spaces, but destroying the livelihoods of the eponymous hero's tenants as well. Interwoven with the romance's central love story, then, readers discover a tale of antagonism meted out upon the land, with both sides recognizing and taking advantage of the countryside's economic value – a perspective on the natural world that echoes the scenes from other romances analyzed above. In addition to this story of destructive lords and the collateral damage to landscape, animals, and tenants that results, though, an undercurrent of frustration with landscape change also arises. As noted above, a number of the changes described echo complaints that were raised by many English aristocrats, gentry landowners, and even tenants over the degradation of manors and villages in the wake of population decline and environmental change. Often, it is true, the calamitous politics of the fifteenth-century encouraged an environment wherein social contests only exacerbated the conditions that led to these complaints. But *Sir Degrevant's* creation of a specific villain upon whom to pin the blame for such complaints allows the story to indulge its audience with a list of specific

complaints with which they could empathize, while also providing a specific and utterly guilty human party upon whom the blame for such changes could be placed, and from whom a just retribution could be exacted. *Sir Degrevant*, then, is a romance enacting a fantasy of human control over the natural world. Yet even here, in the predominately aristocratic world of designed parks and planned streams, an anxiety over the falsehood of this dream is evidenced by the permeability of boundaries that both good and bad characters seek to impose upon the land – and demonstrating the fragility of even the most just knight’s ability to protect his land from change.

Lamentable Landscape Change in the Tale of Gamelyn

The mid- or late fourteenth-century romance the *Tale of Gamelyn* embodies in its brusque yet engaging narrative late medieval attempts and desires for control over the natural landscape. At the center of these issues in the text stands the favorite romance motif of contested inheritance. The smallholder Sir Johan of Boundes (literally, the knight of the boundaries⁸³) wishes to split his lands between his three sons – five “plowes” each for the two elder sons, with the rest of the lands and horses going to his youngest, Gamelyn. After Johan’s death, however, the eldest son steals Gamelyn’s inheritance, and lets it fall into ruin. Sixteen years later, the now grown Gamelyn decides to reassert himself, first winning a wrestling contest, and then brutally storming his brother’s manor. Tricked into fetters by this eldest brother, Gamelyn must then escape from imprisonment into outlawry in the greenwood. When the noble, middle brother

⁸³ See Knight and Ohlgren’s note to line 1. 3. Again, all citations of this text, unless otherwise noted, are taken from the edition in their collection *Robin Hood*.

returns and stands bail for him, Gamelyn is forced to rescue the helpful brother from the clutches of the evil brother, finally returning with a band of noble forest outlaws to condemn and hang his eldest brother and the latter's bribed jury. "Justice" accomplished, Gamelyn regains his lands, and earns an appointment as the chief justice of the king's forest into the bargain.

The concentration of this text on explicitly legal matters has understandably captivated the interest of many modern readers of the poem.⁸⁴ More recently, such interpretations of jurisprudence, jurisdiction, outlawry, and land law have led to valuable considerations of the social significance behind specific land measurements and practical or noble greenwood spaces that Gamelyn contests and inhabits.⁸⁵ Moreover, as Ryan Harper has observed, this poem implicitly places the forest within the socioeconomic matrix of everyday village life, ranking such sylvan spaces as of equal importance with fields, buildings, and material goods.⁸⁶ As W. R. J. Barron aptly observes, "the vividness of the verbal surface, the ironic commentary on events[,],... the exactness of legal references, all anchor the poem in the real world."⁸⁷ Yet entwined with these elements identified by other scholars is a perspective on English landscape that records grievances

⁸⁴ See for instance Edgar F. Shannon, Jr., "Mediaeval Law in *The Tale of Gamelyn*," *Speculum* 28 (1951): pp. 458-64; Richard Kaeuper, "An Historian's Reading of *The Tale of Gamelyn*," *Medium Aevum* 52 (1983): pp. 51-62, and also his *War, Justice, and Public Order* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988); John Scattergood, "*The Tale of Gamelyn*: The Noble Robber as Provincial Hero" in *Readings in Medieval English Romance*, ed. Carol M. Meale (Cambridge: Brewer, 1994), pp. 159-94; and finally Jean Jost's "Retribution in Gamelyn: A Case in the Courts" in *Crime and Punishment in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age: Mental-Historical Investigations of Basic Human Problems and Social Responses*, eds. Albrecht Classen and Connie Scarborough (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2012), pp. 175-88.

⁸⁵ On how the number of "plows" of land mentioned in the text relate to contemporary definitions of knighthood based on land ownership, see again van Iersel's "The Twenty-Five Ploughs of Sir John." For a discussion of the greenwood space in *Gamelyn*, see Harper's *Representation*, at pp. 62-84.

⁸⁶ Harper, *Representation*, pp. 72-4.

⁸⁷ W. R. J. Barron, *English Medieval Romance* (London: Longman, 1987), p. 84.

of rural decay endemic to the late medieval context of its composition,⁸⁸ while also implying a very personal emotional and physical connection between small landowners and the local environments and topography of their holdings. In a romance notably bereft of female characters, the link between man and land occupies the foreground. As Maurice Keen notes in his discussion of the poem's perspective on contemporary society, "We have left the world of knights, in the romantic sense, for a world of landlords and peasants, the world in which Robin Hood himself moved: we have come nearer to the soil."⁸⁹ Thus, while John Scattergood claims that *Gamelyn* "is essentially about social and political problems endemic in England in the earlier part of the fourteenth century, and its essential context is provided by legal records and poems on contemporary events,"⁹⁰ I believe that part of *Gamelyn*'s enduring popularity among the *Canterbury Tales*

⁸⁸ Speaking of the effects of fifteenth-century policies of enclosure, Lynn Staley posits the rise of a late medieval and early modern feeling of "nostalgia" for a lost landscape imbued with an "understanding of of community and thus of law," since "theirs was no lament for the noble life but for the town or village supported by the husbandman," a "rhetoric" of "outcries" which "creates a picture of a vanished England of crofts and common fields where prosperity depended on a set of shared values, on a set of pictures of England dominated not by castles but by smallholders whose rights were upheld by the law personified in the sovereign;" see Staley, *The Island Garden: England's Language of Nation from Gildas to Marvell* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2012), pp. 91-2. However, while Staley states that "complaints for a lost England that are expressed as complaints for its altered agrarian landscape" (p. 106), which she charts through a variety of parliamentary speeches and historical chronicles (pp. 90-106), "begin in the late fifteenth century" (p. 106), I aver that similar, if more localized concerns regarding human observation of a changing landscape (even if not reacting specifically to enclosure) motivates the worldview of the fourteenth-century *Gamelyn*. My reading of this romance thus accords more closely with the accounts of the effect of the Black Death on landscape abandonment in fourteenth-century chronicles mentioned by Staley (p. 90), although I read more of an anxiety over the power of human agency in *Gamelyn*'s concerns. For an in-depth reading of medieval literary (dramatic) texts responding to the social pressures of enclosure, see especially Lisa J. Kiser, "'Mak's heirs': Sheep and Humans in the Pastoral Ecology of the Towneley *First and Second Shepherd's Plays*," *JEGP* 108.3 (2009): pp. 336-59.

⁸⁹ Maurice Keen, *The Outlaws of Medieval Legend*, rev. edn. (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 79. However, while Keen also argues that *Gamelyn* "would technically be called a metrical romance, but there is nothing romantic about its tone" (p. 79), I would instead argue that its views on landscape reflect similar perspectives in other late medieval romances such as *Sir Degrevant*, if made relevant to a broader range of lower gentry and yeoman farmer audiences in *Gamelyn*.

⁹⁰ John Scattergood, "*The Tale of Gamelyn*," p. 163 (also cited by T. A. Shippey [see "*The Tale of Gamelyn*: Class Warfare and the Embarrassments of Genre" in *The Spirit of Medieval English Popular Romance*, eds. Ad Putter and Jane Gilbert (Garlow, Essex: Pearson Education Limited, 2000), pp. 78-96, at p. 79]).

manuscripts may also be reflected in how its portrayal of land abandoned and misused would have continued to strike a sympathetic chord with fifteenth-century English readers. Here, then, I shall examine how this text's conservative concentration on landed property as the foundation of social identity reveals contemporary attitudes of the lower gentry and even the yeoman farmer – who, in looking to the ever-shifting legal and natural landscape of late medieval England, found in the natural world both a reflection and an extension of his own evolving social and economic experience.

The desire for a tangible connection between personal identity and personal property becomes particularly evident in passages devoted to a sympathetic character's death. As Knight and Ohlgren observe, the passage detailing Sir Johan's deathbed speeches rather expertly communicates the old man's emotional trauma in its deft portrayal of a dying knight whose lands grow further outside his control the more obsessed with their fates he becomes.⁹¹ Yet the poem goes beyond merely evoking such a connection through the juxtaposition of mortal illness and legal negotiations. When Sir Johan is finally laid to rest, the text explicitly illustrates the knight's final resting place, reporting that he was "under gras grave" (l. 69). Interestingly, the text makes the same note of Gamelyn's fate at the poem's end, as "sithen was Gamelyn graven under molde" (l. 896). In contrast, the false judge and sheriff are hung "To weyven with the ropes and

⁹¹ "[A]s Sir Johan of Boundys lies on his death bed, the text keeps repeating how he lay increasingly *stille* and *syke*. At the same time the poem keeps returning, as he does, to the question of his lands. In performance the passage has considerable power: as the man grows weaker, his lands become mobile, more and more a matter of obsession for him and, as it transpires, others. The identity of landowner and land, the difficult dissolution of that bond and the crucial nature of its re-formation, these issues central to the period and the land-holding classes, lie behind the emphatic language of this highly effective opening passage" (Knight and Ohlgren, *Robin Hood*, p. 187). Knight reaches a similar conclusion in his close-reading of repeated and opposed phrases in this opening scene in "'Harkeneth Aright': Reading *Gamelyn* for Text not Context" in *Tradition and Transformation in Medieval Romance*, ed. Rosalind Field (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1999), pp. 15-27, at pp. 21-2.

the winde drye” (l. 876), while the entire bribed jury and even Gamelyn’s eldest brother meet the same fate.⁹²

In death, then, the relationship between characters and the landscape is made clear. Even with such seemingly minor, formulaic lines, the poem demonstrates its conception of the proper relationship between different categories of human beings and the land beneath (or around) them. The dead bodies of the evil brother and crooked members of the legal system are kept physically separate from the land that they so desperately sought to wrest from away from its proper owners, while both Sir Johan and his intended heir Gamelyn are literally “engraved” into the ground. Through a pun on the term “grave,”⁹³ the manner of their internment reflects Sir Johan’s opening wish: that his oral will be recorded on the land, in the form of legal statutes enacting the boundaries that he wished to impose. In a way, then, the poem itself becomes the text that “engraves” these wishes upon the landscape it creates. Within the world of textual narrative, words literally shape the world – and here the graves of father and son symbolize a natural world that welcomes those people it feels to be its rightful owners, while rejecting the bodies (and claims) of those who seek to subvert inherited claims.

This interpretation must stop short of ascribing a sense of conscious agency to the land itself within the poem; for it is, of course, Gamelyn’s actions that eventually lead to the fate of his eldest brother and the bought court. Yet the brief moments describing

⁹² As Knight notes, this fate is foreshadowed by the earlier moment in the text when Gamelyn’s evil brother hides in the loft of his house during Gamelyn’s feast: “the curious motif of the isolated and elevated villain in part etches the separation of lord from lordship that was a feature of late-medieval social stratification and domestic architecture, but it also ironically foresees the brother’s ending, swinging on a rope and, as the poet darkly remarks, drying in the wind” (“Harkeneth Aright,” p. 23). In opposition to the brother’s clear association with stratification, I argue that *Gamelyn* espouses a worldview that demonstrates a lord firmly and directly connected with his property – in other words, the texts celebrates a man who manages his property with two feet on the ground.

⁹³ See the *MED* entries for “grave (n.(1))” and especially “graven (v.(1)),” all meanings.

bodies after death reflect and reemphasize the importance of a corporeal connection to land that runs throughout many late medieval English romances. The landscape is part and parcel of the Englishman's social and even physical identity in this tale – a fact that makes the changes in landscape detailed by other moments in the poem so disturbing to contemporary readers reflecting on their own, real-world surroundings.

The brutal beatings that Gamelyn is threatened with and himself supplies parallel, in a condensed fashion, the impact of sixteen years' worth of neglect by his older brother on the lands left to Gamelyn by Sir Johan. Indeed, it is the process of reflecting upon these wrongs (which thus illustrates their effects to the reader) that first inspires Gamelyn to embark upon his vengeful rampage:

He thought on his landes that lay unsowe,
And his fare okes that doune were ydrawe;
His parkes were broken and his deer reved;
Of alle his good stedes noon was hym byleved;
His hous were unhilled and ful evell dight;
Tho thought Gamelyne it went not aright (ll. 83-88).

As Ryan Harper argues, this passage and the lines immediately preceding illustrate that the forest spaces of the greenwood were considered normal (and equal valuable), not “wild,” parts of the everyday economy.⁹⁴ Yet beyond reflecting fourteenth-century attitudes towards woods as spaces for practical economic endeavors (a perspective endemic to late medieval English romances), these lines also communicate a contemporary awareness – and resentment – of the changing landscape of post-plague England. Studying fourteenth- and especially fifteenth-century accounts of landscape in East Anglian written records, Philippa Maddern posits that most such details are to be

⁹⁴ Harper, *Representation*, pp. 72-4.

found in legal cases detailing disputes over accountability for damages done to economically significant parts of the local landscape.⁹⁵ If a beach eroded, a river ran shallow, or a plot of woodland fell rotten, late medieval English claimants and jurors alike sought to place blame on a human party. Often, this blame would be linked to a breach of “traditional” practices for maintaining natural resources and landscape features. As Maddern notes, “the underlying assumption [to these cases] seems to be that the landscape should, ideally, be absolutely stable, and would remain so were it not for the reprehensible actions of individuals.”⁹⁶

While recent scientific research suggests that such changes were symptomatic of larger shifts in European climate patterns during the “little Ice Age” of the late medieval and early modern periods,⁹⁷ fourteenth- and fifteenth-century witnesses insisted that human beings must be to blame (as is present to a lesser extent in *Sir Degrevant*). Furthermore, the widely documented collapse and then prolonged period of low population from the middle of the fourteenth century through the fifteenth century in England, caused by a combination of economic, pestilential, and climactic factors, left many villages and manors partially or completely abandoned.⁹⁸ As a result, manorial registers record many complaints by lords and tenants alike demanding the repair of

⁹⁵ See again Maddern, “Imagining,” pp. 52-67. Maddern argues that most contemporary fiction, including romance, ignored these changes in favor of a view of unchanging landscape (although she admits Metham’s fifteenth-century romance *Amoryous and Cleopes* may have a brief instance of realistic decay [p. 58]). While I agree with many of her remarks on historical and environmental records, I posit that some late medieval English romances, the *Tale of Gamelyn* primary among them, actually do record contemporary attitudes towards the types of landscape change that Maddern discusses. It should be noted, however, that *Gamelyn* is not thought to be an East Anglian text, and thus falls outside the oeuvre that Maddern examined – although she does gesture with her conclusions toward national literature as well.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 56-7, especially n. 24 and n. 25.

⁹⁸ See the detailed discussions throughout Dyer, *Making a Living*.

destitute buildings, fields, and plots.⁹⁹ While many individual members of the gentry (and even some aspiring peasants and yeomen farmers) were able to take advantage of changing conditions, the falling price of grain often led to even these groups reneging on promises to upkeep buildings, occasionally specializing in areas like enclosure themselves, or being left unable to maintain formerly profitable tracts of land.¹⁰⁰

The passage from *Gamelyn* cited above clearly echoes many of these concerns. While damage to landscape was a favored strategy of rival barons in romance and real-life alike, here the elder brother's destructive negligence instead places him more in line with post-plague, absentee landlords or the responsible parties sought by so many late medieval juries attempting to react to a rapidly changing landscape. The empty fields, broken park walls, and unroofed houses that *Gamelyn* sees recreate sights familiar to many late medieval English readers.¹⁰¹ Moreover, the anger with which *Gamelyn* responds to such sights creates a moment of sincere empathy for a broad social range of contemporary audiences – the landlords who could not stem the receding tide of rural renters (and thus rent), gentry farmers jealous of their entrepreneurial neighbors'

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 265-70 and pp. 330ff, especially pp. 349-52. Dyer for instance notes the public anger that flared over John Rous of Warwick's list of sixty abandoned villages in and around Warwickshire, which in turn sparked legislative attempts to restrict "the willful waste of houses and towns" (p. 351).

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 330ff. Dyer notes, as peasant and yeoman leasers gained more complete control over their holdings, even they often failed to hold themselves to terms that required the upkeep of buildings (pp. 347-8). Breaking up formerly unified landholding among multiple leases, renters, and purchases often led to the a lack of organization, and subsequent of space – Dyer notes, for example, the town of Compton, whose "fields were so ill-managed that neighboring villages sent their flocks and herds to graze illicitly" (p. 351).

¹⁰¹ Keen presents a concordant reading of the poem's tone, noting in passing that "the author knew his countryside and knew his law... [For example, h]e knew that nine out of ten guardians who held lands for a ward wasted them, and did not make much effort to make restitution, for he knew that the average medieval landlord, being less anxious about what he put into the land than about what he got out of it, would make the utmost of whatever advantages his legal position as guardian gave him" (*The Outlaws*, p. 91). Where Keen links this (perhaps over-generalized) point to his discussion of the poem's recourse to violence as the only form of opposition left to opposed groups when the law failed them, I posit that such knowledge ultimately allowed the poet to communicate contemporary attitudes condemning the "waste" of landscape that accord with some later Middle English romances.

successes, and the yeoman and peasant farmers struggling to stay afloat as grain prices dropped and communal fields were broken up or enclosed. Aside from the mere desire for rightful inheritance, then, this romance offers a parallel illusion of concrete blame for changes to English countryside – and acts out the fantasy of avenging and redressing such wrongs. Within the text of *Gamelyn*, the landscape is made into a laundry list of social and economic spaces whose fate remains irreducibly dependent upon human nature.

Perhaps the most interesting scene involving landscape within this poem is also one of its most fleeting.¹⁰² While living with his outlaw gang in the woods, Gamelyn is informed that the day for him to face his brother's charges in court has come – and, if he doesn't show, his eldest brother has bribed the jury to hang his middle brother, Sir Ote, who is standing in for Gamelyn's bail. This news elicits a reaction from Gamelyn that throws into focus the relationship between human and local environment implied in the passages discussed above:

Gamelyn stode on a day and byheeld
The wodes and the shawes and the wild feeld,
He thoughte on his brothere how he hym byhette
That he wolde be redy whan the justice sette;
He thought wel he wold without delay,
Come tofore the justice to kepen his day (783-8).¹⁰³

The poem's most recent editors have argued that these lines, and particularly the "shawes" of line 784, are an overt reference to, or echo of, early Robin Hood oral tales.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² These mentions of the "greenwood" are fleeting when contrasted with those in other outlaw tales. Keen, for instance, notes that *Gamelyn* "lacks even such slight decoration as serves to freshen the ballads of Robin Hood, those pencil sketches of the charm of the greenwood, which in so many of them create an immediate atmosphere" (*The Outlaws*, p. 89).

¹⁰³ These line numbers refer to those in Knight and Ohlgren, *Robin Hood*; one line is left out of the count after 614, so I have kept the edition's numbering, but amended to include lines 614a and 614b.

¹⁰⁴ Knight and Ohlgren, *Robin Hood*, footnote to line 784. Knight argues elsewhere that this scene thereby serves to imbue Gamelyn "with the glamour of the myth of an outlaw leader," granting him the power with which he "asserts his sense of true rights above the corrupted law" ("Harkeneth Aright," p. 25).

In addition to such an intertextual reference, however, I read these lines as an acknowledgment that the hero looks to the natural world as a locus for thought and meditation.¹⁰⁵ Lines 783-4 could easily have been omitted without disrupting the form or the plot, yet they are included because they represent an important role played by the landscape in this text.

First, the poem records an act of examining the natural world. Gamelyn “beholding” the “wodes and the shawes and the wild feeld” serves no immediately practical or economic role. Yet it also does not call to mind a condemnation of such action, as Philippa Maddern posits is the aim of Robert Reynes’ fifteenth-century account of a play that “identifies landscape observation as a principal characteristic of worldly people.”¹⁰⁶ As Maddern points out, the length and rich (albeit idealized) detail of Reynes’ play fragment suggest its condemnation of landscape appreciation as sinful frivolity was founded on the fact that contemporary audiences would have been quite familiar with the activity.¹⁰⁷ *Gamelyn*, however, does not pass moral judgment on its eponymous hero for observing his surroundings. Instead, its repetition of the verb “thought(e)” in the lines immediately following suggests that Gamelyn uses observation of the natural world as a method for collecting his thoughts, and deciding upon his next course of action.

Second, and perhaps more concretely connected to the text’s specific plot, Gamelyn’s meditative moment implies that an examination of his local environment

¹⁰⁵ As such, my reading diverges from that of T. A. Shippey here, who claims that “the fascination of the forest... is almost denied by Gamelyn, with his strongly marked taciturnities in the forest scenes” (“*The Tale of Gamelyn*,” pp. 92-3). Instead, I argue that scenes such as the one discussed above reveal a thoughtful meditation on the greenwood space and its multiple significances within the context of the narrative – despite such scenes’ textual brevity.

¹⁰⁶ Maddern, “Imagining,” pp. 58-9.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

compels him to examine the meanings associated with different spaces that he has encountered. The woods and fields that surround him here remind readers of the lands which he fought with his brother to regain. The conflict over the land in turn led directly to the predicament in which his middle brother Sir Ote now finds himself, with “justice” for both Ote’s case and Gamelyn’s charges remaining at stake. The self-styled “wild” aspect of these settings, while previously acknowledged by the poem to be actually more domestic, also implies the contrast between Gamelyn’s own position outside the control of the local court and Ote’s dangerous position as his surety. Indeed, the note on “wild feeld” echoes Gamelyn’s earlier remark, upon first repairing to the greenwood, that “he most nedes walk in feeld that may not in toune” (l. 667). Simultaneously, it evokes his compatriot Adam’s advice, given when he and Gamelyn realize they must flee the scene of a battle with the local sheriff’s men: “I rede we to wode gon er we be founde, / Better is ther louse than in the toune bounde” (ll. 601-2). Faced with the landscape that embodies the idea of outlawry, Gamelyn’s thoughts turn to the people and place that put him into that situation: the court. His freedom in the greenwood comes at his brother Ote’s expense, bound in the town. Thus Gamelyn decides to return to court and redefine his relationship with the external social forces that have heretofore defined these spaces for him – for, this time, he will write their significance for himself and others with his actions.

Finally, this turn from seeing landscape to thought reenacts the initial moment, discussed above, that set the romance’s main plot into action. As before he looked upon his injured properties, and thought “it went not aright,” so too does observing the trees and fields of the greenwood cause him to consider the new wrongs done to both himself

and his good brother Sir Ote. And once again, these thoughts lead Gamelyn to brutal, decisive, anger-driven action. Throughout *Gamelyn*, then, observation of the local landscape leads directly to thoughts of one's own tangible connections to that landscape – and rage over the fact that spaces within once deemed habitable or profitable no longer fit those same designations. Such anger accords with the class view of the “rural yeomanry” that T. A. Shippey identifies in *Gamelyn*'s often accurate reflection of late medieval bastard feudalism in England, and the shifting socioeconomic status of the yeoman class.¹⁰⁸ These yeoman were, in turn, often among (or aspiring to join) the small landowners who suffered at the hands of late-medieval aristocrats who enclosed arable land to raise animals, or let manorial holdings and fields fall to ruin. Of course, as many scholars have noted, *Gamelyn* is a conservative text: it condemns local corruption, but elevates the king as an unfailing fount of justice. Consequently, the text does not present this perspective of contemporary attitudes towards landscape as a call to action. Instead, it encodes those anxieties that thoughts of social class, inheritance, and knighthood cannot escape – and constructs a fantasy of landscape change avenged that audiences had no real-world recourse to pursue. As one scholar observes of the “Matter of England” romances like *Gamelyn*, “the struggles in which they are caught up spring not from the internal contradictions of courtly codes but the oppressive forces of a wicked world.”¹⁰⁹ In many of these romances, then, that “wicked world” is quite literally a landscape mismanaged or abused, a countryside altered from the way it was. As such, *Gamelyn* and *Sir Degrevant* serve as nostalgic laments for imagined landscape categories of the

¹⁰⁸ Shippey, “*The Tale of Gamelyn*,” all, and especially pp. 90-4. See also Shippey's argument that *Gamelyn* was meant to be “The Yeoman's Tale” in the *Canterbury Tales*, although its survival often attributes it to the Cook (pp. 79-83).

¹⁰⁹ Barron, *English Medieval Romance*, p. 85.

immediate past, as poet and reader, lord and tenant alike moved forward into the late medieval climate of harsher weather, population decline, manorial abandonment, and field enclosure. Some individuals would profit from these changes; but the tangled legal records of post-plague England suggest that achieving the desired goals of reversing or avenging such changes to environments and topography would too often remain the territory of romance.

Gamelyn stands as the Middle English romance with by far the largest number of medieval survivals (twenty-five manuscripts). Of course, much of this seeming popularity is due to the fact that the romance is bundled, in every single witness, with Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Apart from the reasons for its literary survival, however, *Gamelyn* records an anxiety about the use and misuse of land that demonstrates a late-medieval evolution of the evaluations and categorizations of landscape that arise in the earlier romances discussed above. From *Sir Isumbras* (the most popular Middle English romance outside of the *Canterbury Tales* manuscript tradition) and its adaptation of both written charter and ceremonial, communal definitions of land as a space defined by its topographical edges, through both *Isumbras*' and a plethora of other romances' illustrative presentations of the economic significance of harvesting and managing natural resources in a variety of different local environments, to *Sir Degrevant*'s fifteenth-century deployment of these evaluations to demonstrate the costs and acts of good lordship in the face of late-medieval threats to traditional landscape uses, Middle English romances regularly root their fantastic narratives in the countryside and urban spaces of medieval England. While I have examined to some extent, and especially with *Sir Isumbras*, the ways in which these romances understand views on landscape as an

integral element in constructing their protagonists' identities, this topic takes on an especial cultural and literary significance on the economic, geographic, and narrative boundary zone of the seashore. In this space, the Middle English romances most consistently draw together and develop their attitudes toward human evaluations, interpretations, and appropriations of natural space. As such, it is to an examination of these significant "strands" that I now turn.

CHAPTER 3: CHASING THE SURF

Pleasure, Identity, and Economic Opportunism on the Seashores of Middle English Romance

Near the middle of the late fourteenth-century Middle English romance *Sir Eglamour of Artois*, readers encounter a scene that ties the identities of multiple characters to their actions on, and discussions of, a beachside space. Cristabelle, the eponymous protagonist's lover, has been shipwrecked on an Egyptian beach. Fortunately for her, the wreck does not pass unseen, since "The kyng of Egypt stod in a toure" and, seeing a ship "Was wroken on the sonde," sends a squire to investigate (ll. 868-73).¹ Interestingly, the text implicitly raises the question of what the King was doing in the tower in the first place. Does he often go up to admire the aesthetic beauty of the beach and the waves? Does he see this shore as part of his domain, and thus worthy of viewing as an acknowledgment and affirmation of his power over people and land? Or does he often go up to watch the ships – and, perhaps, to keep an eye out for any financial windfalls that a wreck may bring into his treasury? The monarch's sudden interest in a shipwreck implies the possibility for material gain, especially when he orders his squire to "loke *what* in the schyp may be" (l. 872) – where *what* could stand for either a

¹ This and all following citations from *Sir Eglamour of Artois* are, unless otherwise noted, taken from the edition in Harriet Hudson's *Four Middle English Romances: Sir Isumbras, Octavian, Sir Eglamour of Artois, Sir Tryamour*, 2nd edn. (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2006).

passenger or, more probably, for the valuable cargo such a vessel may contain.² Such an eye for gain would have struck a sympathetic chord especially with gentry and mercantile audiences (perhaps aiding the overall romance's enduring appeal into the early modern period³).⁴

Of course, while the narrator and the audience know the identity of the ship's passenger, the King himself is not so sure, and thus sends his squire to investigate.

Approaching cautiously, the squire attempts to avoid any accusation or threat of ambush:

And on the syde gan he smyte:
The lady gan up stonde.
For feyntenes sche spake no worde;
The lady lyfte up hyr hode
And made sygnes with here hond (ll. 878-9, 874-6).⁵

Befuddled, the squire returns to court, and informs the king that the woman only signs with her hands, "As sche were of another lond / Beyonde the Grekus see" (ll. 893-

² See *MED* entry "what (pron.)." For a discussion of laws and literature pertaining to scavenging rights on seashores, see Section II below.

³ On *Sir Eglamour's* enduring popularity, see further Jennifer Fellows, "Printed Romance in the Sixteenth Century," in *A Companion to Medieval Popular Romance*, eds. Raluca Radulescu and Cory Rushton (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2009), pp. 67-78, at 68-70; and Helen Cooper, *The English Romance in Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 116.

⁴ The Middle English *Partonope of Blois* contains a similar scene of a lord (in this case, the young protagonist) overlooking his lover's domain from a tower, and appreciating a similar view:

Alle þe coste was notte but see,
Thorowe wyche he sawe be resone
By shyppe come marchandyse in-to þe towne,
Cloþes of gold and Spycery
Frome Alysaunder and fro Surry,
Clowys, macys, and Galyngale,
Off suger and canelle full mony a bale,
Off medecynes boþe more and lesse
To hele folke of here Sekenes (ll. 2024-2032).

All citations are taken from the British Library Additional MS 35288 version of *Partonope of Blois* in A. Trampe Böttker, ed., *The Middle English Versions of Partonope of Blois*, EETS (e.s.) 109 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1912).

⁵ As Hudson observes in her note on line 874, two sets of three lines (ll. 874-6, 877-9) are misarranged in her base manuscript (British Library MS Cotton Caligula A 2). Here, I follow the line order consistent with the five other manuscript witnesses.

4). Once the lady has been so identified, however, the King reveals himself to be a Christian (to the surprise of the audience), rejoices, and brings her from her ship into court (ll. 895-906). Once cleaned, dressed, and beseeched in God's name to speak, Cristabelle relates the circumstances of her pitiful plight – namely, how she and her “madyns went to play / Be a syde of the see” (ll. 914-915), and entered a boat with her squire (ll. 910-918). Then,

“On lond I leved my maydenes alle,
My sqwyer on slepe gon falle,
A mantyll over hym I drewe.
A wynd rose and tyll a roche us bare,
A fowle come to my sqwyere thare
And swyftly away hym threwe” (ll. 919-924).

Luckily for Cristabelle, her tale doubly endears her to the Egyptian King. Not only does her circumstance elicit the King's pity, but he also happens to be her paternal uncle (ll. 925-30). Thus, the lady finds safety in the Egyptian court, where she will live for the next fifteen years until reunited with her lover and her son.

The tale that Cristabelle presents is certainly one carefully crafted to evoke pity. Her account emphasizes her courtliness, in her “play” on the beach with attendant ladies and a “squire.” That such activity would be marked as a properly aristocratic pastime may be seen in a concordant passage from the contemporary Constance-story-cum-romance, *Emaré*, where the one at play on a beach is he who finds the eponymous heroine abandoned in a boat:

Syr Kadore hyght he.
Every day wolde he go,
And take wyth hym a sqwyer or two,
And play hym by the see.
On a tyme he toke the eyr

Wyth two knyghtus gode and fayr;
The wedur was lythe of le (ll. 342-8).⁶

Naturally, when the weather is fine, aristocrats should go out to “play” on the beach – a detail that Cristabelle capitalizes upon in her own, reworked account. Cristabelle’s story also illustrates her vulnerability in the face of the variable animal and weather forces of the natural world. In sum, this story convinces the audience to sympathize with her plight, and consider their own powerlessness in the face of the inscrutable wind and waves.

Yet there is a notable kink in this rhetorically effective back-story that complicates readers’ interpretation of the scene: namely, as readers of this romance already know, much of Cristabelle’s account is a lie. The “squire” of her tale was actually her new-born child,⁷ and she had been cast adrift in the boat by her evil father, who desired both to punish Cristabelle for giving birth out of wedlock, and to strike a blow against her absent lover, Eglamour. Now that she has washed ashore on an unknown beach, then, Cristabelle presents a tale that twists these events into a plot that evades placing blame on any party. Instead, she throws guilt to the wind while she explores the situation into which her voyage has brought her. Her tale expertly uses seemingly specific details of land- and seascapes – the beach, the rocks – to anchor her falsified social circumstances in a believable setting.

⁶ All citations from *Emaré* are taken from Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury, eds., *The Middle English Breton Lays* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995). Frances Richardson lists this passage from *Emaré*, along with the one discussed below, as an influence upon *Sir Eglamour*, but the content of the texts remains unanalyzed beyond a correspondence in wording. See Richardson, ed., *Sir Eglamour of Artois* EETS (o.s.) 256 (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), Appendix III, pp. 139-140.

⁷ Although “squire” could mean “young man of noble rank” or “knight’s son” (see *MED* “squier (n.)” meaning 2a), Cristabelle capitalizes on the fact that, more often than not, it was not used to refer to newborn infants.

Cristabelle's "play" with the setting of the beach evokes a number of similar moments in other Middle English romances, where such seaside fun seems to invite or suggest falsehood or obscured pasts. While these allusions slip by the trusting King of Egypt, astute medieval English readers of romance would have noticed this situation as prime for crafting a new self-identity – an opportunity for self-invention available also to male but especially to female characters, as Cristabelle's circumstances demonstrate. These beaches of romance present pleasure as a double-edged sword, and encapsulate contemporary attitudes and anxieties regarding the places – and dangers – of beachside play.

Middle English romances, both serious and humorous, resonate with scenes devoted to play. As modern scholars have noted, these episodes – particularly hunts in sylvan spaces – often reflect the values of aristocratic culture.⁸ Perhaps surprisingly, however, play also occasionally occurs in association with another particular space in these romances: the seashore. The beach scenes of romance illustrate that, far from some popular historians' claims of omnipresent, Biblically-motivated "beach phobia," wherein "the medieval imagination gravitated to those depictions of the ocean and its shores that were most terrifying and forbidding," fourteenth- and fifteenth-century English authors

⁸ One example among many arises in the beginning of the fourteenth-century romance *Sir Isumbras*, wherein the eponymous hero "wente hym to play, / His foreste for to se" (ll. 38-9 in Hudson, ed., *Four Middle English Romances*). See further Susan Crane, "Ritual Aspects of the Hunt 'à Force'" in *Engaging with Nature: Essays on the Natural World in Medieval and Modern Europe*, eds. Barbara Hanawalt and Lisa J. Kiser (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), pp. 63-84; Anne Rooney's *Hunting in the Middle English Literature* (Cambridge, UK: Brewer, 1993); and John G. Cummins' *The Art of Medieval Hunting: The Hound and the Hawk* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1988).

and audiences employed and recognized the seashore as a place for the pursuit of pleasure.⁹

Of course, not every beach scene in medieval romance is associated with play. As scholars such as Helen Cooper have observed, many beaches in romance serve merely as spaces within which the hero encounters either magical ships of adventure or providentially guided, rudderless boats.¹⁰ As Cooper notes, such stories had their roots in medieval (and earlier) legal practices of abandoning socially-transgressive individuals to the hands of God on the open sea.¹¹ Similarly, such “oar-less boat” narratives often mirror the beach scenes in their focus on “those who have the least agency” in a given society – ergo, particularly women in romance.¹² In contrast, scholars such as Sebastian Sobecki have argued for the beach as a space for religious and cultural encounters between shore-bound Christian and seafaring Muslim social groups in early Middle English romances such as *King Horn*.¹³

⁹ The citations are taken from Lena Lenček and Gideon Bosker, *The Beach: The History of Paradise on Earth* (NY: Viking Penguin, 1998), p. 41. See further their over-generalized discussion of Flood-narrative paranoia in medieval accounts of the seashore at pp. 38-44.

¹⁰ Cooper, *The English Romance*, pp. 108ff. There is also an ongoing critical discussion of the “Hero on the Beach” scene as a possible literary theme in Old English, Germanic, Norse, Middle English, and even simply Indo-European literature, although its very existence has recently been debated, with some scholars attributing it more to the occurrence of “threshold” scenes in romance than to any significant association with the beach itself. For criticism of the “Hero on the Beach” motif as an over-abstracted critical construct, see John Richardson, “The Critic on the Beach,” *Neophilologus* 71.1 (1987): pp. 114-119. On the preceding critical tradition arguing for the “Hero on the Beach” as a pan-European literary phenomenon, see further the sources cited in Richardson’s footnotes 1-13. For a more recent argument of this motif’s occurrence as a hold-over from oral formulas in Middle English tail-rhyme romances, including many discussed here, see Masaji Tajiri, “‘The sone rase bryght and schane’ – The Theme of the Hero on the Beach in Middle English Tail-Rhyme Romances,” *Ōsaka Gaikokugo Daigaku Ronshu: Journal of Osaka University of Foreign Studies* n.s. 6 (1991): pp. 195-218, and especially Tajiri’s *Studies in the Middle English Didactic Tail-Rhyme Romances* (Tokyo: Eihōsha, 2002), pp. 27-55.

¹¹ Cooper, *The English Romance*, p. 108. Cooper also briefly discusses *Sir Eglamour* as an enduringly popular example of this story motif, but focuses on the sea-journeys themselves; see *ibid.*, pp. 116-117.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 108.

¹³ Sebastian Sobecki identifies the beach as the scene of a cultural, religious conflict between (land-bound) Christians and (seafaring) Saracens in the early Middle English romance *King Horn*; see further his essay “Littoral Encounters: The Shore as Cultural Interface in *King Horn*,” *Al-Masaq: Islam and the Medieval*

In this chapter, however, I would like to focus exclusively on the space of the beach itself, and examine how a number of romances complement the larger themes explored by other scholars with a concentration on the seaside as a simultaneously inviting and threatening space whose multifaceted, liminal nature embodies the complex range of meanings embedded in the Middle English concept of “play.” According to the *MED*, the verb “play” encompasses the meanings of being merry, enjoying oneself, making love, playing games, gambling, fighting (lightly or seriously), performing (on an instrument or on stage), plying a trade, or even boiling.¹⁴ Beaches also serve as stages upon which the romances act out their anxieties over the consequences of human economic endeavor, in their scenes of shipwrecks as opportunities both for financial gain and mortal danger. Such a view develops the darker elements of “play,” evidencing how economic systems gamble with human lives on the open sea. Moreover, mentions of the beach in accordance with play in Insular texts other than romance also suggest an association between identity formation and the beach. As Nicholas Orme recounts, “Gerald of Wales describes how he and his brothers used to play on the sands near Manorbier, their father’s castle in Wales, in the 1150s,” and, “while his brothers erected towns and palaces, he built churches and monasteries which led his father” to have him trained for “an ecclesiastical life.”¹⁵ This identity formation, as I shall demonstrate, often moves beyond rewriting one’s own personal back-story. Indeed, alongside the spaces of

Mediterranean 18.1 (2006): pp. 79-86; and his monograph *The Sea and Medieval English Literature* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2007), pp. 100-112. I myself present similar arguments in the final section of this chapter regarding the popular fourteenth-century romance of *Sir Isumbras*.

¹⁴ *MED* pleien (v. (1)), definitions 1-9.

¹⁵ Nicholas Orme, *From Childhood to Chivalry: The Education of the English Kings and Aristocracy, 1066-1530* (London: Methuen, 1984), p. 35. Orme has more recently noted that Gerald’s account takes place “perhaps on the nearby beach” at Manorbier; see Orme’s *Medieval Children* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 175.

inland lakes, seaside scenes can serve to embody anxieties about human relationships with the natural world – and with the divine power that medieval Christians saw within and beyond the physical universe. The waterside, then, invites play and pleasure at the same time that it provides the opportunity to rewrite one’s own narrative of self in the face of natural and divine forces beyond human control – or perhaps even beyond comprehension.

At Play on the Beach

The reinvention of a character’s identity via the opportunities that the seashore provides plays a central role in a number of Middle English romances roughly contemporary with *Sir Eglamour*. For instance, in the early fourteenth-century, Auchinleck MS adaptation of the Tristan and Isolde story, *Sir Tristrem*, the Irish shore serves as a place for the eponymous hero to craft a new identity for himself while he recovers from a wound.¹⁶ In particular, the courteous knight, well skilled in lute and chess playing, lies about the circumstances of his impromptu voyage from the shores of Cornwall to the Dublin beach, telling his royal rescuers that:

Marchaund ich have ben ay;
Mi nam is Tramtris.
Robbers, for sothe to say,
Slough mine felawes, ywis,
In the se.
Thai raft me fowe and griis,
And thus wounded thai me (ll. 1215-21).

¹⁶ See ll. 1156ff. This and all subsequent references to or citations of *Sir Tristrem* are taken from Alan Lupack, ed., *Lancelot of the Laik and Sir Tristrem* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1994; rpt. 1997).

The protagonist's creation of a calamitous pirate attack at sea allows "Tramtris" to rewrite himself as a merchant while he sounds out his new circumstances. Earlier in the romance, Tristem had already learned the dangers of seaside play when he was abducted by Norwegian sailors while playing chess (ll. 298ff, especially 342-352), linking once again the concepts of play and threat to the seaside (here, shipside). While brief, then, these beach scenes illustrate the vulnerability of one at play on the beach, and also a peculiar connection between the seaside and a mercantile identity. Both of these elements will be exploited and expanded in other romances.

Beach scenes captivate even more of the narrative's focused attention in another fourteenth-century romance, *Sir Amadace*. Having lost his wealth by means of excessive largesse, Sir Amadace decides to seek his fortune while travelling. Along the way, he uses the last of his funds to pay off the debts of a dead merchant, allowing the merchant's wife to bury his body. When Amadace again departs, mourning his losses, he encounters a white knight in the woods who offers him a chance for redemption. Informing Amadace of a nearby king whose daughter will be given in marriage to the winner of a joust, the white knight says that he will offer Amadace a new set of riches, whose origins he should obscure:

Thu say the menne that come with the,
That thay were drounet on the see,
With wild waturis slone.
Loke that thu be large of feyce,
Tille thu have wonon gode congrece,
And I schall pay ichone (ll. 487-492).¹⁷

¹⁷ All citations from *Sir Amadace* are taken from Edward E. Foster, ed., *Amis and Amiloun, Robert of Cisyle, and Sir Amadace*, 2nd edn. (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007).

Once again, the sea is presented as an alternative to the truth – an easy, unexplainable force that swallows proof, and leaves only one’s word. Entering into league with the mysterious white knight, Amadace soon comes to the beach, where he finds the goods that the white knight “promised” him – namely, a shipwreck full of knightly accouterments: armor (on dead knights), steeds, and chests of gold (ll. 517-528). This scene presents a nightmare scenario frequent to medieval romance – the shipwreck – recast with an appreciation of its financial benefits to those already on land.¹⁸ Shipwrecks, in the event, become a sort of natural resource provided by the sea and chance. The shore is the space within which such failed mercantile gambles can be harvested. The beach, then, provides the bounty with which Amadace can begin to rewrite his own story. As he makes a name for himself anew (with his true identity concealed), Amadace remains associated with the beach. Indeed, it is “As the messingerus welke bi the see sonde” that “Thay toke Sir Amadace bi the quite honde” and invite him to court (ll. 553-554). He’s the knight of the beach – and his liminal identity as an anonymous challenger is echoed in the liminal nature of the beach space itself, providing him with a narrative *carte blanche* that allows him to put aside the consequences of his past experiences. In this way, Amadace enacts the “performance” aspect of the Middle English concept of “play” – along with its “gambling” connotations. Indeed, his adoption of a new life nearly ends in disaster, when his white knight “creditor” returns to exact half of Amadace’s winnings – in the form of half of his wife’s and child’s bodies. In the end, the knight’s mercy and Divine will are the only things that

¹⁸See the next section, below, for an expanded discussion of shipwrecks in these romances (and especially in *Sir Amadace*). For another association of the beach with mercantile affairs, in this case a fair “upon þe stronde” (l. 8042) explicitly denoting the reliance of chivalric identity upon material goods, see *Partonope of Blois*, ll. 8037-8062.

save Amadace's consequences from catching up with him. His issue, then, was taking the gift of the beach as a "free lunch" – and forgetting the dangerous consequences that Middle English play always seems to elicit, when performed on the seashore.

The connection between mercantile endeavor (as discussed in *Sir Amadace*) and aristocratic play on the beach is made explicit in another seaside scene from *Sir Eglamour's* close contemporary, *Emaré*. Here, as in the scene from this romance discussed above, the text presents a man playing upon the beach (this time, at Rome) who happens to discover the shipwrecked heroine. However, this man has a different social identity – one perhaps attractive to a broader, fifteenth-century audience: he is a merchant (ll. 685-696).¹⁹ This merchant discovers the lady along with her son, and decides to house them both. As such, they spend the next seven years living with the merchant and his wife. This scene, then, places Jurdan the merchant in a parallel role to the earlier Sir Kadore – and emphasizes the echo by showing the merchant to be a man who daily goes "to playe hym by the see" (l. 689).²⁰ Of course, this parallel raises the question of what motivates Jurdan's long walks on the beach. Does he seek merely to entertain himself? Or does he also go with an eye out for shipwrecks – the "gambling" aspect of play? Either way, this text demonstrates that mercantile audiences, too, could find themselves

¹⁹ Tajiri attempts to identify this scene as following the "Hero(ine) on the Beach Theme," but does not analyze it further; see "The sone," pp. 207-208, and *Studies in the Middle English*, pp. 43-45. A perhaps similar moment also occurs in *Apollonius of Tyre*, when a "clerk" spies the washed up coffin of Apollonius' wife (c. l. 1161). There, however, the clerk is merely passing by along the beach, and isn't explicitly out "to playe." All quotes from *Apollonius of Tyre* are taken from John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, 3 Vols., 2nd edn., ed. Russell A. Peck (with Latin translations by Andrew Galloway) (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2006), Vol. I.

²⁰ Ad Putter also briefly notes the echo of the wording between these two scenes, but in support of his argument that the romance seeks to emerge its readers in a sense of a constantly repeating past of exile and return, escapable only by the tale's conclusion; see "The Narrative Logic of *Emaré*" in *The Spirit of Medieval English Romance*, eds. Ad Putter and Jane Gilbert (Harlow, UK: Pearson Education Limited, 2000), pp. 157-180, at p. 166.

enjoying beaches as recreational spaces in romances – a scene that could subsequently reflect or influence real world practice.

The convention of dangerous play on the seashores of romances also resonates in the works of more famous authors who seek to adopt the genre for their own ends. Cristabelle’s tale of playing on the beach in *Sir Eglamour* may call to mind, for instance, her more famous contemporary, literary peer, Dorigen in *The Franklin’s Tale* – that is, Chaucer’s “Breton lai.” When her female friends see Dorigen’s sorrow over the absence of her lover, Arveragus, they decide to find a pastime that will entertain and distract her. The first idea that they jump to, while rather obviously misguided given the particular circumstances, reveals the naturalness of the activity to Chaucer and his readers:

Now stood hire castel faste by the see,
And often with hire freendes walketh shee
Hire to disporte upon the bank an heigh,
Where as she many a ship and barge seigh
Seillynge his cours, where as hem liste go (ll. 847-51).²¹

The fact that Dorigen pays particular attention to passing ships because she anxiously awaits Arveragus’ return reflects, of course, the specifics of the tale’s plot. Her focus on such details leads in turn to her famous meditation on the “rokkes blake” (l. 868) that threaten the passing ships, until her friends finally “sawe that it was no disport / To romen by the see, but disconfort, / And shopen for to pleyen somwher elles” (ll. 895-7). Yet this scene also encapsulates the network of social associations layered atop beaches and seashores. With the ships and barges, Chaucer calls attention not only to Dorigen’s anxieties, but also to the mercantile worth and uses of the sea – a fascination that runs

²¹ Citations of *The Franklin’s Tale* are taken from the edition of Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd edn., eds. Larry D. Benson, et al. (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987). Line numbers are as given in that edition, and refer to lines in Fragment V (Group F) of *The Canterbury Tales*.

through many seaside scenes in Middle English romances. Moreover, the result of Dorigen's "play" on the beach, and her subsequent transfixion upon the rocks, is again a falsification with significant consequences. For it is the sight of these rocks that leads her, in jest, to promise her suitor, Aurelius, that she will love him if only he can make the rocks disappear (ll. 989ff). The illusion that Aurelius later buys, seemingly causing the rocks to vanish, leads to the climactic finale of the tale. As such, Chaucer here adopts the romance convention of the seashore as a space for play and false narrative, building on the beach's association with both female entertainment and unpredictable threat to show a world where "play" may be misinterpreted as a serious request, with dangerous (or ridiculous) consequences. The literary trigger for this move, then, is at least partly drawn from romance – but the leisure activities it portrays reflect contemporary conceptions of the beach as a space for "play."

Another late-fourteenth century author whose forays into romance prominently feature play on the beach is Chaucer's fellow Ricardian, John Gower. In his major Middle English work, the *Confessio Amantis*, Gower's most developed tale is his final one: the romance *Apollonius of Tyre*. Here, Gower uses seas, storms, and beaches as both dividing markers and drivers of the tale's plot. In the process, he also details circumstances for beach play and the beach as a space for both female power and vulnerability.²²

Gower's text first portrays a light-hearted beach celebration scene. Once Apollonius is married, he and his wife quickly seek to consummate the marriage, which

²² For an excellent discussion of how Gower elaborates his sources' depictions of the sea/Neptune as a predominately benevolent, ultimately understandable force of fate or "kynde" separate at least in part from the fickle (and pagan) Fortune, see Sobecki's *The Sea and Medieval English Literature*, pp. 113-118.

they successfully do: “For as thei pleiden hem betwene, / Thei gete a child between hem tuo / To whom fell after mochel wo” (ll. 8.972-4). Here, Gower establishes “play” as a pastime that involves both enjoyment and sorrow, both sex and “wo.” This image is fresh in the audience’s mind when, but a few lines later, Apollonius’ new in-laws set out “To pleien hem upon the stronde” (ll. 8.981) as a form of celebration. There, they find a ship that appears to bear good news: Apollonius’ foe, King Antiochus, is dead. As such, the hero and his pregnant wife will decide to sail for Tyre themselves – leading to the “woes” that Gower has recently foretold. The foreshadowing of these trials is thus encapsulated in Gower’s choice of the verb “pleien” to describe the nobles’ activities “upon the stronde.” On the one hand, the beach provides the space for aristocrats to relax and enjoy themselves – but, on the other, its openness presents them as vulnerable to the intrusion of the outside world. In the play-space of the seashore, even seemingly good news may quickly turn sour.

The sourness and danger of the seashore are qualities further emphasized by the text’s next major beach scene. Here, too, Gower works in the romance motif of a female character spinning a false tale relating to the seashore – but now to darker ends than those that I have discussed so far. In this case, the King and Queen of Tharse are raising Thaise, the daughter of Apollonius, as a ward. However, when Queen Dionise learns that her people feel that Thaise is more beautiful and more talented than the Queen’s own daughter (c. l. 8.1345), her jealousy leads her to set a seaside snare for Thaise. The Queen thus calls upon “hire bondeman” (l. 8.1358), Theophilus, and orders him to lead Thaise “Upon the stronde nyh the see, / And there he schal this maiden sle” (ll. 8.1365-8.1366). The seashore, as this passage makes clear, can serve for murder as much as for

play. In the actual events that do transpire, Thaise is “rescued” from this setup – but by pirates, who eventually sell her off to a brothel.

Throughout the passage, Gower’s verse clearly associates the place with the events unfolding (ll. 8.1373-8.1397). The text’s constant repetition of “upon the stronde” and “in this stede” drives home to the audience that the seashore is the place associated with the twin dangers of secluded murder and abduction by pirates. In the reverse of the earlier scene of aristocratic play in this romance, and the scenes of female recreation in other romances, this unhappy passage illustrates the dangers of the beach’s openness as a liminal space bounded and made accessible by the ocean. However, while the romance association of the shore with female society here takes a dark turn, the text later balances this shift with its description of a Neptunalia on the seaside in Mitelene, during whose celebrations “upon the stronde at the rivage” (l. 8.1615) Apollonius will be reunited with his daughter at last.²³ Thus, Gower’s romance demonstrates the multiple valences of the seaside by virtue of its characters’ shifting fortunes.

The fourteenth-century romance *William of Palerne* further develops the connection between recreation and danger at the beach, while also emphasizing the space’s potential uses in the construction of misleading narratives. Near the end of the romance, William’s werewolf companion is revealed to be Alphonso, the transformed son of the King of Spain. The King reaches this revelation as he observes the wolf’s bizarrely courtly demeanor, which elicits within him thoughts of his own lost son. As he says, his loyal retainers had originally told him that his new Queen used enchantments to

²³ As Sobecki also notes (*The Sea and Medieval English Literature*, pp. 115-116), this “solemn” Neptunalia nevertheless emphasizes the benevolent nature of the sea, and also of Neptune (see Peck’s note to l. 1614) – while also encompassing the happy consequences of the beach in my reading.

transform his first son into a wolf. However, when confronted, his new wife “swor grimli gret opes bi al þat God wrouzt, / þat mi semli sone was in þe see sonken, / as he passes out to pleie priveli him one” (ll. 4110-4112).²⁴

Here, in a condensed form, the audience finds the romance categorization of the seaside space. In order to conceal the nefarious nature of her stepson’s transformation, the Queen instead creates another story of identity termination for the boy by spinning a false tale of dangerous play on the beach and in the sea. In it, she relies upon the understanding of the waterside as a space culturally constructed both to evoke the desire for recreation and to invite disaster. By virtue of her actions, however, the text also implicitly associates the shore with the opportunity to make oneself (and here, one’s heirs) anew. The beach provides a space of possibility open to the character that takes it upon herself to fill the void it presents with a version of reality more amenable to her own goals. Concordantly, the juxtaposition of the beach with the seemingly limitless sea misleadingly suggests that actions performed during, or attributed to “play on the beach” are free of consequences. The seashore thus presents itself as an alluringly natural *tabula rasa*, inviting characters to surrender their inhibitions and engage in play either for its own sake, or as a cover for a self-composed metamorphosis of social identity.

This conception of the seaside provides us with a window onto the cultural perspectives of late medieval English audiences vis-à-vis the beach. Put most directly, the beach seems to present one of the most important of the natural world’s embodiments of the Middle English term, “play.” Entertainment, recreation, performance, gambling with

²⁴ All citations from *William of Palerne* are taken from G. H. V. Bunt, ed., *William of Palerne: An Alliterative Romance* (Groningen: Bouma’s Boekhuis, 1985).

high stakes – all of these various components of a complex English concept come to life in the romances’ descriptions of seaside activity. The aspect of the gamble, especially, creates a sense of tension and excitement that permeates these beach-based narrative moments. For, although the sea’s vastness may offer the allure of momentary anonymity and an escape from consequences, Divine will does not always prove so blind.

The Queen of Spain’s seaside gambit in *William of Palerne* ultimately fails, with the result that the disinherited heir returns to his original biological and social roles. Yet *Sir Eglamour of Artois* presents a contradictory view, since Cristabelle’s tale of half-truths ultimately wins her fifteen years of protection, and allows her to escape the clutches of her vindictive father. There, however, the language clearly links Cristabelle’s performance of her story (and subsequent amendment of her own identity) with a trust in the Christian God: she speaks to a (surprisingly) Christian king, and only once she has been beseeched in Christ’s name to do so. Moreover, as the romance draws to a close, the true circumstances of Cristabelle’s departure from Artois are revealed – but only when she is back in the protection of Sir Eglamour, and no longer stands in danger of reaping the consequences of her father’s actions.

In sum, God’s plan will out. While the beach may present the illusion of self-recreation, God will ultimately reveal such a performance for what it is: play. The seashore, with its fast-eroding sands and ever-evolving topography, provides an apt geographical metaphor for the misleading permanence that play may so temptingly – and yet so falsely – appear to provide.

Overall, the passages of misrepresented seashore scenes discussed above raise the issue of how medieval poets and audiences thought about the space of the seashore.

Clearly, a sense of the dangers inherent in travel by ship was omnipresent, with shipwrecks looming large in the imagination of romance – a point to which I shall return below. Yet, as I have shown, these romances also suggest that the seashore was seen as a space for recreation and entertainment. “Play,” including both performance and amusement, transformed the natural environment of the beach into a stage for fantasy. Perhaps the seemingly limitless unpredictability of the ocean itself naturally invited such speculation. But what these romances clearly demonstrate is that medieval English readers found it normal for aristocratic *and* mercantile characters – particularly women – to enjoy a day at the beach. This recreation is, in turn, often tied to a beach that is, as in *The Franklin’s Tale*, *Sir Tristram*, *Sir Amadace*, *Emaré*, or *Sir Eglamour*, explicitly linked to mercantile networks of exchange and material wealth. The weaving of fictional narratives endemic to the beach scenes of Middle English romance even mimics to a small extent the experience of hearing or reading the romances themselves. Consequently, enjoying the space of the beach as a potential platform for fictional narratives may also (intentionally or not) encode late medieval aristocratic and gentry attitudes on the pleasures of taking long walks on the beach.

Shipwrecks and the Human Costs of Capital in Middle English Romance

The fourteenth-century romance *Sir Amadace* opens with an eponymous hero whose noble largesse has driven him into debt. Seeking wealth, he embarks upon a voluntary exile, pays a dead merchant’s debts with his final funds, and elicits a visit from the merchant’s ghost (disguised as a knight), who invests in Amadace’s attempt to reclaim his proper status. The ghost directs Amadace to discover the necessary capital in

a “fortuitous” shipwreck – but the bargain’s terms include a fifty-percent cut of all “earnings” that almost costs Amadace’s wife and child their lives at the tale’s conclusion.

Sir Amadace is not alone among Middle English romances in its anxious fascination with shipwrecks as sources of capital. Featuring prominently in the romance imagination as terrifying obstacles in the hero’s path, shipwrecks are nevertheless often presented from the salvager’s perspective. Romances abound with knights, clerks, and merchants who obsessively observe nearby beaches and cautiously (yet excitedly) examine the contents of wrecked vessels.²⁵ Washed ashore, such fruits of maritime disaster delineate medieval English conceptions of seashores as dangerous yet profitable spaces, wherein seaside harvests of (un)natural resources help to stimulate local economic networks. Designations of these shipwrecks as “magical” or “fortuitous” cannot, however, completely elide the source of such wealth in others’ suffering – an unavoidable implication that interrogates contemporary means of attaining investment capital. This section of my discussion of seashores, then, seeks to examine how the

²⁵ Simone Pinet suggests a concordant shift in Hispanic chivalric fiction, where he posits that the main perspective of shipwrecks shifts from the adventuring knight onboard the ship to that of the ironic observer on shore as the genre moves from medieval to early modern iterations. See further “Where One Stands: Shipwreck, Perspective, and Chivalric Fiction,” *eHumanista* 16 (2010): pp. 381-394. However, Pinet only mentions issues of “economics” in passing as a background concern in scenes of shipwrecks from medieval and especially renaissance Hispanic historiography and chivalric fiction, observing that “the suspicions associated with merchants and commercial ventures in general inform the configuration of the narration of shipwreck” (p. 383). Instead, Pinet is interested in linking the philosophical evolution of the Knight from exiled sailor to landed community member to the elaboration of ship descriptions in Hispanic fiction of the early renaissance. As such, his theoretical approach diverges from my own analysis of the very economically-minded and often mercantile Middle English romances. Steve Mentz, both in his essay “Shipwreck and Ecology: Toward a Structural Theory of Shakespeare and Romance” in *The Shakespearean International Yearbook 8: Special Section, European Shakespeares*, eds. G. Bradshaw, T. Bishop, T. Hoenselaars, and C. Calvo (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 165-82, and in his monograph *At the Bottom of Shakespeare’s Ocean* (London: Continuum, 2009), analyzes scenes of oceans, beaches, and shipwrecks in Shakespeare’s plays (especially his romances), focusing on the metaphorical use of ocean description and narrative structures that echo ecocritical systems of thought. Mentz sees the “seeds” of English interest in the seashore in the early modern period (*Shakespeare’s Ocean*, p. 56). I aver that late-medieval (if not earlier) texts also demonstrate such an interest.

littoral space of the seashore is cast as a source of perilous and problematic material bounty in many Middle English romances.

The problematic – and often contentious – nature of shipwrecks in medieval English society can be clearly seen in legal and historical records. As I shall soon illustrate, charters to seaside lands often include clauses designating the owner's (or the king's) right to harvest the material goods of a ship that wrecks upon that property, while contemporary letters and household accounts bear witness to frequent conflicts over the recognition of such rights. Both sets of sources demonstrate, however, the pronounced value of shipwrecked goods, designating them a special status as found wealth that enter into the economic networks of exchange in a uniquely “serendipitous” way. Yet medieval English accounts also reveal that shipwrecked property was a site of contested claims, as locals sought to loot wrecks before absentee landlords could collect on their legal rights. Looking first to such records, therefore, will help to illustrate for modern readers the competitive, salvage-oriented mindset with which many medieval English audiences approached the topic of shipwrecks, painting an everyday background of economic competition and desire that allows the shipwreck scenes of contemporary Insular romances to stand in greater relief.

In the *MED*, the physical and legal elements of the concept of a “shipwreck” are split between two entries: *wrak* (n.1) and *wrek* (n.), respectively. The first word refers to the physical event of a shipwreck, while the second encompasses shipwrecks and other beached items to which different parties claim legal right. As the above examples demonstrate, the two meanings were often folded together in practice. In order to understand the implications of such semantic overlap in late medieval romances,

however, I must first delineate how the body of privileges and arguments circumscribed by the legal concept of the “wreck” operated in practice.

The meticulous work of legal scholar Rose Melikan helps to put the spectrum of English salvaging laws into the context of medieval European practices.²⁶ Concerning “titles to goods that washed up on shore, typically described as wreck,” Melikan observes that a number of charters granting to religious houses the right to harvest wrecks on their property were given out through the reigns of Canute, Edward the Confessor, and early Anglo-Norman kings “until, by the end of the reign of Henry II, the franchise was largely granted out in all coastal manors in the kingdom.”²⁷ In light of this practice, Melikan concludes that, in English law, “landowners and the state were favored at the expense of shippers and carriers,” which “was in sharp contrast to Continental practice, which was largely to ignore the potential rights of landowners and the civil authorities in favor of shippers, carriers, and salvors” – a difference that derived from English law’s markedly more feudal, pro-landowner slant.²⁸ While this position was tempered by a series of modifications that granted survivors claim to their vessel and blocked local landowners from declaring that ship a wreck (at least for a set amount of time),²⁹ such rules clearly

²⁶ See Rose Melikan, “Shippers, Salvors, and Sovereigns: Competing Interests in the Medieval Law of Shipwreck” in *The Journal of Legal History* 11.2 (1990): pp. 163-82, especially pp. 171-82.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 172

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 172-3. See especially the *First Statute of Westminster* and the *De Officio Coronatoris*, both issued by Edward I, which proclaimed that shipwrecked property should be held by the local representative of the king for a year and a day in the case of surviving crewmembers. If, at the end of that time, the property remained unclaimed, it was given into the custody of royal representatives. The *De Officio* appointed a special power to the king’s coroner to keep track of any property so taken (Melikan, “Shippers,” p. 173).

encouraged a sense of resentment towards shipwrecked survivors among land dwellers.³⁰ Even “findall,” or property found afloat at sea,³¹ was disputed between salvors who sought to take it from where it floated, and landowners that hoped to prove it would have washed ashore on their own beach.³² Moreover, as Melikan notes, “in situations where the liberty extended only to goods that washed up on shore, certainly, a private salvor would have been trespassing, and would probably be looked on with little favor.”³³ In sum, Melikan concludes that English policies regarding shipwrecks were “feudal” in nature, since the right to wreck “was looked upon as private revenue for the individual landowner and not an aid to commercial communities” of international sailors and merchants.³⁴ However, as subsequent examples shall show, such shipwrecked goods would naturally make their way into the English economy, connecting the seashore to inland systems of exchange, and even allowing coastal landowners to circumvent import tariffs and other trade restrictions.

Privileges to shipwrecked vessels and goods, then, remained a part of charter grants in England throughout the Middle Ages. Laws and proscriptions attempting to regulate the looting of shipwrecks abounded, issuing from both secular and ecclesiastical authorities. As Benjamin Hudson observes, “at the Third Lateran Council (1178), Pope Innocent II excommunicated anyone who despoiled Christians either on the sea or

³⁰ Speaking of such legal attempts to protect sailors’ rights, Melikan observes that “One unforeseen result of the survivorship rule seems to have been that some local people killed all survivors as they came ashore” (“Shippers,” p. 182, note 107).

³¹ Such property seems to have included both “flotsam” (items washed overboard by a storm or wreck) and “jetsam” (items thrown overboard by a crew in order to survive a storm); see Melikan, “Shippers,” pp. 173-5.

³² Ibid. As Melikan notes, however, many cases up to the reign of Edward III suggest “that all goods found floating off shore belonged to the king regardless of who was entitled to wreck on the adjacent property,” since “the typical grant of wreck only extended to beached property” (“Shippers,” p. 174).

³³ Ibid., p. 176. I shall examine just such situations in the romances below.

³⁴ Ibid.

through shipwreck.”³⁵ Fifteenth-century Rolls of Parliament also bear witness to a number of attempts to regulate and relegate specific rights to shipwrecked goods. For instance, a motion of 1455 to curb the expenses of Henry VI’s government allows, among its many exemptions, a certain Richard Wydevill Knyght and his wife Jaquette the right to keep their privileges for:

the thirde parte of the Profittes and Emolumentes of Waters, Fishynges, Mylnes, Cranages, Stallages, Peisages, Passages, Mesures of Oyle, Lastages, Perquisites of Courtes, of Veues of Francpleg’, Sokenes, Wapentakes, Markettes, Feires, Wrecke of the See, Weyves, Estrayes, Fynes, Amerciamentes, Catall of Felons and of Fugitynes and of outlawed men, Wastes, [and] Appromentes.³⁶

Clearly, shipwrecks are seen as one of the financial perks of owning seaside property. As such, this knight and his wife angled to maintain their right to one third of any local wrecks that should occur as an economic measure, linking these seaborne goods to their inland networks of exchange, their “markettes” and “feires.” The seashore emerges as a space of economic opportunity for the local, landed gentry.

Other entries in the Rolls explicitly excuse shipwrecked goods from the restrictions imposed by tariffs and other laws on merchants and craftsmen. In 1463-4, a proposal on behalf of London’s “Artificers” requests that, in order to prevent foreign competition from stealing English jobs and livelihoods, a wide range of goods (from lace,

³⁵ B. Hudson, “Prologue” in *Studies in the Medieval Atlantic*, ed. B. Hudson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 1-34, at p. 17. Hudson goes on to note that, “while the legislation was intended mainly for traffic on the Mediterranean Sea, the force of papal authority meant that it was equally valid in the Atlantic Ocean” (p. 17). Ecclesiastical authorities also challenged one another’s claims to beached property, as with a fourteenth-century contest between the Bishop of Chinchester and the Archbishop of Canterbury over the legal right to a stranded porpoise’s corpse; see R. Harper, “The Astronomical Tables of William Rede” in *Isis* 66.3 (1975): pp. 369-78, at p. 371. My thanks to Leslie Lockett for directing me to this source.

³⁶ John Strachey et al., eds., *Rotuli parliamentorum; ut et petitiones, et placita in parlamento*, 6 Vols. (London: 1767-77), at Vol. 5, p. 311, col. B. References to this collection are taken exclusively from Vol. 5, and cited in the form “page number, column letter.”

gloves, and saddles to candlesticks and tennis balls) be blocked from sale in England.³⁷

However, the petition includes one situational condition excused from this restriction:

Provided alwey, that yf eny of the forseid Wares or Chaffares, made oute of this Londe, be taken on the See without fraude or collusion, or come into this Reame or Wales by wey of wreck, that they be in no wise comprised within this Acte; but that they may be sold within this Reame or Wales, this Ordenaunce notwithstanding.³⁸

Coming upon a shipwreck, on shore or at sea, thus allows one to circumvent any restrictions on the collection or sale of foreign goods. In effect, shipwrecked materials are exempt, and always welcomed into the English economy. Presumably, the reason for this exemption is that the original crafters of these goods will no longer profit from their sale, but only the English lords or merchants who came upon them. As such, looting shipwrecks emerges as a pseudo-nationalistic occupation, employing serendipitous goods to bolster the English economy. Indeed, when the opportunity arose, the exclusive rights granted to harvesters of shipwrecks gave an especial impetus towards the categorization of any “found” vessel as a wreck. Gerald of Wales, for instance, notes in the late twelfth century “that the most serious offenders were princes and ecclesiastical lords who would condemn as a shipwreck a perfectly sound vessel if it were stranded.”³⁹ Moreover, the

³⁷ Ibid., pp. 506, col. B – 507, col. A.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 507, col. A.

³⁹ Hudson, “Prologue,” p. 17. Such mercenary actions are clearly the motivation for the definition of “wrecks” in the late-fifteenth century law code of Yarmouth, which attempts to protect the crew’s rights by declaring that “Concerning wrecks of the sea, it is agreed, that where a man, a dog, or a cat escape quick out of the ship, that such ship, nor barge, nor any thing within them, shall be adjudged wreck: but the goods shall be saved” and held by the town officials (p. 146 in Henry Swinden, ed., *The History and Antiquities of the Ancient Burgh of Great Yarmouth in the County of Norfolk: Collected from the Corporation Charters, Records and Evidences; and Other the Most Authentic Materials*, [Norwich: Printed for the Author by John Crouse, in the Market-Place, 1772]). The legal code just quoted is part of a translation of earlier French law codes of Yarmouth into English by Thomas Banyard in the reign of King Henry VII (pp. 131ff), and seems to be drawn from the *First Statute of Westminster* issued by Edward I (see Melikan, “Shippers” at p. 173). Overall, it attempts to prevent grounded ships from being categorized (and thus looted) as “wrecks” if they are close enough to shore to allow survivors (human and animal) to swim to safety.

modern scholar Maryanne Kowaleski has demonstrated that, while Atlantic sailors maintained a certain *esprit de corps* at sea, alien mariners run aground in England could face harsher treatment, since “coastal residents, for example, often took advantage of poor, shipwrecked sailors... [who] risked being detained or even killed by local residents, ... usually because they were carrying valuable cargoes that were promptly confiscated.”⁴⁰ In turn, shipmasters and their crews were bound by the Atlantic sailors’ common law, the *Lex d’Oleron*, to rescue any or all wares from a wrecked vessel, and even to protect the ship’s materials from being salvaged or sold until authorized by the vessel’s owner(s).⁴¹ Thus, the promise of personal benefit clearly motivated English shore-walkers to keep a careful eye out for the bounty of wrecks – and placed them not only in competition with each other, but possibly with any surviving sailors as well.

One striking example of a Middle English charter that records both an obsession with categories of landscape and with rights to beached “wreck” is the agreement recorded in British Library Additional Charter 40673. Here, Sir Roger of Swyllyngton agrees to grant the “Baillies, Burgeis and Comuners of the town of Donewych”⁴² rights to marshland that he has reclaimed along the local seashore. The vast majority of the rights

⁴⁰ Maryanne Kowaleski, “‘Alien’ Encounters in the Maritime World of Medieval England,” *Medieval Encounters* 13 (2007): pp. 96-121, at p. 116. Kowaleski’s well-documented study provides a variety of examples from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

⁴¹ See Article 3 of the *Lex d’Oleron*, original Anglo-Norman and translated English text, in Robin Ward, *The World of the Medieval Shipmaster: Law, Business and the Sea c.1350-c.1450* (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2009), pp. 183-205, at pp. 184 (original text) and 192 (translation) for Article 3. Particularly relevant is the Article’s statement that “the shipmaster has no power to sell the equipment of the ship if he does not have an order or the authority of the owners but he must put it (the equipment) in safe keeping until he knows their wishes. ... And if he does it otherwise he has to pay compensation” (p. 192). Also, according to this Article, if crewmembers refused to help protect the wares of a sinking or shipwrecked vessel, they sacrificed all of their wages.

⁴² British Library (listed as British Museum) Additional Charter 40673 is transcribed as Charter I.A in Hermann M. Flasdieck, ed., *Mittelenglische Originalurkunden (1405-1430)* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter’s Universitätsbuchhandlung, 1926), pp. 28-49. Cited here at p. 31, l. 2. All citations from this text are taken from this edition, and cited by “page number, line number.”

granted amount to privileges to collect “wrek” goods along “al the Mersch, Stones and Sond, that lien, or shul lien, fro the Eld hauen of Donewych to the newe hauen at Walberswyk.”⁴³ This document clearly demonstrates an awareness of the financial significance of manipulating the local landscape, as Sir Roger does here, with an especial interest in the new beach that such landscaping will provide for catching and collecting “wreke of the see.”⁴⁴ Indeed, the majority of the charter is given over to describing in detail different categories of wreck, based on the value of the items found, and then designating how such material should be distributed between the commoners and Sir Roger. On the one hand the charter first recognizes that the local inhabitants may wish to reclaim their own goods after their craft have been wrecked. As such, the document specifically allows for commoners to avoid having their investments stolen from them by right of wreck: “And also þe forsayd sir Roger shal graunt, þat, ʒif ony wreck falle vp on his soyle, . . . of the forsaide Baillies, Burgeis or Comuners, ʒif thei prouen it here propyr gode, than thei shul haue it with outen ony thing paiyng.”⁴⁵ For items of foreign origin – including shipwrecks along with “ony ffysch, or ony other maner thing”⁴⁶ –, one example on the lower end of the value scale should suffice to communicate the general formula:

ʒif ony Burgeis or ony Comunere of the forsaide towne of Donewych first fynde ony wreck in the place aforsaid, that is for to seye: fro the newe hauen at Walberswyk vnto Southwoldlond, that paseth the valewe of vj. s. and viij. d. jn to xx^{ti}. s., the fyndere shal haue the v^{te} parte of the value paide to hym, be the hands of the forsaide ministers of the forsaid sir Roger or of his heirs, for his trauallye.⁴⁷

⁴³ Ibid., p. 32, l. 6.

⁴⁴ Ibid., l. 7.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 37, ll. 24-5.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 38, l. 27.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 39, ll. 30-2.

This division of shipwrecked and other beached items into extremely specific categories of value represents a significant amount of haggling and effort on the part of the charter's authors, who clearly thought quite carefully about the seashore as a space whose very nature transformed its sands into a fertile source of investment capital. The shore emerges here as a space inextricably imbued with financial value in the eyes of its owners. As the charter reiterates near its conclusion:

... that no maner of wreke be remewed of nowthere partye out of the place, that it is founden jnne, with outen the assent of forsaid sir Roger... ne with outen the assent of the forsaid Baillies of Donewych... And qwho so do the contrarye, shal forfeit his parte or profytz abuf said... And also answere be the commune lawe to hym, that the forsaid gode longit to be weye of wreke, 3if he wil pursu it.⁴⁸

Neither party here seems entirely to trust the other to abide by the rules of this agreement, if the extreme specificity of the terms and consequences here are any indication.⁴⁹ A space of serendipitous bounty for shore-dwellers, the beach is also a place of theft and lies, of property misreported or secreted away. Lords and commoners alike appear equally liable to succumb to the temptation for free money here – and the charter takes pains to make clear the parties that will suffer the consequences should such windfall be unfairly distributed. Notably, the parties most likely to suffer – the foreign crews of shipwrecked vessels – are entirely left out of the equation. The text here attempts to avoid any category of human cost associated with such economic matters, focusing primarily on the financial designations of different value categories of wrecked

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 41, ll. 40-2.

⁴⁹ Melikan sees these same concerns in other contemporary English laws regarding the salvaging of wreck, remarking that since “the individuals holding the liberty of wreck typically exercised legal authority over those persons living or working on the property, the likelihood of good faith salvage activities by third parties was probably not very great” (“Shippers,” p. 176) – a situation Sir Roger and the village officials wanted to protect themselves against.

goods. However, the anxieties clearly apparent in all local parties' concerns over theft of such goods reminds readers that the human cost of such seashore items can never fully be written out of the equation – no matter how hard the authors may try to ignore the darker side of their serendipitous capital.

Another colorfully detailed example of a dispute over the right to harvest the remains of a shipwreck in late fifteenth-century East Anglia occurs within the now famous correspondence of the Paston family. Over the course of the month of November, 1477, William Pecock⁵⁰ sent two letters to his “ryth worschepfull master,”⁵¹ John Paston II, describing a shipwreck that occurred alongside the latter's property in the Norfolk town of Winterton. Indeed, Pecock is clear about the significance of the event, stating in his second letter that it is a “gret plenté of wreke of þe schyppe þat is worth meche mony.”⁵² Even at the very onset of his description, Pecock details the size and worth of the remains that have washed up on Paston's shoreline: “there is a grete chyppe go to wrekke be-for Wynterton, and there cam vp on youre seueral grownd gret plenté of bowe stavys and waynescotte, and clappalde gret plenté. I gate cartys and caryd to þe towne þat þat was fownd on youre fee.”⁵³

The initial way in which Pecock perceives the shipwreck, then, is as an economic bounty. Indeed, he even describes the material value of the shipwrecked goods in very

⁵⁰ William Pecock (occasionally identified erroneously as Thomas Pecock) was an important, if often quarrelsome (at times he seems somewhat of a busybody) property manager and head servant for the Pastons for twenty years or more; see Colin Richmond, *The Paston Family in the Fifteenth Century*, Vol. II (Fastolf's Will) (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 50-2.

⁵¹ Norman Davis, ed., *Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century*, Vol. II, EETS (s.s.) 21 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), p.420, Letter 778, address autograph. All following letters and citations are from this volume, and cited in the form “Letter #, page #, line #.”

⁵² Letter 779, p. 423, l. 11. This statement is preceded by a long, detailed list of the various boards, barrels, oars and other items that Pecock believes the wreck to have yielded (ll.9-10).

⁵³ Letter 778, p. 421, ll. 20-3.

practical terms, observing that “þe bordys had ben good for wyndownys and dorys.”⁵⁴ Speaking of the calamity, Pecock does not mention the human cost until much later, and then more as a fly in the ointment of his attempts to collect on Paston’s legal claim to the wreck’s material, remarking that “I am threte to be trobilid there, for there ben v men on lyve of þe chyppe.”⁵⁵ Clearly, the event of a shipwreck has triggered a sense of opportunism more than any empathy for the ship’s crew, with a pronounced focus on cataloguing and collecting the newfound material wealth as quickly as possible. That Pecock must race to gather his “master’s” share is evident, as he explains the primary troubles that he has had in claiming the wreck, since the neighboring “Mastras Clere hath sent down hyre men and with-set alle þe stuff and wrekke, and seyth þat ye gete non there for sche wol haue it be þe tytyl of þe lete; and I haue answerd there-to þat che owte non to haue be þat tytil.”⁵⁶ One can sense Pecock’s indignation when he bitterly concludes that “Sche had neuer no wrekke nor growndage til with-inne this xx wyntter.”⁵⁷ The category of “wrekke” that Pecock uses here refers not just to literal shipwrecks, but also to the right “to wrek” – that is, to collect the remains of wrecks on the Winterton beach. As Pecock tells Paston, this right should belong to Paston alone, since “[t]here is no maner in Wyynterton but youre.”⁵⁸ However, the vagaries of general practice may

⁵⁴ Ibid., ll. 31-2. This detail is particularly relevant, since Pecock later describes the damage that a recent storm (perhaps the same that sank the unfortunate vessel) did to the manor house’s windows (p. 412, ll. 48-50).

⁵⁵ Ibid., ll. 30-1.

⁵⁶ Ibid., ll. 23-6.

⁵⁷ Ibid., ll. 28-9.

⁵⁸ Ibid., ll. 29-30.

quickly usurp such legal arrangements. As Pecock warns, Paston must act fast, or “lesse youre ryth now and lesse it for euer.”⁵⁹

In all, this shipwreck has stoked competition between neighbors, compelling the Lady Clere to press her local advantage over the absentee Paston, who Pecock believes to have the sounder claim. Shipwrecks thus emerge as an opportunity for financial gain – but gain only by means of cutthroat competition, and challenging – or defending – legal claims that may be upset by quick action on the spot. Indeed, masters and mistresses are not the only individuals to get in on the act; Pecock also records the names of three “Men of Scrowby” who “hath fet... away” the “v or vj barell” that “is com vp ther at Caster,” and charges Paston that “ye must haue a meen be sum wryte of trespass for them or ellis it wool do yow meche harm here-after.”⁶⁰ Everyone, it seems, participates in the practice of harvesting “wraks,” regardless of their right to “wrek.” Moreover, it is worth reiterating that the crew of the ship gains little attention amongst these dealings, except as yet another party of possible competitors. Shipwrecks provided bounty to those who acted fast – and Pecock’s letters demonstrate that economic gain was the primary motivation.

With the desires and anxieties relating to historical shipwrecks in late medieval England firmly in mind, then, let us return to examining the opening example of *Sir Amadace*. Here, these contemporary issues are personified in the figure of the “Grateful Dead” merchant/White Knight, who promises to invest in Amadace’s return to

⁵⁹ Ibid., l. 30.

⁶⁰ Ibid., ll. 33-6.

knighthood. Charging Amadace to “say the menne that come with the, / That thay were drounet on the see, / With wild waturis slone” (ll. 487-9), the White Knight declares:

That thu be fre of wage,
And I schall pay for thi costage,
Ten thowsand gif thu ladde.
Ther schall thu wynne full mekille honowre,
Fild and frithe, towne and towre,
That lady schall thu wedde (ll. 493-8).

Amadace’s venture has a backer. Notably, the products of this investment will be not only Amadace’s return to noble status, but also the gaining of a wife and new lands into the bargain. After all, Amadace needs to turn a profit for the White Knight’s investment to be worthwhile. Yet the mysterious stranger departs once Amadace agrees to their deal, leaving his investment unpaid. Amadace alone must continue out of the forest to the seashore, where the environment is right for a manifestation of the specter’s “goodwill.”⁶¹

Now als Sir Amadace welke bi the se sonde,
The broken schippus he ther fonde —
Hit were mervayl to say.
He fond wrekun among the stones
Knyghtes in menevere for the nones,
Stedes quite and gray,
With all kynne maner of richas
That any mon myghte devise
Castun uppe with waturis lay;
Kistes and cofurs bothe ther stode,
Was fulle of gold precius and gode,
No mon bare noghte away (ll. 517-28).

⁶¹ Maldwyn Mills suggests an echo here of John Gower’s *Apollonius of Tyre*, where the eponymous hero suffers a shipwreck and goes on to win a tournament; see Mills’ edition of *Six Middle English Romances* (London: Dent, 1973), pp. xxiii-xxiv. However, I argue that the fact that Amadace comes upon, and is not the victim of, a shipwreck is of key importance, and alters how contemporary readers would have approached the scene.

William Pecock would certainly have known what to do if he had come upon such a treasure at Winterton. In the event, what has washed up here is the material manifestation of a knightly identity. Armor, steeds, chests of precious stones and gold – Amadace simply needs to dress, mount, and spend, and he becomes a knight again at once, satisfying the initial problem of the romance.⁶² However, the text here makes explicit some disturbing implications of the serendipitous exchange. For, when “Sir Amadace he him cladde, / And that was in a gold webbe, / A bettur myghte none be” (ll. 529-31), he is literally stripping the clothes and arms off the bodies of those “Knyghtes in menevere for the nones” who now lie “wrekun among the stones.” Amadace’s insensitivity to members of his own class in this scene starkly contrasts with his previous care for the merchant’s corpse. Readers hear nothing, for instance, of Amadace moving to

⁶² Elizabeth Williams makes a brief and concordant note about this scene, but in support of a rather different conclusion; see “Sir Amadace and the Undisenchanted Bride: the relation of the Middle English romance to the folktale tradition of ‘The Grateful Dead’” in *Tradition and Transformation in Medieval Romance*, ed. Rosalind Field (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1999), pp. 57-70. Observing that the wreck is a “key episode” in the romance’s plot, Williams notes that Amadace finds “riches for the taking, but also with the corpses of the drowned” (p. 70). Noting as I do Amadace’s inconsistency in the treatment of corpses, Williams posits that Amadace’s failure to bury the knights demonstrates that he is not “a psychologically consistent character,” but rather provides evidence that Amadace “is acting in folktale mode, passively following instructions, and [that] the shipwreck is a pure motif, of local significance only: it is simply a source of wealth, and its other implications are irrelevant to the story” (p. 70). While I agree that the shipwreck scene demonstrates Amadace taking advantage of material wealth, I argue that, instead of marking the register of the narrative as that of an unrealistic folk-tale, Amadace’s treatment of the wreck and its contents instead quite chillingly reflects contemporary English beach-combing practice, and illustrates an uncomfortable similarity between merchants and knights when faced with the opportunity for economic gain.

Michael Johnston, “Romance, Dstraint, and the Gentry,” *JEGP* 112.4 (2013): pp. 433-460, at p. 448, also cites these same lines in support of his argument that, at precisely this point, the romance switches from an idea of wealth defined by carefully calculable, concrete amounts of coins to “uncountable” amounts of aristocratic wealth, wherein “[u]ncountability serves as a reinstitution of aristocratic economics, for largesse presupposes that one does not reckon expenses” (p. 448). Ultimately, Johnston posits that *Sir Amadace* presents a narrative that “works particularly to assuage gentry concerns, first testing their membership in the elite and finally resolving that they belong there” (p. 451) by showing a hero worried about counting coins and then delivered from such worries by the practically infinite amounts of material wealth granted by the shipwreck and later the tournament winnings. I agree with Johnston’s overall analysis of the tale’s financial and class worldview, but I argue that the shipwreck’s placement as the source of this status-defining wealth implicitly links the practice of noble largesse to the cutthroat world of seashore opportunism.

bury these knights. Instead, his attitude betrays the contemporary sense of cutthroat opportunism that runs through, for instance, William Pecoock's complaint that the Winterton wreck had any survivors at all, since such men provided more possible competition for the wreck's wares. As the first-comer, Amadace claims the wreck for himself, and uses it to escape the system of economic exchange which he seems unable to manage profitably, becoming instead the recipient of a great act of providential largesse. A wreck, it seems, renders its contents (human or otherwise) into their base financial values, ready for reinsertion into the economic system by the first quick-witted passerby.

Apart from the glaring lack of empathy that this scene reveals in Amadace as he scrambles desperately for the material trappings of his previous identity, the hero's treatment of this wreck also raises some concerns for any medieval reader familiar with seaside practice. As the White Knight has already informed us, "here beside duellus a riall king" (l. 472).⁶³ If the king lives nearby, he must also own this stretch of seashore – and thus, presuming that the laws of contemporary England provide any model, the king should have the right as local landowner to the contents and profits of any shipwreck.⁶⁴ In effect, Amadace steals these goods from the king – the same monarch whose daughter he will later marry, and whose throne he will inherit. This troubling moment – an alien looting a shipwreck that does not belong to him so as to usurp the local ruler – embodies, in a reversed way, many of the fears that English anxieties over claims to shipwrecked goods seem to demonstrate. If Amadace were the villain and not the hero, his actions

⁶³ While this statement was uttered in the forest, it presumably still applies to the beach, as that is where Amadace makes his temporary base while venturing out to tournaments – and it is where the king's messengers go to seek him out.

⁶⁴ Unless, of course, the king had granted those rights to another – but that lord would still have a greater claim to such goods than the alien Amadace.

would be chilling indeed. Yet the fact that he is the hero demonstrates another element of the text's subtle critique of the mercantile worldview it cannot escape.⁶⁵ The first person to the opportunity earns the investment – but an investment indivisible from human suffering. Indeed, the plot of the romance appears to imply that the shipwreck itself was caused by the will or influence of the dead merchant. At the tale's conclusion, too, the merchant (himself deceased) is unable to think of even fellow human beings as anything other than objects of exchangeable value – and the influence of his worldview helps shape the perspective that the desperate Sir Amadace is forced to adopt. The fact that Amadace is a born noble may avoid raising explicit problems for the plot's resolution of knightly identity restored, but the problematic implication that such capitalist competition is to be pursued in the face of inherited right remains.

In addition to these issues of possibly usurped social hierarchies, the romance reveals in its desperation to sanction Amadace's use of the wreck's goods the difficulty of stripping investment capital of its many hidden costs. Indeed, the dead knights are not hidden at all, but thrust in the reader's face. The king's loss is more implied, although he

⁶⁵ For a brief, but insightful examination of some mercantile aspects in *Sir Amadace* (that does not, unfortunately, address the shipwreck scene), see James Simpson, *Reform and Cultural Revolution*, The Oxford English Literary History, Vol. 2: 1350-1547 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 266-70. In particular, Simpson's observation that the tale ultimately betrays a number of "striking, unavoidable, and shameful similarities between merchants and knights" (p. 268) accords with my interpretation of the shipwreck scene. Ad Putter, in another major consideration of mercantilism in the romance, has argued that *Sir Amadace* ultimately presents a world that favors the reckless largesse of noble spenders, and champions a gift economy over the proto-capitalist commodities mindset that I examine here; see "Gifts and Commodities in *Sir Amadace*," *The Review of English Studies* 51.203 (2000): pp. 371-94. Speaking in passing of the shipwreck, Putter posits that "Amadace's gift to the merchant [burying him] reciprocates the merchant's earlier gifts to knights; the White Knight's gift of shipwrecked riches reciprocates Amadace's gift to the merchant; and Amadace's willingness to give half his wife and child acknowledges his indebtedness to the White Knight's earlier gift to him" (p. 384). However, as my argument demonstrates, scenes such as the shipwreck reveal that, even within a framework of noble gift exchange, the costs of a burgeoning economy of exchanged goods and investment cannot be entirely avoided or silenced. For an argument that *Sir Amadace*'s presentation of the knight-merchant relationship was influenced by moral exempla, see Michael Johnston, "Knights and Merchants Unite: *Sir Amadace*, the Grateful Dead, and the Moral Exemplum Tradition," *Neophilologus* 92.4 (2008): pp. 735-44.

arguably regains some of these goods when Amadace becomes his heir. What the ruler loses, however, is the right to invest as he would, or to promote his own largesse by means of the shipwreck's goods – leaving him to pale beside Amadace's example. Finally, the character of the White Knight/Dead Merchant presents us with the literal ghost of a shipwreck's original investors. Try as it might, the romance cannot ultimately escape the fact that the shipwreck exists because another person's (or group of people's) live(lihoods) have been dashed. From this destruction, then, arises Amadace's opportunity; but, as the bodies that he strips bear silent witness, this bloody legacy is one that his economic and social venture cannot entirely escape. As such, it is appropriate that the "Ghost of Investors Past" comes to visit Amadace and his wife at the story's end, threatening to upset the venture's success by retaking half of the wife's and child's own bodies as a fair share of the "earnings." This shipwreck, then, stands for investment capital: try as one might, the beneficiary cannot escape his debt to the offers and suffering of those who provided the goods or funds that support his own endeavors. Moreover, the decaying or ghostly merchant's attempt to evaluate Amadace's wife and child as divisible, material objects in the romance's final scenes highlights the fact that human suffering is a possible consequence, as well as a requisite precondition, of economic opportunism – a cycle of human cost that the shipwreck full of dead knights (and presumably funded by now ruined merchants) comes to represent. Disadvantaged knights may be forced to take advantage of this system, and face hardship (or even death, as with those aboard Amadace's wreck) within it, but merchants themselves are also shown to be unable to escape the consequences that their networks of exchange appear to demand. Indeed, the dead merchant himself may demonstrate the ultimate cost of pursuing such a

profit-oriented mindset. Such thoughts cannot have escaped the minds of men like Pecoock, wading through the wreckage on a Winterton beach – but the efforts of both real and fictional men to bury such issues beneath economic concerns over losing such goods to others betrays their anxiety over the dangerous economic system that the wreck represents.

Not surprisingly, issues surrounding the “harvest” of a shipwreck feature frequently in Middle English romances relating the Constance or Custance narrative. I have already considered two such instances from the romance of *Emaré* in a different light: the heroine’s discovery by Sir Kadore (ll. 337ff), and her later discovery by the merchant Jurdan (ll. 685ff). As I have shown, both “rescuers” abandon their seashore “pley” to help Emaré out of her shipwrecked boat.⁶⁶ Yet these scenes warrant a renewed investigation, to examine how these ultimately championed shore-dwellers fit into the matrix of contemporary attitudes towards shipwrecks as a source for investment capital.

In the first moment, Sir Kadore is out to take the air and play upon the beach with his squires (ll. 345-8) when he makes his discovery:

A boot he fond by the brym,
And a glysteryng thyng theryn,
Therof they hadde ferly.
They went forth on the sond
To the boot, y unthurstond,
And fond theryn that lady (ll. 349-54).⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Such seashore discoveries by serendipitously kindhearted shore-walkers are a staple of late medieval Insular romance. John Gower’s *Apollonius of Tyre*, for instance, notes a rescue by a considerate fisherman (ll. 8.646-52) and a cleric conveniently trained in the medical arts, out to take the air upon the beach with his assistants (ll. 8.1161-71).

⁶⁷ We may also recall, among the scenes previously discussed, the king of Egypt in *Sir Eglamour of Artois*, who observes the wreck of lady Cristabelle’s ship on the shore of his domain, and immediately sends a squire to investigate. Note that, in this scene, the fact that the king “sygh the lady” means in fact only that he saw her ship, as the later line “loke what in the schyp may be” suggests:

The “glysteryng thing theryn” is, of course, Emaré’s infamous (and perhaps magical) robe. Yet otherworldly power aside, this scene constructs a line of reasoning for Kadore that clearly echoes an opportunistic perspective of shipwrecks. Seeing a boat, he presumably moves closer, drawn by the potential for loot therein. Since he holds the nearby castle as steward to the local king, it is safe to presume that he owns pillaging rights to this beach as part of his property, and thus he moves in to collect. That this is his initial motivation is suggested by the way that his attention turns immediately to the “glysteryng” robe as the item of the greatest value in the boat. Amazed (“he hadde ferly”) at the sight of such a valuable item, Kadore then advances all of the way “to the boot,” only to discover that the robe is worn by the lady within. At this point, Kadore demonstrates his truly chivalrous nature by putting aside his desire for loot, and taking the heroine into his custody (ill-fated though her stay with him will prove to be). However, Kadore may be helped along this path by the fact that Emaré carries no other goods with her of any value aside from the robe she wears. Since she is alive, unlike the unfortunate knights of Sir Amadace’s wreck, her clothes cannot be stripped from her body without a significant (and horrifying) breach of chivalric etiquette that would clearly mark Kadore as a villain. As he is instead a noble knight, he is forced to abandon his pursuit of loot – but not before the text has clearly demonstrated his implicit motivation for visiting the wreck in the first place.

The kyng of Egypt stod in a toure
And sygh the lady whyte as floure,
Was wroken on the sonde.
He commaundyd a sqwyere to go and se
And loke what in the schyp may be;
The wynd has dryven hit to londe (ll. 868-73).

The second instance of Emaré being discovered in a shipwrecked or beached vessel arises with a more surprising character as her rescuer, the merchant Jurdan. As already discussed at length above, he echoes Sir Kadore's beachside activities, since "Every day wolde he / Go to playe hym by the see, / The eyer forto tane" (ll. 688-90). When he comes upon the lady's boat, Jurdan's reaction also parallels that of Sir Kadore, with a notable exception:

He wente forth yn that tyde,
Walkynge by the see syde,
All hymselfe alone.
A bote he fonde by the brymme
And a fayr lady thereynne,
That was ryght wo-bygone.

The cloth on her shon so bryght,
He was aferde of that syght,
For glysteryng of that wede;
And yn hys herte he thowghth ryght
That she was non erthyly wyght;
He sawe nevr non such yn leede (ll. 691-703).

The change here is, of course, that the text presents Jurdan as seeing the lady before his attention is captured by the fearfully bright or "glistening" robe, which frightens him as if it were evidence Emaré "was non erthyly wyght." Nevertheless, Jurdan's first move toward the boat was presumably motivated by the desire to examine the shipwreck for valuable items. As a merchant, he also probably lacks the right to loot such a wreck, as its contents would presumably belong to the local lord. The questionable legality of his actions may be subtly emphasized by the text's note that he goes forth "all hymselfe alone." On the one hand, the lack of retainers marks Jurdan as one without noble or aristocratic status; on the other, the lack of witnesses would provide the perfect environment for Jurdan to loot beached vessels before they are discovered by anyone

else. Luckily for Emaré, Jurdan proves to be a kind-hearted forager, and takes both the heroine and her son home to live with the merchant and his wife. Yet here, as in the Sir Kadore episode, the kindheartedness of the rescuer belies the threatening situation within which Emaré both times finds herself. As contemporary documents suggest, many English looters would be more interested in the contents of a shipwrecked vessel than in helping survivors – and the long-suffering Emaré’s series of trials certainly suggest the possibility that she may receive a more cut-throat welcome. Instead, by virtue of wearing the glistening robe, Emaré becomes in a way the treasure herself, and thus survives. The great list of her previous tribulations, however, again points to the fact that all shipwrecked persons and goods are ultimately the products of others’ misfortunes – and even the overarching narrative of Emaré’s trust in God as protection cannot erase the suffering that the text calls upon the audience to experience empathetically.

If anything, Chaucer’s presentation of a shipwreck scene in his version of the Constance-narrative, *The Man of Law’s Tale*, emphasizes even more bluntly the mercenary motivations of a notably English shore-dweller who finds the heroine’s wrecked vessel:

She dryveth forth into oure occian
Thurghout oure wilde see, til atte laste
Under an hoold that nempnen I ne kan,
Fer in Northumberlond the wawe hire caste,
And in the sond hir ship stiked so faste
That thennes wolde it noght of al a tyde;
The wyl of Crist was that she sholde abyde.

The constable of the castel doun is fare
To seen this wrak, and al the ship he soghte,
And foud this very womman ful of care;

He found also the tresor that she broghte (ll. 505-515).⁶⁸

Here, both the event and the setting clearly place the scene within the context of English views of shipwrecked vessels (or “wraks”).⁶⁹ That the Atlantic off “Northumberlond” is characterized as “our wilde see” emphasizes its dangerous nature, and implies frequent shipwrecks on English coasts. Also, the fact that her ship is technically beached, and thus left stranded by the sea, calls to mind Gerald of Wales’ complaints regarding secular and ecclesiastical lords that rushed to claim beached vessels as shipwrecks in order to loot them.⁷⁰ Indeed, the local “constable” wastes no time in doing just that. Seeing the vessel wrecked from his nearby castle, he races down “to seen this wrak” and to claim it, since it has washed ashore alongside (and presumably onto) his property. Moreover, in the same

⁶⁸ Citations of *The Man of Law’s Tale* are taken from the edition of Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*. Line numbers are as given in that edition, and refer to lines in Fragment II (Group B¹) of *The Canterbury Tales*.

Compare Gower’s version of this scene in the *Confessio Amantis’ Tale of Constance*, wherein the castle also stands in Northumberland, but specifically “upon Humber banke” (l. 2.720). Note especially the concentration on the riches discovered with the shipwrecked woman, although Gower’s chasteleyn, Elda, sends a group of retainers to examine the wreck (and, presumably, to head off other prospective looters). Also, we are assured at the outset that Elda is “a knyghtly man after his lawe,” and so we miss the moment of disquiet that Chaucer exploits:

Of this castell was chasteleyn
Elda the kinges chamberleyn,
A knyghtly man after his lawe;
And whan he sih upon the wawe
The schip drivende alone so,
He bad anon men scholden go
To se what it betokne mai.
This was upon a somer dai,
The schip was loked and sche founde.
Elda withinne a litel stounde
It wiste, and with his wif anon
Toward this yonge ladi gon,
Wher that thei founden gret richesse (ll. 2.725-37).

All quotes from the *Tale of Constance* are taken from Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, Vol. II.

⁶⁹ While an investigation of Chaucer’s presentation of shipwreck scenes within the context of other *Canterbury Tales* will be a valuable future endeavor, here I focus my analysis on how shipwrecks in *The Man of Law’s Tale* reflect the influence of similar scenes in Middle English romances.

⁷⁰ See footnote 39, above.

breath that the text tells us that the constable has discovered Custance, it reminds us that he has “foond also the tresor that she broghte.” Although the constable soon proves to be the noble parallel to *Emaré’s* Sir Kadore, his eagerness to seek out and examine the vessel wrecked upon his beach is clearly motivated by a desire for treasure.

That Chaucer clearly links this motivation with his discovery of the heroine demonstrates his awareness of the romance convention. That the Man of Law is the character chosen to present this tale may also be appropriate, as this scene and the explicit mention of treasure recall the treacherous legal waters that must be successfully navigated in order to loot a shipwreck properly. With his castle nearby, the constable does just that: seeing a wreck, he jumps at the chance to capitalize on his legal right. And finally, the suffering of Custance before her wreck reminds the audience of the human cost behind this wreck that the Constable initially sees as a free lunch. Such a cost, indeed, is not one the constable himself can escape, as the divine forces so interested in Custance’s fate compel a lustful local knight to murder the constable’s wife, Hermengyld. The price of blood, it seems, came ashore along with the lady and the treasure that the constable took from that ship – and both he and his family cannot escape the consequences.

An interesting development of the structure of the Constance-narrative is that the central heroine (later accompanied by her young son) is presented at many points as the “crew” of a wrecked ship. As Helen Cooper has noted, narratives of exiles set adrift often gained emotional leverage through representing the victim as a woman, focusing on the

least politically powerful identity in the given society.⁷¹ Seen from the perspective of the shipwreck scenes alone, however, this equation may also be interpreted from the opposite perspective, with the woman and child aboard ship serving to emphasize the vulnerability of crews washed up in foreign lands.⁷² A particularly disturbing and violent iteration of this metaphor is embodied by the threat of rape that the heroine faces when her vessel is beached for a second time in Chaucer and Gower's versions of the tale. Although presented with significant differences, both iterations tie pillaging wrecks to an explicit, undeniable human cost – and, while this cost is presented in the form of sexual violence and the power dynamics of gender relationships, its relevance to the dangers faced by shipwrecked sailors (and, metaphorically, by their investors) is painful and unavoidable.

In Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*, the episode where Custance's ship is grounded "under a hethen castel" (l. 904) lasts but briefly. Notably, Chaucer's text places the emphasis on the tension between public spectacle and private exploitation at work in the English concept of the shipwreck as competitive commercial opportunity:

Doun fro the castel comth ther many a wight
To gauren on this ship and on Custance.
But shortly, from the castel, on a nyght,
The lordes styward – God yeve hym mischance! –
A theef, that hadde reneyed oure creance,
Cam into ship allone, and seyde he sholde
Hir lemman be, wher-so she wolde or nolde (ll. 911-17).

Surprisingly, the crowds that come "to gauren" at the wreck and Custance don't plunder the ship – perhaps in fear of the power of the unseen lord who rules from the

⁷¹ Cooper, *The English Romance*, p. 108.

⁷² Speaking of Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*, J. Hsy makes a concordant point, positing that "Constance is ultimately subject to the very same potential risks and hazards or 'aventure' that merchants are known to face at sea: the random sort of luck that can make (or break) a commercial venture;" see *Trading Tongues: Merchants, Multilingualism, and Medieval Literature* (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2013), at p. 69.

local castle. The heathen lord here is also shown to be less financially savvy than his English counterpart in Northumberland; whereas the latter rushed to loot the wreck as soon as it appears, the heathen lord delays, allowing his steward, “a theef,” to seek the ship’s plunder for himself.⁷³ The title of “theef” concisely emphasizes the moral, legal, and ethical nature of the crime that the evil “styward” seeks to commit. Here, after a brief but bitter struggle, the help of the Virgin Mary allows Custance to throw her attacker overboard to drown (ll. 918-24), and her ship is providentially freed from the sandbar. Despite its brevity, however, this scene amply illustrates (via sexual metaphor) the dangers that stranded ships could face from the denizens of foreign lands – and asks us to empathize once more with the shipwrecked crew in the face of shore-dwelling opportunists, who arise as either mute, inscrutable observers or aggressive threats to physical safety, reputation, and psychological well-being.

By way of contrast, Gower’s presentation of this scene focuses on the power of a lord (or his representative) to exercise control over the access to a wreck. As in Chaucer’s tale, the heroine runs aground beneath a heathen castle in Spain, here owned by a pagan admiral but administered by his steward, “Oon Theloüs, which al was badde, / A fals knyht and a renegat” (ll. 2.1092-3). Again, Gower leaves little room for the audience to wonder as to the nature of the encountered character, removing the eerie inscrutability of Chaucer’s heathen crowd. Indeed, Gower omits the crowd altogether, demonstrating the steward’s desire to control the wreck. First, he runs to observe its contents:

He goth to loke in what astat
The schip was come, and there he fond

⁷³ Even if, as in Gower’s version (below), the heathen steward holds the castle for his lord and thus would have right to wreck under English law, his delay in capitalizing upon this right is notable, and ominously suggests that his motivating desires may be even baser than economic opportunism.

Forth with a child upon hire hond
This lady, wher sche was alone (ll. 2.1094-7).

Discovering the woman and child inside bereft of treasure, he nevertheless decides to immediately exercise his right to exclusive access to the wreck and its (here, human) contents:

And thoghte he wolde upon the nyht
Demene hire at his oghne wille,
And let hire be therinne stille,
That mo men sih sche nocht that dai.
At Goddes wille and thus sche lai,
Unknowe what hire schal betide (ll. 2.1100-05).

In this scene, the powerlessness and fear of the shipwrecked crew is emphasized in spades. “Unknowe what hire schal betide,” Constance is forced to wait, stranded off-shore, while the steward keeps any other people from seeing her (or the wreck). As such, the steward both prevents others from offering Constance help (or prevents her from seeing others and asking them for help), while also protecting his right to exclusive access to the stranded ship. Again, this scene recalls complaints of lords that sought to claim stranded vessels as shipwrecks, and force their desires upon the unwilling crew.

And fell so that be nyhtes tide
This knyht withoute felaschipe
Hath take a bot and cam to schipe,
And thoghte of hire his lust to take,
And swor, if sche him daunger make,
That certainly sche scholde deie (ll. 2.1106-11).

His threat made brutally explicit, the steward also seeks to enforce his solitary will, avoiding the gaze or presence of others as he attempts to claim the entire ship and the crew for himself alone. Here, Constance does not fight the assaulter, but outwits him by playing upon his desire for private, selfish gain:

Sche sih ther was non other weie,
And seide he scholde hire wel conforte,
That he ferst loke out ate porte,
That no man were nyh the stede,
Which myhte knowe what thei dede,
And thanne he mai do what he wolde.
He was riht glad that sche so tolde,
And to the porte anon he ferde.
Sche preide God, and He hire herde,
And sodeinliche he was out throwe
And dreynt, and tho began to blowe
A wynd menable fro the lond,
And thus the myhti Goddes hond
Hire hath conveied and defended (ll. 2.1112-26).

Thus, through the will of God, the steward's perverted spirit of capitalist competition proves his own downfall, and the stranded vessel slips free in the night. Under the guise of gendered power dynamics, therefore, Gower's scene illustrates the dangerous position of stranded ships and their crews on foreign shores. Just as importantly, however, the text delineates the dangerous consequences of blindly pursuing the salvaging desire and anxiety over commercial competition that run throughout the perspectives presented in contemporary accounts of shipwrecks and salvage rights. Once again, the human cost of shipwrecks is brought to the fore – and the heritage of suffering proves inescapable to the would-be pillager.

Shipwrecks, then, emerge in the Middle English romances discussed above as moments of extreme anxiety, where each text attempts to reconcile contradictory perspectives regarding the economic bounty and heritage of suffering that such sites represent. Some of this anxiety naturally reflects the attitudes of these texts towards the shore more generally, as a place that invites play while also inspiring the dangerous desire to convince beach-walkers that consequences are theirs to shape. Yet embodying

or even celebrating the (occasionally desperate) desire for “free” capital that colors every salvager’s treatment of a wreck cannot entirely allow any of these texts to escape the very real human costs that such wrecks clearly represent. Shipwrecks, then, present scenes wherein these romances cannot help but betray a growing sense of unease towards the economic system that so fervently celebrates the selfish opportunism of Sir Amadace peeling clothes from the dead knights’ sea-soaked corpses. Who is the knight, and who the merchant, when both Sir Kadore and Jurdan “play” on the beach and eagerly root through wrecks? The beached or broken vessel, it seems, provides yet another moment of human authors desperately trying to rewrite a narrative of human powerlessness in the face of natural forces by recasting such misfortunes as moments of economic opportunity. That such disasters are to be celebrated, however, betrays the desperation that runs just below the surface of an increasingly exploitative economic system – one wherein even serendipitous treasure cannot be imagined without its share of suffering.

Fluid Boundaries in the Awntyrs off Arthure and Sir Isumbras

Moving both out to sea and further inland from the beach alone, bodies of water permeate the Middle English romances of *The Awntyrs off Arthure* and *Sir Isumbras*. In the latter, rivers and the “Greek Sea” serve to distinguish separate sections of the narrative: the river marks the point at which the titular hero's family unit begins to break down, as his children are stolen by animals, while the beach of the sea marks the lowest point of his social power, as his wife is stolen from him by raiders, who beat him to a pulp before the eyes of his one remaining child. Yet this seashore also provides the space wherein Isumbras, through becoming a blacksmith and then a self-made knight, works his

way back up the social hierarchy – an ascent culminating in his traversal of the Greek Sea itself, in order to reclaim his wife and reassemble the family (and future) of his reclaimed aristocratic power. In *Awntyrs*, the Tarn Wathelene ties the actions of the romance onto a specific spot in the real-world English landscape (a small lake in Cumberland). At the same time, this setting also connects the text to a number of other Arthurian romances that also mention or take place near the Tarn. In its conclusion, then, this chapter will explore bodies of water in Middle English romance as sites of transition (with regards to both narrative progression and social status), as well as means of establishing (inter-textual) connection(s). More than passive background detail, the lakes, rivers, and seas of these romances embody particular cues regarding literary tradition, narrative progression, and social status that resonated with late medieval English readers – and reflect contemporary perspectives on the nature of these bodies of water in the realm of everyday experience.

In the *Awntyrs off Arthure*, the very opening lines establish the connection between the narrative’s legendary time-line and real-world setting, relating that, “in the tyme of Arthur an aunter bytydde, / by the Turne Wathelan, as the boke tells, / whan he to Carlele was comen, that conquerour kydde, / with dukes and dussiperes that with the dere dwelles” (ll. 1-4).⁷⁴ From the start, then, this text is concerned with weaving the events of the romance directly into a recognizably Cumbrian landscape. Moreover, this initial identification of Arthur as both an outsider and imperialist “conqueror” emphasizes, as

⁷⁴ Unless otherwise noted, citations from *The Awntyrs off Arthure* are taken from Thomas Hahn, ed., *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995), and thus based on the Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce 324 variant. The passages used are cited by line number. Reference will at times be made to the comparative edition of Robert Gates, ed., *The Awntyrs off Arthure at the Terne Wathelyne: A Critical Edition* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1969).

many modern scholars have noted, the decidedly regionalist, English/Scottish border-March perspective of a story obsessed with the (mis)appropriation of land by an alien crown.⁷⁵ Such a focus corresponds especially with the work of Rosamund Allen, who has argued that the text was originally composed for Joan Neville, matriarch of the powerful English March lords centered at Carlisle, in the mid-1420s.⁷⁶

Modern scholars, then, have followed precisely the lead that the poem offers, seeking to place the origins of the text in a hyper-specific historical moment. However, despite the meticulous, comprehensive, and often convincing nature of these studies, their concentration on lands and cities as primarily political markers obscures the multiplicity of associations embedded beneath this level of signification in the landmarks and landscape features of the *Awntyrs*.⁷⁷ It is the aim of my argument, then, to explore some of these underlying associations, particularly those embedded in the space of the Tarn Wathelene.

In this approach, I build upon the work of Margaret Robson who, in her interpretations of the poem, has argued that “the tarn is the most important feature of the

⁷⁵ See for instance: Rosamund Allen’s “Place-Names in the *Awntyrs off Arthur*: Corruption, Conjecture, Coincidence” in *Arthurian Studies in Honour of P.J.C. Field*, ed. Bonnie Wheeler (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004), pp. 181-198; and Randy Schiff’s “Borderland Subversions: Anti-Imperial Energies in *The Awntyrs off Arthure* and *Golagros and Gawane*,” *Speculum* 84.3 (2009): pp. 613-32.

⁷⁶ See Rosamund Allen, “*The Awntyrs off Arthure*: Jestes and Jousts” in *Romance Reading on the Book: Essays on Medieval Narrative Presented to Maldwyn Mills*, eds. Jennifer Fellows, Rosalind Field, Gillian Rogers, and Judith Weiss (Cardiff: University of Wales, 1996), pp. 129-142, and especially Allen, “Place-Names.”

⁷⁷ In addition to the secondary works already mentioned, see further: Andrew Walking, “The Problem of ‘Rondolesette Halle’ in *The Awntyrs off Arthure*,” *Studies in Philology* 100.2 (2003): pp. 105-122; Andrew Breeze’s articles “‘The Awntyrs off Arthure’, Caerphilly, Oysterlow, and Wexford,” *Arthuriana* 9.4 (1999): pp. 63-8 and “*The Awntyrs off Arthure*, Cywryd of Kent, and Lavery Burn,” *Notes and Queries* 45.4 (1998): pp. 431-2; and Susan Kelly’s “Place-Names in the *Awntyrs off Arthure*,” *Literary Onomastics Studies* 6 (1979): pp. 162-99.

tale.”⁷⁸ As Robson convincingly posits, the environment of the real-life tarn would have provided the perfect spot for murderers to dispose of their victims’ bodies. Moreover, this happenstance would help to provide real-world grounding for the traditional, otherworldly myths and folk-legends associated with the Tarn, which is featured in a large number of Arthurian (often Gawain) romances.⁷⁹ Consequently, during storms (like the one related in the poem), corpses floating to the surface with the rising water levels would, due to the change in pressure, burst and release the gases of decomposition, along with sometimes terrifyingly lifelike squeals and gurgles. Such a sight could, clearly, convince someone that they had seen the dead rise – and lead to much the scenario I see in the *Awntyrs*.

While both original and practical in its reasoning, Robson’s reading of the tarn as a place that “provides, in both its topography and its legends... in essence, a famous local murder-spot”⁸⁰ concentrates almost entirely on the humanness of the figure that rises from the lake to lament and prophesy to Guinevere and Gawain. Yet the connections between this character and the tarn, I would argue, run deeper than that between a corpse and its watery grave. For, in presenting a description of a decomposing body, the poem’s details simultaneously transform Guinevere’s mother into an anthropomorphized embodiment of the tarn itself. Bizarrely, the tarn becomes a sort of mother-figure, giving birth to a daughter that retrospectively serves as the mother to the human queen she

⁷⁸ Margaret Robson, “From Beyond the Grave: Darkness at Noon in the *Awntyrs off Arthur*” in *The Spirit of Medieval English Popular Romance*, ed. Ad Putter (Harlow: Longman, 2000), pp. 218-36, at p. 222.

⁷⁹ One of the most enduring legends regarding the tarn is that of ringing churchbells sounding from a town sunk beneath its surface. On this story, see R. C. Cox’s “Tarn Wadling and Gervase of Tilbury’s ‘Laikibrait,’” *Folklore* 85.2 (1974), pp. 128-31. As Hahn observes in his note (p. 202) to line 2 of *Awntyrs*, the Tarn is specifically mentioned in *Awntyrs* (l. 2), *The Avowing of Arthur* (ll. 131 and 338), and *The Marriage of Sir Gawain* (l. 32), and alluded to in descriptions of a setting in Inglewood Forest for *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* (l. 16) and *The Greene Knight* (l. 493).

⁸⁰ Robson, “From Beyond,” p. 225.

encounters. This figure, then, is at once a liminal, boundary-citizen of Arthurian, human society, and an extension of the text's presentation of the local biome of the tarn. As such, the character of Guinevere's mother embodies a multivalent cultural conception of the tarn-space. Here, the landscape (or waterscape) encodes an identity that presents both the past and future as present, and layers the immediacy of experience atop a timeless stability. Speaking of *Lazamon's Brut*, Christopher Cannon has argued "that the land's stability through time comes to be its most important characteristic, as if its principal use and interest to people was to remain unchanged through continuous waves of human happening."⁸¹ In *Awntyrs*, the figure of Guinevere's mother demonstrates a conception of topographical metamorphosis in the human realm that entwines this timeless (semi-Divine) identity with human evaluations and categorizations of the world of God's Creation as legally definable segments of ownable or exchangeable property. The natural landscape emerges as a composite identity that encompasses and exceeds the human attempts to categorize and possess it – a point that may be further highlighted by the anger, fear, and violent acts that arise in the second half of the poem's arguments over the possession of landed properties. Thus, in addition to the implicit criticisms of imperialist colonization analyzed at length by other scholars, the tarn-figure of the poem's initial movement suggests that the land (and its bodies of water) in fact point back to the unity of creation. This theme of union is ignored only at one's peril – a lesson that, famously, the Arthurian court is fated to learn through experience.

⁸¹ Christopher Cannon, *The Grounds of English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007 [Orig. 2004]), p. 53.

Emerging from this water-based biome is the figure of the mother-as-corpse. “There come a lowe one the loughē.../ in the lyknes of Lucyfere, laythesete in Helle, / and glides to Sir Gawayn the gates to gayne, / Yauland and yomerand, with many loude yelle” (ll. 83-7).⁸² Both naturalistic (in terms of marsh gas) and symbolic (with the mention of Hell), the modern reader recognizes how a chance echo of *Beowulf*’s mere (fire on water) here emphasizes the otherworldliness of the apparition – its inhumanness. Yet its cries immediately morph into language, as it laments its own creation – much akin to the late-medieval figure of the fallen man, bereft of faith by wanhope: “I ban the body me bare! / Alas! Now kindeles my care; / I gloppen and I grete!” (ll. 89-91).⁸³ The immediately following line – “Then gloppenet and grete Gaynour the gay” (l. 92) –, through its repetition of the same terms attributed to the (living) queen, establishes the foundation for the mirror relationship between Guinevere and her mother that the text will later make explicit.⁸⁴

Yet right after Gawain and Guinevere converse, deciding to send the knight to approach the figure, the text switches back to a description of Guinevere’s mother. While,

⁸² Interestingly, Hahn (footnote to these lines) and Gates (*The Awntyrs*, p. 98, variations on l. 85) both note that all other manuscripts here say that the fire/figure floats to Guinevere, not Gawain. If the figure does address Guinevere, then the birth/womb imagery would be even further emphasized, with the queen who, famously, never bears a child forced to encounter the dead specter of her own mother.

⁸³ This curse of the mother – “the body me bare” – encodes a simultaneous curse of one’s own body, the vessel that “bears” the soul. This particular comment shares close affinities with a formulaic commonplace (“bannen” + one’s own birth) in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century religious and *memento mori* literature, often attributed to a character that surrenders itself to wanhope (and thereby damnation). See for instance the citations under the *MED* entry for “bannen (v.),” meaning 2a.

⁸⁴ Nearly every modern reader has noted this level of connection, usually on the basis of the mother’s suffering for adultery, and the parallel role of Guinevere as Lancelot’s lover (although the romance is carefully silent regarding this latter part of the Arthurian myth). See for instance Robson “Darkness at Noon,” p. 231, who posits that “the two female characters are, to many intents and purposes, identical.” In this view, she expands upon A. C. Spearing’s similar sentiments in “*The Awntyrs off Arthure*” in *The Alliterative Tradition in the Fourteenth Century*, eds. Bernard Levy and Paul Szarmach (Kent: Ohio State University Press, 1981), pp. 183-202 (at p. 193).

as Robson proposes, parts of this description make the figure reminiscent of a rotting corpse, its details also call to mind a more concrete connection to the “body” of the tarn:

Bare was the body and blak to the bone,
Al biclagged in clay uncomly cladde.
Hit waried, hit wayment as a woman,
But on hide ne on huwe no heling hit hadde.
Hit stemered, hit stonayde, hit stode as a stone,
Hit marred, hit memered, hit mused for madde.
Agayn the grisly goost Sir Gawayn is gone;
He rayked oute at a res, for he was never drad.
Drad was he never, ho so right redes.
On the chef of the cholle,
A pade pikes on the polle,
With eighen holked ful holle
That gloed as the gledes.

Al glowed as a glede the goste there ho glides,
Umbeclipped in a cloude of clethyng unclere,
Serkeled with serpentes all aboute the sides -
To tell the todes theron my tonge wer full tere (ll. 105-121).

This description presents a natural, corpse-like counterpoint to the opening description of Guinevere (ll. 14-26) in that the text emphasizes how the apparition is “uncomly cladde”: that is, covered in clay, toads, and serpents, and, “bare” of skin, left “blak to the bone.” While definitely reminiscent, as Robson argues, of a decaying human body, the apparition simultaneously embodies a hybrid character composed of both human and environmental, corporeal elements. In effect, the apparition here becomes a “tarn-woman”: literally, she is composed of the physical and aesthetic components of the tarn – clay, serpents, toads, “black” rot and shadows – layered atop, and woven throughout, a human skeleton. To an audience familiar with the environment of a tarn (and even a readily identifiable, local tarn to boot), the association is clear. The figure of death, then, becomes a vehicle for contemplating the human relationship with the local

landscape – and the space of the tarn provides the perfect environment for all of these elements to be made readily “visible” to the human viewer, as a medium both semi-transparent (unlike the hard earth) and simultaneously alien (as a liquid, constantly in motion). Even the sounds that the figure emits echo those of the tarn, particularly in the context of a vicious hailstorm: “Hit stemered, hit stonayde, hit stode as a stone, / Hit marred, hit memered, hit mused for madde.” Here, the sounds recreate the effect of disturbed water, as the lake overflows its bounds during fierce weather. Yet the figure also “stode as a stone” and “stonayde,” details that call to mind (either by simile or homophony) the still stones glimpsed within and through the water of the tarn. In her appearance, sounds, and movements, then, the apparition anthropomorphically embodies the human experience of the tarn come alive.

In contrast to the other bodies of water discussed in this chapter, the waters of a small lake like Tarn Wathelene are relatively still, when not disturbed by a storm. This means that the tarn would provide a space for a traveler to catch a glimpse of her reflection on the surface of the water. As in the poem’s story, then, the tarn would provide an apt environment for encountering the most intimately familiar, oneself – albeit, a self slant and distorted by small waves and shadowy, muddy depths. Even in the absence of Robson’s figure of the murder-victim, then, the tarn proves a ready recipient for contemplations of the body, the soul, and their respective fates. In particular, the lake would serve this role for an audience well-versed in the *memento mori* tradition becoming increasingly widespread in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries.⁸⁵

⁸⁵ Note, for instance, the nearly-contemporary *Fall of Princes* and *Dance of Death* (*Dance Macabre*) of John Lydgate – in F. Warren, ed., *The Dance of Death*, EETS (o.s.) 181 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971 [Orig. 1931]) –, as well as Thomas Hoccleve’s *Lerne for to Dye* (in Hoccleve, *My Complaynte*

Inhabitants of late-medieval England were raised in a society saturated with images of death, images which, emphasizing the dual spiritual and corporeal nature of the end of earthly experience, regularly invited viewers to imagine themselves within the frame of their own failing bodies. As such, the late-medieval church provides a source of ready inspiration for the mindset that would, upon looking down upon its own reflection in the landscape, imagine itself interred within that landscape.

Concomitant with that image, then, come questions concerning suffering for sins from the viewer's life – the debts that one will be called upon to pay. Combine these religious elements with folk traditions concerning Tarn Wathelene as a home for devils and cursed souls, where church bells ring from beneath the water,⁸⁶ and one can easily begin to weave a narrative wherein the tarn serves as both prophetic mirror and window: where the viewer is always already within the grave, looking back at herself. It is in this way that the figure from the tarn is able to serve as both Guinevere's mother and Guinevere's double at the same time – for the tarn-space represents both the worldly, historical roots of human corporeality (the divine clay, with which she drips) – the “womb of the earth” – while also showing Guinevere an image of herself as she exists in the “omnipresent” of the divine historical moment, always already suffering for her sins. “Thus am I lyke to Lucefere: takis witness by mee! / For al thi fresh fouroure, / muse on my mirror; / for, king and emperour, / this dight shal you be” (ll. 165-9). Not only does

and Other Poems, ed. Roger Ellis [Exeter, UK: University of Exeter Press, 2001]). On the latter, see further James Simpson's chapter on late-medieval English mortuary imagery in *Under the Hammer: Iconoclasm in the Anglo-American Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 49-83, and also Christina von Nolcken, “O, why ne had y lerned for to die? *Lerne for to Dye* and the author's death in Thomas Hoccleve's *Series*,” *Essays in Medieval Studies* 10 (1993): pp. 27-51.

⁸⁶ On the bells, see Cox, “Tarn Wadling.”

the reader see Guinevere in the apparition⁸⁷ (at the figure's own command), by imagining the queen's reaction; but the reader simultaneously extends this pronouncement to Arthur ("king and emperour"), the society he represents, and herself – the human receiving the text. In effect, the figure has asked us, the audience, to see ourselves in her – precisely the pronouncement of a *memento mori*. Of course, this is also the role that the actual Tarn Wathelene would have invited those encountering it to assume, by casting back their own, muddied reflections. The woodland lake, then, becomes a space that takes control of observant onlookers, forcing (or enabling) them to see outside the realm of historical, narrative-driven human time to the omnipresent of the Divine. In this relationship with God, the observer should recognize herself as subservient, the ultimate recipient of fate – and, hopefully, mercy. The agency of the feminine tarn, then, rising up to command the narrative, causes the text to perform precisely this role.

An extension of the body of water itself, an anthropomorphized symbol of a hyper-specific space that is simultaneously "naturally" and "culturally" defined, this figure of the "tarn-woman" exemplifies the tension inherent in human conceptions of the physical world. For the space of the tarn, as with any natural or human-constructed space, triggers associations in the human mind on a number of different levels. Indeed, the tarn-woman points to such issues of interpreting landscape when she seeks to describe her own past wealth, and through it, her conception of what human "wealth" means:

Quene was I somwile, brighter of browes
Then Berell or Brangwayn, thes burdes so bolde;
Of al gamen or gle that on grounde growes
Gretter then Dame Gaynour, of garson and golde,
Of palaies, of parkes, of pondes, of plowes,

⁸⁷ See again footnote 84, above.

Of townes, of toures, of tresour untolde,
Of castelles, of contreyes, of craggess, of clowes.
Now am I caught oute of kide to cares so colde;
Into care am I caught and couched in clay (ll. 144-152).

Clearly, landscape and landholdings are primary constituent elements, in the tarn-woman's "eyes," of human wealth and cultural prestige. Notably, the apparition includes "pondes" in her list as human-shaped waterscapes, alongside examples of human-crafted landscape features ("parkes" and "plowes"). Yet, when she lists elements of "wild" topography – "contreyes... craggess... clowes" –, she omits the "wilder" waterscapes of tarns, lakes, rivers, and streams. As such, the tarn-woman's list at once emphasizes her (and the poem's own) conception of wealth as an issue of one's relationship with the land and its features, and casts the tarn as space uniquely situated on the boundary of the familiar and "possessed" (as with the pond) and wilderness. The background storm also helps to emphasize the liminality of the tarn-space relative to human control, causing Arthur, Guinevere, Gawain, and the rest of the hunting party to scatter before its onslaught, as "thay ranne faste to the roches, for reddoure of the raynne / for the sneterand snawe snartly hem snelles" (ll. 81-2). Such a moment is precisely when the human characters are forced to admit the limits of their own control – and face the multifaceted tensions that compose their concept of the tarn-space.

On the one hand, then, this tarn exists as an experienced space, a space whose shape and physical characteristics (in addition to placement relative to other, adjacent spaces) determine a culturally-fixed range of actions that a human being may initiate or experience therein. This lake was, for instance, known both in medieval times and "as

late as the eighteenth century for the value of its carp.”⁸⁸ Indeed, registers of the late thirteenth century record innumerable legal battles over the rights to its rich fish resources.⁸⁹ This sense of value attributes to the tarn a layer of economic significance – its value in terms of producing fish for both consumption and exchange. It also invites human visitors to think of acts associated with this register of interpretation for the tarn – i.e. fishing or, as in the *Awntyrs*, hunting. Moreover, the tarn provided a common resting point for travelers heading to and from Scotland, bearing trade goods.⁹⁰ As such, the tarn-space serves as a microcosm of the entire March region’s liminal status, caught between the burgeoning imperialism (or proto-nationalism) of the Scottish and English crowns. Yet, out in the middle of Inglewood Forest – one of, if not the, largest forest(s) in England at the time –, the tarn also serves as a reminder of the immediate presence of the natural world, pointing to the human-managed⁹¹ yet not humanmade environments that underpin human economic endeavour, and thus to human reliance on that supra-human world.

Moving in this direction leads us to yet another layer of signification embodied by the tarn: the perceived “timelessness” of the natural world. If Margaret Robson is right, the tarn would also have invited, in some individuals, the acts of murder or depositing

⁸⁸ Allen “Place-Names,” p. 192, n. 31, notes this fact, drawn from William Hutchinson, *The History and Antiquities of Cumberland*, 2 Vols. (Carlisle: G. Jollie, 1794), Vol. II, p. 491.

⁸⁹ R. C. Cox, at “Tarn Wadling,” p. 130, explains further that “Not only was Inglewood renowned for its game in the Middle Ages but also for the excellent fishing resources of the tarn, a fact conspicuous from the numerous litigations over fishing rights.” Hahn specifically points to a case record from the 13th year of the reign of Edward I (c. 1285).

⁹⁰ Allen “Place-Names,” p. 192.

⁹¹ For an argument that examines the poem’s language to argue that the *Awntyrs* describes Inglewood Forest as a managed woodland-pasture, see Laura Howes, “Inglewood Forest in Two Middle English Romances,” *Neophilologus* 97.1 (2013): pp. 185-9. Her conclusion that *Awntyrs*’ forest demonstrates that, in this romance, “imagined and magical events animate the everyday landscape of medieval Britain” (p. 189) accords with my own reading of Guinevere’s mother as tarn-figure.

bodies in culturally unsanctioned ways. Yet this constant human traffic – fishermen, hunters, drovers, and brigands – points to the (again, perceived) unchanging permanence of the tarn-space itself. Human beings, caught in the “narrative” of historical time, come and go; but the tarn remains. The landscape endures, above and beyond the constraints that human squabbles over property ownership attempt to impose in the poem’s second half. In this way, the tarn embodies the omnipresent of the Divine represented in the physical world – a world that, of course, will itself ultimately be stripped away at Judgment Day. This last point, then, links up again with the *Awntyrr*’s echo of the apocalypse in the scene of “darkness at noon” that precipitates the tarn-woman’s rise.⁹² Yet the tarn also, with its clay-thick sediment, represents the basic matter from which, in the Christian account of the world’s creation, humanity itself was crafted.⁹³ Considering all of these layers of meaning, then, it makes sense that the tarn would become embodied as an undead woman – for the tarn itself is both within and without human, historical time, a physical reality separate from human bodies that is nevertheless experienced through the multiple lenses of economic, cultural, and corporeal significance.

Simultaneously known and unknowable, the tarn-woman becomes a microcosm of nature

⁹² For more on the Apocalyptic elements of the *Awntyrr*’s scene at the tarn, see further Robson, “From Beyond,” pp. 228-31.

⁹³ In the *Avowing of Arthur*, another (if more explicitly humorous) romance that contains a narrative episode with Gawain facing an adversary at the Tarn Walthelene, the text begins with an explanation of the origins of humankind in the matter of the earth itself:

He that made us on the mulde,
 And fair fourmet the folde,
 Atte His will, as He wold,
 The see and the sande,
 Giffe hom joy that will here
 Of dughti men and of dere,
 Of haldurs that before us were,
 That lifd in this londe (ll. 1-8 from the version presented in Hahn, ed., *Sir Gawain*).

herself – and yet one that remains hyper-specific in space and place, in concordance with the text’s decidedly regional, political perspective.

In the romance of *Sir Isumbras*, bodies of water play a different – depending upon the perspective derived from one’s point in the narrative – more adversarial or supplementary role than the tarn of *Awntyrs*. Appearing in the forms of a river, “the Grykkyssche see” (194)⁹⁴, and a well, water in this text serves to separate the core family and cause suffering, as well as provide recognition of, and reward for, that suffering and loneliness. Extensions of the divine mandate with which the text begins, these bodies of water betray a sincere medieval anxiety about the status of rivers and seas as spaces that isolate the suffering individual. Ever-rushing and powerful, the strength of this water will inevitably overwhelm any human hero who relies primarily upon his corporeal strength. Once Isumbras has learned to seek his strength beyond the realms of this life, however, water suddenly loses its menace, becoming powerless before the advance of the enlightened individual. Indeed, the last significant body of water in the romance, a well, provides the space wherein Isumbras is finally forgiven his arrogant trespass by a merciful angel, and where he is recognized as a reformed, appropriately pious hero. Water, then, becomes inextricably associated with divine will: a threat at first, but, when acknowledged and submitted to, a source of comfort and spiritual refreshment. A baptismal metaphor, though latent in this text, is clearly implicated.

Yet, in addition to reinforcing a traditional reading of *Isumbras* as a redemption narrative, the bodies of water demonstrate some uniquely intriguing elements. First, the

⁹⁴ Citations are taken from *Sir Isumbras* in Hudson, ed., *Four Middle English Romances*. Unless otherwise noted, all quotes are from the version surviving in Cambridge, Gonville and Caius College MS 175.

initial two bodies of water, as mentioned above, deconstruct the human family unit. Spiritual purification, they emphasize, is an experience fundamentally beyond sharing with other humans.⁹⁵ The sea and its beach, however, carry the additional significance of serving as a site of cultural and religious conflict, pitting the shore-bound Christian Isumbras against the seafaring, presumably Muslim Saracens.⁹⁶ This space encompasses Isumbras' most completely humbling defeat, a low-point that defines the poem's opening half. Having refused to relinquish his wife to the Sultan,

The gold upon hys mantal they told
 And to himselff they gan it folde
 And took hys wyff hym froo.
 And sithen on the land they hym casten
 And beten hym tyl hys sydys brasten
 And maden hys flesch al bloo (ll. 286-291).⁹⁷

These lines encode a variety of conceptions regarding the human experience of the shore and the sea it borders. First, the Mediterranean's association with mercantile

⁹⁵ This point is in keeping with the teachings of the Gospel. See for instance Matthew 10:37, "He that loveth father or mother more than me, is not worthy of me; and he that loveth son or daughter more than me, is not worthy of me" (Vulgate). In this way, the bodies of water are presented as even more in line with Divine will.

⁹⁶ Sebastian Sobecki identifies the beach as the scene of a very similar sort of cultural, religious conflict between (land-bound) Christians and (seafaring) Saracens in the early Middle English romance *King Horn*; see further his essay "Littoral Encounters," and also Sobecki, *The Sea and Medieval English Literature*, pp. 100-112.

⁹⁷ Hudson notes that many later manuscripts follow this moment with an even more horrible stanza that further emphasizes the pathos of the scene, and the severing of family bonds that occurs on the shore. For instance, Lincoln, Lincoln Cathedral MS 91 here reads:

The littill childe one lande was sett
 And sawe how mene his fadir bett,
 He wepid and was full waa.
 The lady grete and gafe hir ill,
 Unnethes thay myght halde hir still
 That ne scho hirselve walde slaa.
 Hir armes scho sprede and lowde gane crye
 And ofte scho cryed one oure lady,
 "Sall we departe in two?
 Allas, for sall I never blythe be,
 My weddede lorde sall I never see.
 Now wakyns all my woo.

endeavour⁹⁸ – an association of water and trade that surely resonated with English readers at all familiar with the trade of wool and cloth with the Low Countries across the English Channel – is emphasized in the money that the sailors insultingly leave behind with Isumbras. Refusing to honor the bonds of the noble family, they see gold as a way to satisfy any desire – and, as the Sultan and his men “sende here over the see” (l. 294), the sea provides a means by which they can make good on and protect their gains. Additionally, this scene reveals the violence that saturates the seashore, and inevitably accompanies the separation of the family. This element could reflect a contemporary audience’s conception of the sea as a space that necessitated physical endurance and corporeal suffering to traverse successfully – and, whether successfully accomplished or no, the attempt to cross the sea would necessitate the sailor leaving behind his wife and children. Here, of course, the wife is the one taken, emphasizing the dangers inherent in the arrival of any human beings from across the sea. One can sense the dread when Isumbras, his wife, and their remaining child first reach the beach:

Thorwgh forest they wente dayes three
 Tyl they come to Grykkyssche see,
 They grette and wer full woo.
 As they stood upon the lande
 They sawe faste come saylande
 Three hundryd schyppys and moo (ll. 193-8).

The appearance of these unknown ships once again crafts the sea as a space full of unpredictable dangers. As with the earlier river, a space that, when “they kome by a water kene, / thet over the wolde fayn have bene. / Thenne was her kare the more” (ll. 160-2), so too does the sea only increase their “kare.” The river had separated Isumbras from his

⁹⁸ On this point, see further Steven Kruger, “Gower’s Mediterranean” in *On John Gower: Essays at the Millennium*, ed. R. F. Yeager (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007), pp. 3-19.

two eldest sons, who had subsequently been borne away by a lion and a leopard while he was still in the water (ll. 163-180). In the end, Isumbras was only able to stay connected to his wife and youngest child by, quite literally, holding on to them: “Hys wyff was hym leeff and dere, / And ovyr the watyr he here bere, / Hys yongeste sone also” (ll. 190-2). But, while Isumbras was able to overcome the river at least partially by brute strength, the sea, as I have shown, utterly defeats him. Another conception of personal identity must be sought before Isumbras can properly meet the sea’s challenge.

Yet this seashore also provides the space wherein Isumbras, through becoming a blacksmith and then a self-made knight, works his back up the social hierarchy – an ascent culminating in his traversal of the Greek Sea itself, in order to reclaim his wife and reassemble the family (and future) of his reclaimed aristocratic power. After finally defeating the Saracen’s army and slaying the Sultan (ll. 400-447), Isumbras is taken, wounded, to a nunnery, where his injuries are healed (ll. 469-83). It is thence he departs – not as a proud knight of this world, but a humble servant of the next: for “He purveyyd hym bothe scryp and pyke / And made hym a palmer lyke / Redy for to wende” (ll. 487-9). Dressed in his palmer’s gear, refusing to acknowledge his name, Isumbras has appropriately placed himself entirely into God’s hands. As such, Isumbras becomes a pure instrument of the divine will – the trait that reveals itself to be the necessary component in properly dealing with bodies of water:

The ryghte wey thenne took he
Tyl he come to the Grykkyssche see
As God Hymself hym sente.
A schyp fond he redy thare
On to Acres for to fare,
And thedyr faste he wente (ll. 490-5).

There is no dread, no struggle this time. The “ryghte wey” leads over all obstacles of this world, transforming them instead into modes of conveyance or necessary experiences. The sea, in effect, serves primarily to emphasize that English sense of the otherworld existing “over-there,” beyond the ocean. Notably, this sea-crossing moves the text away from an English presentation of borderland topography along the seashore to the idealized, stock landscape of the Holy Land. Appropriately enough, the water that Isumbras encounters here is a “welle-strem,” beside which “he sette hym ... / sore wepande for hys synne” (ll. 512-13). As soon as the water of his body is shed (as tears) in this sacred space, an angel appears to bring “hym bred and wyn” (l. 516), and the message from God that “Forgiven is synne thyn” (l. 519). This site is particularly apt for the receipt of comfort, too, since it is the most domesticated water-source to appear in the poem – and thus reminiscent of the Divinely-granted rewards for chastened believers that dot the biblical narrative. The process of recomposing his family, or reclaiming a noble identity for himself in this life, may thus begin – and, notably, this pro-community conclusion leaves out any more mentions of bodies of water. Isumbras has learned the appropriately pious way to transform the terrors of water into the boons of divine mercy – a lesson that ultimately leaves behind the practical fears of the poem’s opening half for an image of idealized sacred space available to experience in the realms of fiction alone: that place “across the sea.”

In the romances discussed above, watersides emerge as spaces that ask their late medieval audiences to question the malleability of human identity, and to consider humanity’s place within God’s broader Creation as embodied by the natural world. The frequency with which beach scenes begin with or lead to play demonstrates a common

cultural identification of the seaside as a place for recreation. Yet cut-throat competition for shipwrecked goods, the threat of murder or abduction, and even encounters with messengers from beyond the grave all point to the network of economic and moral consequences that these fantastical narratives cannot seem to escape. Instead of obscuring such anxieties, then, waterside encounters – whether figured as an innocent pastime, divinely mandated suffering, or contest in deadly earnest – highlight the collection of contradictory meanings that beaches and bodies of water held for the authors and audiences of Middle English romance. Perhaps more than any other landscape spaces in these texts, seashores (or river- and lake-fronts) present the clash between the desire for personal gain and fear of the unknown or uncontrollable cost as a primary factor in determining how late medieval English readers and writers conceived of their relationship with the natural world.

CHAPTER 4: ACROSS THE SEA

Eastern Reflections of England in Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Laud Misc. 622

Heretofore, the romances examined have often dealt with purportedly foreign spaces, but reveal within those representations of landscape (at times, perhaps, conscious) reflections of identifiably British features and characteristics. Indeed, medieval landowners themselves, as I have argued, undoubtedly made at least some of those connections while reading these didactic texts and extracting lessons to apply in their own lives. Now, however, I would like to turn the analytical lens that I have been developing onto another type of Middle English romance: those that deal with hyperbolically foreign landscapes. From Rome, Jerusalem and the Holy Land to the exotic realms of Alexander the Great, these romances entice their audiences through the attraction of distance and difference, explicitly establishing such spaces as separate from, and alien to, British audiences. That said, even such a conscious move away from the fantastic, yet still recognizably Insular, stomping grounds of other romances cannot allow these texts to escape contemporary British concerns regarding human relationships with the natural world.

To illustrate this point, I examine in this chapter the two longest contents of the late-fourteenth-century manuscript Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Laud Misc. 622:¹ namely, the pseudo-historical romances *Titus and Vespasian* and *Kyng Alisaunder*. This manuscript, concerned as it is with exploring the spaces of the Holy Land and the Far East, presents a complex, at times contradictory ecological perspective that champions human achievements in land- and waterscape engineering at the same time that it gives voice to anxieties regarding the lack of human power in the face of divinely-controlled natural forces. That such concerns are raised in romance narratives links the works of this manuscript to the studies of my previous chapters, and demonstrates how late medieval English poets, compilers, and audiences saw even the fantastic lands of the East as an opportunity to meditate upon the grounds just outside their own front doors.

Ecological Vengeance and Landscape Design in Titus and Vespasian

To examine how these spaces are employed, then, I first turn to constructions of the Holy Land through a popular medieval narrative: the siege of Jerusalem. *Titus and Vespasian* is a late-fourteenth-century Middle English text that deals with the “Vengeance of God” motif, or the punishment of the Jews forty years after the crucifixion of Christ.² This poem grew out of a medieval fascination with accounts of the

¹ For a description of this manuscript, hereafter referred to as the Laud MS, see Gisela Guddat-Figge, *Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Middle English Romances* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1976), pp. 285-6, and further my discussions below.

² Citations of this text, unless otherwise noted, refer to J. A. Herbert, ed., *Titus and Vespasian or The Destruction of Jerusalem in Rhymed Couplets* (London: Roxburghe Club, 1905). Although the base manuscript used by Herbert is London, British Library Additional MS 36523, he notes that its text is extremely close to that found in the Laud MS, with “the variations between the two MSS. [being] comparatively few and unimportant,” and the Laud MS standing as *Titus*’ oldest witness (*Titus*, p. xxxvi). As no edition of the Laud MS *Titus* currently exists, I rely on the Herbert edition for citations of this text, and hope to compare lines cited with the manuscript itself in the future. For comparative scenes quoted

fall and sack of Jerusalem in 70 CE by the Roman forces of Vespasian and his son Titus. The original account of the siege and the war surrounding it was composed by Josephus, a Jewish commander who surrendered to the Romans and eventually became an advisor to the Roman leaders. His work in turn went through a number of translations and emendations throughout Antiquity and the Middle Ages, including the combination of his description of the war with the story of a healing cloth touched by Christ.³ This latter, composite version entered Britain through sources such as the wildly popular *Golden Legend*, and thus in turn prompted the writing and circulation of *Titus* and related narratives. Partial and complete versions of *Titus* are found in thirteen manuscripts, demonstrating the tale's popularity.⁴

The genre of *Titus*, as with so many of the medieval texts demonstrating romance characteristics, is a matter of debate among modern readers. A useful comparison for the

from *Siege of Jerusalem*, a contemporary Middle English alliterative poem dealing with the same narrative, I take my citations from Michael Livingston ed., *Siege of Jerusalem* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2004). However, Ralph Hanna and David Lawton, eds., *The Siege of Jerusalem*, EETS (o.s.) 320 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) is frequently referenced. I will hereafter refer to these two poems as *Titus* and *Siege*, respectively, once both have been cited in my main text.

³ For an overview of this history of sources, see Hanna and Lawton, *Siege*, pp. xxxvii-lv, and also Livingston, *Siege*, pp. 2-7 and 10-13. Herbert's account is also useful, if somewhat restricted by the materials then available – see *Titus*, pp. v-xxvi.

⁴ This manuscript count includes three manuscripts that bear witness to a shorter version of the poem that lacks lines 1-814 (the account of Christ's life), 4487-4884 (the account of Judas' life and death), and a small number of scattered couplets. Phyllis Moe argues that the shorter text is artistically superior, since it achieves a more balanced narrative structure than the messier, more digressive long text. While I will note the short text where it makes changes that directly impact my analysis, I focus primarily on the long text here, since manuscript survival rates suggest it had a broader circulation and existed contemporaneously with the shorter version. On the differences between the long and short texts, and a reading of the short text's "superiority," see Phyllis Moe, *Titus and Vespasian: A Study of Two Manuscripts* (Ph.D. Diss., New York University, 1963), pp. 77-122. For the first to argue "that the longer text is due to accretion" as opposed to "the shorter text [having] resulted from abridgement," see Curt F. Bühler, "The New Morgan Manuscript of *Titus and Vespasian*," *PMLA* 76.1 (1961): pp. 20-4, at p. 24. An edition of a version of the short text (albeit missing the conclusion) can be found in Rudolf Bruno Fischer, "Vindicta Salvatoris: Mittelenglisches Gedicht des 13. Jahrhunderts," *Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen* 111 (1903): pp. 285-98, and 112 (1904): pp. 25-45. *Siege*, by way of comparison, occupies nine manuscripts; see Livingston, *Siege*, pp. 8-9; Hanna and Lawton, *Siege*, pp. xiiiif; and especially Guddat-Figge, *Catalogue*, p. 41.

purpose of determining genre is the contemporary Middle English poem *Siege of Jerusalem*, which draws from the same narrative tradition. Of the two, *Titus* appears mostly, although not exclusively, in religious collections, while *Siege* demonstrates a more varied set of manuscript contexts, including religious, historical, and romance texts.⁵ However, both works demonstrate a number of romance characteristics, including verse form (couplets for *Titus*, alliterative lines for *Siege*), the detailed description of martial exploits, stories of heroes (Vespasian especially) and antagonists (Pilate, Judas), and Christian conquest of the Holy Land.⁶ Guddat-Figge ultimately declared *Siege* to occupy “the border area between romance, legend and historiography.”⁷ I would argue that, despite *Titus*’ many digressive passages of religious prophecy and pronounced engagement in the concerns of affective piety,⁸ this text also occupies a middle ground similar to *Siege*.⁹ In particular, *Titus*’ back-stories for Pontius Pilate and Judas Iscariot make deft use of inverted romance conventions to present each man as an opposite to, or fallen version of the chivalric and Christian ideal.¹⁰ As such, while both texts exhibit a

⁵ Guddat-Figge, *Catalogue*, p. 41; Malcom Hebron, *The Medieval Siege: Theme and Image in Middle English Romance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 116; and Michael Johnston, “Robert Thornton and *The Siege of Jerusalem*,” *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 23 (2009): pp. 125-62, at pp. 131-5.

⁶ See also Livingston, *Siege*, pp. 14-15.

⁷ Guddat-Figge, *Catalogue*, p. 41, also cited by Livingston, *Siege*, p. 15.

⁸ Bonnie Millar, “The Role of Prophecy in the *Siege of Jerusalem* and its Analogues,” *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 13 (1999): pp. 153-78, and Maija Birenbaum, “Affective Vengeance in *Titus and Vespasian*,” *Chaucer Review* 43.3 (2008): pp. 330-44.

⁹ While I do not entirely discount Guddat-Figge’s claim that “mediaeval audiences and compilers would seem to have associated *Titus and Vespasian* clearly with religious literature – a conclusion also supported by the unusually large number (13) of extant manuscripts” (*Catalogue*, p. 41), I argue that its proximity to the form and narratives of romance and clear manipulation of romance motifs render it best classified as a religious romance, or hybrid along the same lines as Guddat-Figge’s classification of *Siege*. At the very least, *Titus* provides a window into the perspectives most popular with audiences and authors of late medieval British verse romance.

¹⁰ See again Birenbaum, “Affective Vengeance,” for the idea that these characters are negative exemplars, worldly men who fall away from a Christian ideal; the argument that their stories sound like conscious re-workings of romance when read in the context of *Titus*’ broader narrative is my own, and will be expanded below.

variety of different generic elements, and were encountered in a similar variety of textual environments, these works nevertheless overlap with the characteristics of other romances.

Categorization of both *Titus* and *Siege* is further complicated by the extreme revulsion that modern readers feel toward the texts' virulent anti-Semitic pronouncements and depictions of gruesome torture. Indeed, such passages were long held to be the reason that scholars waited until the last twenty-five years to engage with *Siege*, and may still account for the dearth of scholarship on *Titus*.¹¹ However, as other scholars have demonstrated, examining these immensely popular narratives, no matter how great their contrast with modern perspectives, allows us insight into the worldviews of medieval audiences.¹² While other critics have rightly examined how these texts reveal fourteenth-century English strategies for constructing relationships between Christian and Jewish identities, these generically complicated works also provide insight into late medieval

¹¹ See especially Ralph Hanna, "Contextualizing *The Siege of Jerusalem*," *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 6 (1992): pp. 109-21, who identifies *Siege*'s "reputation as the chocolate-covered tarantula of the alliterative movement" (p. 109); Johnston, "Robert Thornton," pp. 125-7, who provides a comprehensive overview of the expansion of *Siege* scholarship since Hanna's article; and practically every other article written on *Siege* or *Titus*. Speaking of the latter poem, Phyllis Moe notes that "no serious critical study of the poem has ever been attempted... perhaps because the prevalent opinion has been that the poem is an artistic failure" (*Titus: A Study*, p. 26). Up to Moe's dissertation, only three major studies focused on *Titus* alone: Fritz Bergau's dissertation, published as *Untersuchungen Uber Quelle und Verfasset des mittelenglischen Reimgedichts: "The Vengeaunce of Goddes Deth" (The Bataile of Jerusalem)* (Konigsberg: Druck von Hugo Jaeger, 1901); Herbert's introduction in his edition of *Titus*; and J. M. Arvidson, *The Language of Titus & Vespasian or The Destruction of Jerusalem: MS Pepys 37 (Magdalene College, Cambridge, No. 2014)* (Lund: Hakan Obisson, 1916). The first two investigate *Titus*' source texts, while the third concentrates on philology. The poem has attracted the attention of few scholars since, as I have been able to find only one further dissertation – John Holmes Wilson's *Titus and Vespasian: A Trial Edition of the Osborn Manuscript* (Ph.D. Diss., Yale University, 1967) – and a single article – Birenbaum, "Affective Vengeance" – that focus on *Titus* exclusively. Most mentions of the poem are made in passing during discussions of the more popular *Siege*, or as an extended example of how *Siege* is a superior text that makes better poetical use of their shared sources; for examples of these respective approaches, see Millar, "The Role of Prophecy," and also her monograph *The Siege of Jerusalem in Its Physical, Literary, and Historical Contexts* (Portland: Four Courts Press, 2000), at pp. 105-140.

¹² This is the main point made by many modern readers of the poem; see for instance Robert Nicholson, "Haunted Itineraries: Reading *The Siege of Jerusalem*," *Exemplaria* 14.2 (2002): pp. 447-84.

perspectives on the relationship between humans and the natural world, even if such concerns are not the primary focus of either text.¹³ Of these two poems, *Siege* has been analyzed at length in recent years, while *Titus* remains almost entirely untouched by modern critics. Yet *Titus*'s meandering narrative presents a fascinating collection of contradictory perspectives on human relationships with the natural world that demonstrate the diversity of human interactions with, and understandings of, the environment in late medieval Britain. As such, I focus my examination on the text of *Titus*, and analyze the insights it provides into the representation of the Holy Land in Middle English romances and popular texts.

Before moving into an engagement with the specifics of this text, however, the setting of the Holy Land itself warrants some extended consideration. Of course, *Titus* is not the first text in this study to deal with travel to the Middle East. *Sir Isumbras*, for one, is another popular romance that ends with a conquest of the Holy Land by a Christian hero and his family. However, *Titus* and *Siege* differ from the texts examined before now in their exclusive concentration on the spaces of Rome and the Holy Land, but particularly the topography surrounding the city of Jerusalem. At first glance, *Titus* and *Siege* both seem rather bare in their description of landscape, especially when contrasted with other Middle English romances. Forests, mountains, and seashores are present, but in short supply, and the desert plains of Judaea rarely get extensive topographical description. Yet this bareness, I aver, makes the details that do occur stand in even greater

¹³ Speaking of *Siege*, Patricia Price notes that "geographical allusions, broadly defined, are necessary to animate poetic worlds," and thus "defining and describing such worlds can show how the literary geography of a given poem is related to its themes and concerns, to other alliterative poetry, and to the concerns of the contemporary audience;" see "Integrating Time and Space: The Literary Geography of *Patience*, *Cleanness*, *The Siege of Jerusalem*, and *St. Erkenwald*," *Medieval Perspectives* 11 (1996): pp. 234-50, at p. 234.

relief, creating prominent literary landmarks. Simultaneously, the often unspoken nature of the Holy Land's landscape alludes to the dramatic cycles of popular morality plays. The Middle Eastern landscape becomes a type of stage, upon which the landmarks that rise seem at first entirely shaped by Divine and even by human will. As Patricia Price notes, the "*Siege of Jerusalem* adheres firmly to the earthly plane," since "the point of this poem is the triumph of the church militant, not the spiritual progress of any individual." Price thus concludes that *Siege* eschews the tripartite focus on the geography of hell, earth, and heaven that she finds in other contemporary alliterative poetry.¹⁴ While *Titus* contains more topographical detail than *Siege*, the same focus on depictions of the physical, earthly world remains. Both texts present a narrative of divinely guided human progress across, and alteration of, the physical world. Relating back to the point I raised above, this perspective of constructed or controlled landscape again seems to evoke the idea of a stage, its nature and characteristics defined by human endeavor. Such a reading, of course, lends itself well to a metaphorical or allegorical interpretation, emphasizing the inter-faith struggle for dominance and self-identification that composes these poems' central theme.

However, the representations of landscape provided in *Titus* cannot be read exclusively as the simple enactment of a divine plan upon the clay of creation. In violence committed upon and enacted by the natural world, anxieties regarding the relationship between the physical universe of God's creation and the human inhabitants of British landscapes begin to take shape. Ingenious alterations of landscapes, such as the construction of artificial canals and lakes, champion the abilities of humans to exert

¹⁴ Price, "Integrating," p. 245.

control over the landscape, and correspond with estate management programs being undertaken by late medieval British landowners on their own properties.¹⁵ On the other hand, the appearance of violent British weather ties the suffering of the Jews in these poems back to the English readers, as they interpret such details through the lens of their own everyday experience of such events. The focus on starvation, too, points to the vagaries of siege, but could equally apply to individuals suffering the effects of a bad harvest – an experience all too common to English environments making the transition into the colder, wetter weather of the Little Ice Age. In all, the distance and significance that the setting of the Holy Land provides allows this text’s representations of landscape details to take on an increased significance: stripped down to their most basic elements, passages evoking the natural world or topographical detail project human struggles to control and survive the vagaries of environmental change onto the epic level of the fight to define and protect Christianity. *Titus*’ narrative, then, is not just about defining political or religious boundaries – it also conveys a foundational mixture of pride, fear, and anxiety relating to struggles of survival in an increasingly challenging British environment at the close of the Middle Ages. In order to examine how *Titus* implies such perspectives, it is to the evidence of the text itself that I now turn.

Titus begins with a condensed narrative of the sayings and acts of Christ, culminating in his Crucifixion and ultimate resurrection.¹⁶ Touching on some of the most famous tales from his ministry, the text introduces a conception of the human relationship

¹⁵ For an overview of such projects, see O. H. Creighton, *Designs Upon the Land: Elite Landscapes of the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2009).

¹⁶ As noted above, this opening description of Christ’s ministry and Crucifixion, including the following citations, is absent from the short text. I focus on the long text’s opening here because I aver that it establishes a perspective for viewing the natural world that colors many evaluations of landscape in nature throughout that text.

with the land through the figure of Christ himself. In the first instance, some Jews at pains to tempt Christ ask their famous question about tribute. Here, though, they phrase the issue in terms clearly shaped by a fourteenth-century English understanding of property, as they ask, “Maister dere, / To whom shull we zeelden every zere / All þe truage of oure lande?” (ll. 97-9). Of course, Christ here as elsewhere famously answers but one way, although he also adopts Middle English property law terminology, telling the Jews that they should pay their “truage” to the man who “hath ymage / With name iwriten” on their money (ll. 101-2); i.e. Caesar. *Titus* first presents land, then, as a foundation of value in the economic and political system of bastard feudalism, whereby the worldly lord receives a fee from his tenants. The association of land with goods or merchandise, tainted with economic sin, is implicitly emphasized when Christ mentions it again but a few lines later. Coming upon the scene of the woman taken in adultery, whom the Jews threaten to stone,¹⁷ he responds in a manner that both draws from the account in the Gospel of John and lays the foundation for one means of interpreting landscape for the rest of the poem:

Jhesu stoupede doun right anoon;
 These wordes he wroot þe erthe upon:
 “This wrecched erthe þis oþur biwriede,
 But God forgaf þat mercy cryede.”
 Poo he had unswared what he wolde,
 “Goth ze þe lettres for to biholde” (ll. 117-22).

Interestingly, this passage departs from John in that it allows the reader to know what Christ wrote upon the ground (whereas the Vulgate merely states that he wrote).¹⁸

¹⁷ Vulgate: John 8:1-11.

¹⁸ This scene was somewhat popular amongst Middle English writers, appearing for instance in Passus XIV of the C-Text of *Piers Plowman* (ll. 39-43), where Christ “in soend a signe wrote” (l. 40). Citations of this text refer to Derek Pearsall, ed., *Piers Plowman: A New Annotated Edition of the C-text* (Exeter, UK:

The Christ of *Titus* literally inscribes the physical world with its own condemnation, laying the blame for the woman's adultery on what he labels the earth's betrayal. As the Jews' focus on the matter of material wealth made them underestimate Christ in the question about "truage," so too here does the text present them as focusing on the earth's "wrecched" influence instead of concentrating on the realm of heaven. Christ writing this message on the earth itself thus serves to present the image of him physically condescending to speak on the level of his doubters, suggesting that the language of property is the only one that they understand.

However, the text here also performs a more complex evaluation of the physical world at this point in the narrative. By presenting Christ as a writer whose text the reader can then access, this scene suggests a parallel with the *Titus* text itself. Christ's writing demonstrates that he has the power to define the natural world's character – and his act of inscription reminds the audience of the fact that, as the divine, he originally created it (through words).¹⁹ That creation's later recognition of his suffering at the Crucifixion, when "Þe sonne also leste all his lyght, / And stones and trees lest her myght; / And every thyng in his kynde / Of Jesu dethe had a mynde, / Out-taken man" (ll.459-63), demonstrates the natural world's close connection to the divine in *Titus*. But what then of human authors and compilers who attempt to set the character of the natural world

University of Exeter Press, 2008). As Pearsall notes, in *Piers*, "Christ wrote on the ground to signify that he was a law-giver like Moses;" however, "exactly what Christ wrote was a matter of some speculation: it was usually said to be the sins of each of the accusers, visible to each alone," as related in the turn-of-the-fifteenth-century text *Dives and Pauper* (*Piers*, p. 240, n. 39). It especially significant, therefore, that *Titus* explicitly reports what Christ writes on the ground.

¹⁹ This emphasis on words as the tools of creation of course echoes the opening to the Gospel of John at the same time as it alludes to the creation account in Genesis 1.

through their own words?²⁰ While not a conscious concern of this explicitly devout text, the tension between the desire to define the natural world as a set value, and the tendency of the description to escape or reverse previously set boundaries, provides an undercurrent of anxiety throughout the text that reflects the human concerns of its contemporary medieval audience. Time and again, the text acts out this idea of the Holy Land as a page to be written, scraped, and reinscribed by divinely inspired (or even directed) human action. As I shall demonstrate, *Titus* is a text peculiarly interested in the ability of characters to reshape their local topography, usually for practical or violent ends. From the outset, then, it juxtaposes such activity with the act of writing, and plays on the human distance between intention and interpretation. Indeed, *Titus*' interest in the human ability to change the landscape, and its concentration on the events of this world, betray an interest in the Holy "Land" itself that undercuts Christ's initial condemnation. The landscape around Jerusalem thus comes to embody both the human desire to mimic divine control and the extent to which the natural world of divine creation remains forever beyond the complete understanding of its mortal inhabitants.

As the narrative passes beyond Christ's Crucifixion, the view of the natural world that it presents continues to be connected to the suffering that Christ's physical body received on the Cross. Joseph of Arimathea, arrested for preaching Christianity, is imprisoned in a cell bricked into the wall of Jerusalem – a prison that will hold him until, years later, the city is taken by the Romans. Visited here by the resurrected Christ, who foretells Jerusalem's destruction, Joseph asks when this will occur. Christ replies that "3e

²⁰ This perspective is still present in the short text (as most of the same events I analyze below are still present), but is not explicitly established at the onset as it is here. As such, the short text draws closer to many of the romances I discussed in previous chapters, in that it deals with issues of literature's ability to represent nature only implicitly.

shull ȝet seene / Many a token upon hye / Of sonne and mone in the skye. / Londe shall werren aȝeynes londe, / Þe fader agayne þe childe shall stonde” (ll. 728-32). In a text that reflects the “Vengeance of God” narrative tradition’s especial concern with compiling prophecies,²¹ this particular passage does not immediately stand out: Jerusalem will be destroyed, and strange portents will warn of the event. Yet the language that Christ employs here serves as another example of how this text establishes a concrete link between the character of the natural world and divine will. The sun and moon will send God’s messages, while the warring lands call to mind once again a misguided human concentration on politicized property in this world, instead of spiritual salvation in the next. While this connection between the natural and the divine is certainly not unique, the abundance of such prophecies in this text presents the Holy Land as an archetypal landscape particularly suited for examining such connections. In turn, this textual Holy Land raises issues that implicitly comment on the audience’s experience of their own local, British environments. From this foundation in the story of Christ’s ministry and Crucifixion, then, the poem moves into constructing its own account of humans attempting – and failing – to understand the nature of a connection that should be so clear.

Moving finally from its devout opening to the main narrative of its titular characters, *Titus* presents a Vespasian who is shut away, suffering from a cancer of the face and a wasp infestation in his nose.²² Mourning his father’s illness, Titus sits gazing

²¹ On which see again Millar, “The Role of Prophecy.”

²² As the narrator in *Titus* notes, “for þese waspes he was cleped þus / By right name Vaspasianus” (ll. 1179-80). In *Siege*, the poem avers that “Waspasian was caled the waspene bees after” (l. 36). As Livingston notes on the line, “The derivation of his name from wasps given here is a false etymology, but one that enjoyed great popularity during the Middle Ages and is amusing to contemplate” (*Siege*, p. 86).

out of a tower window in his family's holdings at Bordeaux. The text here demonstrates its connections with the romances I discussed in the previous chapter, as it slips into a description of yet another hero found observing the sea:

Sire Titus out a wyndow lay;
And as he lokede in the stream
A shipp þer come from Jerusalem.
He segh where þat þe shippe went
In the see, as Crist hit sent.
Anone he sent a messagere
To come to hym þat þereinne were (ll. 1284-90).

While this scene omits a shipwreck and its possible contents as the motivation for Titus' interests (although the narrative will provide such a scene later on), the reader nevertheless finds a noble observing the shipping alongside the property whose title he will inherit. The economic undertones of this passage call to mind such evaluations of seaside spaces as opportunities for the collection of treasure, and imply an appreciation for the economic significance of merchant shipping. Here, however, the conception of the seaside as a space for recreating one's identity will come to the fore, as this sighting begins the string of events that will lead to Titus' conversion. The mention of Jerusalem and Christ in this passage clearly foretells the nature of the vessel's voyage. In this moment, then, the text reflects both literary convention and a scene that is probably close to real-life experience.

Of course, the scene as it is described does not tend overtly towards realism. The identification of a ship "come from Jerusalem" suggests that the holy city itself sits astride the sea, engaging in trade via its ports. Here, this phrase is meant to indicate the origins of the passengers on the ship, and indeed the poem will later identify Jerusalem as an isolated settlement surrounded by waterless desert (a setting which I analyze below).

Yet the wording employed here temporarily establishes Jerusalem as a parallel to the city of Bordeaux, where Titus lounges at his window, watching ships. The Mediterranean delineates the distance that still exists between both the spiritual and the physical Holy Land and Titus at this moment in the narrative. Simultaneously, however, this same body of water serves as a means of connecting these two points in space or spirit. That the sea serves this role is important, as a long road or overland trade route could not carry the same range of associations. Not only does the sea carry shipping and travelers, but it also collapses a sense of distance into the realm of hyperbole. On the open water, weather can literally reshape the space that one must cover in a journey, lengthening or shortening its duration dramatically, all the while threatening to end it should the elements grow too fierce. As such, the sea emerges here as an embodiment in the natural world of divine will, a physical expression of God's power that echoes the sea passage to the Holy Land found in other crusading romances such as *Sir Isumbras*.²³ When he sees the ship through his window, Titus does not yet realize the role of the physical world as a stage for the actions of the Christian God; it is thus the audience that sees the hand of Christ in the ship's course, not the protagonist. In a text centered on physical manifestations of God's omnipotence, however, Titus and Vespasian's budding belief will be demonstrated by the trust they come to place in the sea as a means by which to begin their conquest of Jerusalem. The sea is thus established as a Christianized space – and once that status has been acknowledged, understood, and submitted to, its power can be used to overcome the opposed desert landscape surrounding Jerusalem.

²³ See further my discussion in Chapter 3.

In addition to this religious significance, the sea also emerges in *Titus* as a space of Roman imperial power. Although the ship here may be linked with Jerusalem, its importance arises from the fact that Titus receives it and its passengers, setting in motion both the imperial conversion and the conquest of Jerusalem. Nathan, the passenger on the boat, is forced by weather to stop in Bordeaux on his way to Rome. Upon being sent to the imperial court by Titus, Nathan delivers his message to the emperor Nero and returns to Jerusalem – but this time, without his journey described (l. 1645). Similarly, when Velocian, servant to Vespasian and his household, goes into the Holy Land seeking the promised cure for Vespasian should he convert (a cloth that touched Christ), the servant passes over the sea without consequence (ll. 1751-2). In Jerusalem, he finds Veroyne, the lady keeper of the cloth, and then “Hem lyst not stynte withoten oon soine / Til þat þei comen to Gascoigne” (ll. 2151-2) and Vespasian’s court. Three voyages to and from the Western Empire and the Holy Land are thus accomplished with no mention of the intervening sea – although, notably, all of these travelers are on imperial business. However, when Veroyne’s cloth heals Vespasian, the emperor-to-be summons his son and vassals and charges them with joining his newfound quest for vengeance:

... I wil þou swere,
 And all my poeple, þat is here,
 With me to wenden to Jerusalem
 Over þe see, þe grete strem,
 To destryen hem, and all þe stede,
 That dede Jesu Criste to dede (ll. 2627-32).

Here, where an imperial military expedition is to take place, acknowledgement of the sea, “þe grete strem,” takes center stage, driving home through its emphasized size the reach and power of Roman military might – and, by extension, the might of Christian

crusaders. After gaining Nero's consent (ll. 2663ff), Vespasian and his troops embark – and here, the fact that they must travel over water is again explicitly explained, drawing a sharp distinction between the unmentioned journeys of the servants and the magnificent might of an aristocratic expedition:

Anoon he dede his shippes dight,
Well a thousand, I þe plyght,
With hym and with his sone alsoo,
An C. thousand men and moo.
Seynt Clement and dame Veroyne
Toward þe see þei gan goon,
Til þei were yshippede all (ll. 2725-31).

The boarding of an army is a great spectacle, a point the text drives home by having both the pope and the lady Veroyne go down to the sea to watch. *Titus* then reminds the reader explicitly of the connections between this scene from fantasy and the context of fourteenth-century shipping practice. As the fleet departs, Clement blesses both the men and “þe water þat 3e in wende” (l. 2737) – using a phrasing that remains applicable to contemporary sailors, as the narrator observes: “And sithen þat blessing dede hem gode, / To all men þat passede the flode, / Þurgh Goddes helpe and seynt Clement, / Sithen ne was noo man ysent” (ll. 2739-42).

I have quoted at such length in the preceding discussion because it is important to note how frequently the poem, in the context of an imperial conquest, mentions the sea that divides Bordeaux and Rome from the Holy Land. While still emphasizing how the sea becomes the hands of God, wielding the weapon of Roman arms against the Jews, the text clearly celebrates the perceived power of humanity to dominate the natural world by channeling divine grace. Yet the celebration of such power only operates with an implicit acknowledgement of the sea's very real dangers – just as Jesus inscribed even the Holy

Land itself as “This wrecched erthe [that] þis oþur biwriede.” The text here does not doubt that divine will supported Vespasian’s mission of vengeance; rather, its description of the magnitude of Vespasian’s achievement only works by silently referencing the many disasters and “betrayals” medieval mariners feared to find on a sea upon whose divine workings they could not always depend. Significantly, it is at this point that one manuscript of *Titus* even declares that “Here bygnneth the passage of Vaspasian and Titus” (l. 2742a):²⁴ the sea crossing divides the text, while that same narrative action links the contemplation of Christ’s suffering and resurrection that came before to the coming vengeance for that suffering. Once embarked upon, the sea voyage itself is fairly brief; “They drogh up seyll bifore and byhynde, / And God hem sent ful gode wynde, / Soo in sex wekes over þei comen, / And at Acres up þei nomen” (ll. 2743-6). Nevertheless, the sea is necessary to demonstrate both God’s favor and his power over the natural world. The Romans may operate as if this power to master the water is in part their own, and the text collaborates in celebrating the size and might of their armada – but the necessity for Clement to bless that water, and for God to control both it and the wind, means that the undercurrent of anxiety regarding the relationship of readers to the seemingly ungovernable forces of nature is never far below the surface.

Upon reaching the Holy Land, Vespasian and his army immediately set about initiating a scorched-earth policy of violence against the local landscape. When Acre surrenders in fear of their numbers, Vespasian “went forth into þe londe; / He slogh and brent all þat he fonde, / And dreven forth bestes, with grete route, / Þat þei founden þerabout” (ll. 2753-6). Here, the Romans demonstrate a keen awareness of the impact

²⁴ British Library, Additional MS 36523 (mid-fifteenth century), as noted by Herbert, *Titus*, p. 124.

that such a collection and destruction of natural resources will have on the economy and welfare of the Jewish rebels. In turn, the invaders' approach reveals a perspective on the natural world that designates it as a space defined by human endeavor: first domestication and agriculture, then violence. When the Romans lay siege to Jaffa, however, the natural world switches from victim to attacker, undermining the Jews' attempts to defend the city:

God hem shewede such chaunce
Agaynes her allers vengeance:
Bothe rayn and hayll, frost and snowe,
And stiff wyndes þat loude gan blowe,
Hunger and thurste and grete coolde,
And oþur evels manyfolde.
And Vaspasian with all his oste
Hadden joye, bothe lest and moste,
Of weder, of gamen, grete plente
Of all myrthes þat myghte be;
And soo he had from þat he come
Til he turnede agayn hoom (ll. 2763-74).

The dichotomy established is simple: God blesses the chosen Roman soldiers with good weather and ample game, while the Jews suffer horrible storms and famine (foreshadowing the greater hunger to come in Jerusalem later on).²⁵ Clearly, the natural world has chosen sides. Yet the nature of the weather's weapons against the Jews indicates another source of anxiety for the late medieval British reader. Rain, hail, frost, snow, and "stiff wyndes" were all too common in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Britain, as both climate records and contemporary texts attest.²⁶ As such, English audiences would have celebrated such pains as they frequently experienced being visited

²⁵ *Titus* draws many of these details from its primary source, *La Venjance Nostre Seigneur*, although it somewhat corrupts the reason that the snow is there (to prevent the Jews escaping); see Millar, *The Siege*, pp. 113-4.

²⁶ See especially my discussions in Chapters 1 and 2 of texts reflecting the impact of the Little Ice Age.

upon the text's constructed "enemies of Christendom." The very fact that these particular types of weather would have been so familiar to them, however, reflects a paradoxical view of such climactic events. The fantasy that this text once again enacts, then, is one where adverse environmental forces can be attributed to a universal system wherein all such forces perform a divinely circumscribed role: they enact God's justice upon those who refuse his mercy. In this way, the sea, weather, and famine become armies fighting alongside, and in league with the Roman legions.

The problem with such a fantasy is that it calls into question the growing presence of such weather events in late-medieval Britain. If hail and hunger are the weapons God employs to smite his enemies, what then were British readers to make of their own predicament, amidst wet summers and failing crops? Moreover, the fact that readers would have experienced such events time and time again puts them in the position to be able to empathize with the Jews' suffering. Such a humanization of the text's purported "enemy," on the one hand, emphasizes how much even professed Christians fall away from the ideal believer, and thus suffer as they attempt to put themselves back in line.²⁷ On the other hand, however, it demonstrates a disturbing lack of ability on the part of either the Romans or the Jews to control the environment. While Vespasian and his men may destroy the Jewish agricultural landscape and reap the rewards of ample food, they benefit from these endeavors not so much as a direct result of their ingenuity, but only because the Christian God forces the natural world to help them. Ultimately, their power is exposed here as a fantasy of domination – they can conquer other human beings, but their success depends on the support of the non-human natural world (and weather). This

²⁷ As Birenbaum's reading of religious empathy in "Affective Vengeance" demonstrates.

scene, then, evokes perhaps another idea of how the earth may “betray” those sinners that walk its surface. Human beings cannot help but observe, harvest, and attempt to manage the physical resources available in the natural world – but such a focus on material wealth and experience, the bare stage of the Holy Land reveals, misrepresents the divine force that provides and defines those same resources and weather events. Human beings, in other words, may betray themselves by seeking to see their own dreams in God’s creation. While explicitly championing the Christian Crusade, then, the text cannot excise implicit unease over the state of human relationships with late-medieval British environments.

Titus seeks to alleviate some of these possible paradoxes through the introduction of the survivor of the fall of Jaffa, Sir Japhell. Japhell surrenders with his one surviving companion to the Roman forces. Vespasian recognizes his value as an advisor when he realizes that Japhell can speak Latin, “And (for he knewe wel the contree) / His lodesman he bad hym be, / And he ful gaynly þan lad hem / Til þei comen to Jersusalem” (ll. 2803-6). For practical reasons, Japhell is useful because he understands the landscape well enough to lead the Romans across it to their primary target. Indeed, the landscape that Japhell understands so well seems to veer closer to a British setting than the abstract desert of the Holy Land; as Hebron notes, Vespasian leaving a garrison at Jaffa “To kepe þe cite, feelde and wode” (l. 2808) evokes a rather British set of landscape categories.²⁸ Japhell’s knowledge derives both from his status as a local and perhaps from his experience of divine hardships endemic to that locale that the Romans have escaped. Japhell’s role, then, is to serve as a foreign landscape advisor with a unique insight on the

²⁸ Hebron, *Medieval Siege*, pp. 119-20.

natural world (despite his non-Christian origins). Japhell's character thus reflects the practice of Western European nobles hiring such foreign advisors to assist in the careful landscaping of their estates.²⁹ Interestingly, the Romans employ Japhell to just this end, having him orchestrate their landscaping campaign once the invading force reaches Jerusalem. While the poem describes a number of landscape renovation projects, such as a fortified palisade to surround Jerusalem (orchestrated by the escapee from Jerusalem, Jacob: ll. 3321-51), I want to focus here on the most memorable of Japhell's achievements: the creation of an artificial lake to supply the Roman troops.

Vespasian entrusts the design of his camp and siegeworks to Japhell because his status as a local allows him a special relationship with that environment. As the Roman opines, "What is to doon best þou wost, / For þou knowest þis countree moost" (ll. 2931-2). Simultaneously, Japhell's status as an outsider in the Roman (i.e. Western European) camp establishes his role as a landscaping advisor. Japhell's special status as local and foreigner thus embodies the paradoxical presentation of human relationships with the natural world in *Titus*, as the text constructs its Holy Landscape from details that, in drawing from the poet(s)' experiences of British environments, cannot help but allude to contemporary views and anxieties over those same environments. Japhell's complex role at the focal point of the text's contrasting perspectives on the natural world is emphasized by the romance's framing of his major project. While Japhell designs the artificial lake to

²⁹ Sharon Farmer, "Aristocratic Power and the 'Natural' Landscape: The Garden Park at Hesdin, ca. 1291-1302," *Speculum* 88.3 (2013): pp. 644-80, discusses the example of Count Robert II of Artois, who employed a set of Italian and Iberian landscape designers when he returned home to Hesdin after years away, to demonstrate "that the colonizing and crusading experiences of northern Europeans led to important transformations at home" (p. 645) in the way that landscape was designed. Interestingly, Count Robert's men designed elaborate fountains and waterscapes in addition to many other additions to the famous Hesdin estate. Across the English Channel, Eleanor of Castile, wife to Edward I, was the motivating factor behind a number of ornate gardens and waterworks, and was also "known to have imported gardeners from Spain and perhaps Italy;" see Creighton, *Designs*, p. 72.

meet the Roman army's practical needs, *Titus*' concentration on the many perspectives from which this engineering feat is admired draw attention to its aesthetic placement in the local landscape as well. Interestingly, although *Titus* maintains many of the details for this scene from its closest source, *La Venjance Nostre Seigneur*,³⁰ its near-contemporary *Siege* omits this scene entirely, providing instead an account of how the Romans pollute and poison the streams supplying Jerusalem with water.³¹ I posit that one factor accounting for the survival of this scene in *Titus* is that the celebration of manipulated landscape in the form of the lake corresponds with the broader representation of the desire to control the natural world that runs throughout this narrative. That so many characters observe first the setting of the lake, and then its magnificence once complete, only magnifies the lake's status as a marker of human control over the natural world. In turn, such a celebration of human ingenuity elevates the landscaping and waterscaping work being performed throughout the property holdings of the text's British readers.³²

Titus foreshadows the creation of the lake by first presenting the space it will occupy from the perspective of the besieged. Pilate, the ruler of Jerusalem, walks the city walls with his main advisor and ally, King Archelaus, all the while expressing his

³⁰ See Loyal A. T. Gryting, ed., "The Oldest Version of the Twelfth-Century Poem *La Venjance Nostre Seigneur*," *Contributions in Modern Philology* 19 (1952): pp. vii-143, at pp. 60 (for laisses 43 and 44) and p. 114, n. 923 (translation of laisse 43).

³¹ *Siege* ll. 689-92.

³² See Creighton, *Designs*, pp. 77-84, for examples of aristocratic landscapes including carefully designed and managed waterscapes in medieval Britain. As Creighton notes, "medieval lakes around elite residences were multifunctional and had a variety of origins, from entirely artificial creations with dams and feeder systems to landscaped meres" (p. 81). Christopher Taylor makes a similar point, observing of designed landscapes in medieval Britain that "most included lakes of considerable size, the principal functions of which may have been to provide for activities such as boating, fishing and perhaps water pageants, as well as pleasing views;" see Christopher Taylor, *Parks and Gardens of Britain: A Landscape History from the Air* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), p. 19. Taylor presents as specific examples "the earls of Norfolk at Framlingham and the earls of Arundel at Clun, Shropshire," who "created lakes or meres within parks at their castles" (*Parks and Gardens*, p. 19).

concerns regarding the coming siege. Archelaus responds by telling him not to worry, since they have plenty of men and food. Moreover, since “fresshe water is þere noon / From hennes to þe fleem Jordan” (ll. 2889-90), the Jews needn’t worry about a prolonged siege; “Water fresshe þei [the Romans] most have, / And whan þei seyen þere nys noon / Hoom agayn þei most goon” (ll. 2892-4). Archelaus demonstrates that his skill as a fighter is the greater of the two, since he can thus read the defensibility of the local landscape, and use such information to their advantage. These concerns addressed, the two men turn to look out over the surrounding landscape: “Over þe wall þei gan byholde; / And all þe feelde and eke þe fen / þei seye bicase aboute with men” (ll. 2904-6). Imagining the view from a castle wall, the text cannot help but slip into an Anglicized landscape, replete with “feelde” and “fen” – the second element of which seems especially inappropriate, given the recently mentioned lack of water. While clearly an element placed to help keep up the rhyme, its suitability to this situation derives from the way in which it unintentionally reflects a British setting. The fact that this landscape fills with Roman soldiers brings the emphasis squarely back to the narrative’s plot – but the presentation of a familiar landscape (and the habit of observing it) lays the groundwork for an appreciation of the lake as both a practical utility and impressive monument when it is added to that landscape.

After the Romans establish their siege, “Japhell rydeth by every coost / To ordeigne in arraye þe oost” (ll. 2938-9) and the lay of the land. Reporting back to Vespasian, he announces the main problem with their position: namely, that “water fressh ne have we noht” (l. (2982). He then goes on to describe his solution to this problem, since:

“...Fressh water nere nys noon,
 Þan hennes to þe fleem Jordan.
 Forþi we shall slee oure pray,
 Þat we tooke by the way,
 Horses, asses, oxen and kyne,
 Mules, cameles and grete swyne;
 Many a thousand we have ybrought.
 Of hem, I telle þou, in my thought,
 I shall doon sewen þe hydes fast
 With stronge seemes, þat wil last,
 And doo sowden every skyn,
 For to lede oure water in.
 Of somme we shall bulges make,
 And somme skynned we shall take,
 And overcasten all þe vale
 Of Josophat, þat depe dale,
 And þus in her valey we shall fonde
 To doon oure watur to withstonde.
 Foure hundreth somers, if I may,
 Shall fecche us water every day,
 Alwey til þe valey be hilde
 And with our water soo fulfild” (ll. 2989-3010).

Notably, Japhell proposes to slaughter the animals that the Romans have taken from the Jewish fields, and use the skins of those same animals to line “her valey” and fill it with water. In effect, Japhell’s plan casts the landscape and resources of the Jews against them, demonstrating the superiority of the Christian cause by virtue of their greater ability to manipulate “their” topography and environmental conditions.

Additionally, the use of the animals’ skins to create the lake emphasizes the scale of human superiority over the natural world at this juncture in the text: the Romans can disassemble animal bodies to construct a new landscape feature. The lake that Japhell and his workers go on to create becomes even closer to the waterworks created on Western European estates, as he takes care to “let make pipes many oon / In every side, out for to

goon / The olde water þat was astonde” (ll. 3013-5).³³ Such a careful circulation of water was important to many decorative and practical waterscapes on late medieval estates, so as to keep the water fresh for use and free of invasive vegetation.³⁴ The great amount of detail that *Titus* provides here demonstrates a pronounced interest on the part of the poet and perhaps the audience in the creation of an artificial lake. Even if the practice of skinning thousands of captured animals to line a lake bed was not common or especially practical, this moment in the text clearly holds up Japhell’s landscaping feat of one worthy of celebration and emulation – and demonstrates in the careful note as to the addition of pipes to circulate the water an awareness of the proper techniques for managing water as a valuable natural resource. Here, then, *Titus* presents the Roman forces as superior because of their ability to adapt a new environment to suit their own needs; by employing a local as a knowledgeable, experienced advisor, the Romans rebuild that landscape in the form more valuable to them. As the poem avers, “This com hym [Japhell] of a nobell wyt, / To do water stande withouten pyt” (ll. 3019-20) – and, even if “all was doon with Goddes wille / For to make þe Jewes spille” (ll. 2023-4), the

³³ Although *Titus* stays extremely close to *La Venjançe* throughout its description of the reservoir, the details of the pipes and circulating water are more detailed than in the French source (laisse 44).

³⁴ Farmer, “The Garden,” mentions the fact that Count Robert’s staff would frequently drain and circulate water throughout the park to keep ponds and ditches clear of vegetation (p. 652), and also that the pond water levels and circulation speeds were controlled by sluices and channels (pp. 659-60). Such elaborate waterworks also existed in England as well; for instance, “at Westminster, Edward I’s queen, Eleanor of Castile, possessed a garden that featured an ornamental pond fed by pipes from the river, and accounts relating to the garden she had made at King’s Langley (Hertfordshire) following acquisition of the manor in 1275 included work on wells and ditches, again suggesting ornamental water features” (Creighton, *Designs*, p. 61). See also note 29 above. Edward I himself had built at the Royal Mews at Charing Cross “a leaden bird bath” into which “water poured through four brass spouts in the form of leopards’ heads,” while during the reign of Edward II, the Privy palace was equipped with extensive gardens supplied with water “by means of cisterns, lead pipes and taps;” see Teresa McLean, *Medieval English Gardens* (London: Collins, 1981), p. 99. For other examples of lead cisterns and waterways built in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century English gardens, see further John Harvey, *Mediaeval Gardens* (Beaverton, OR: Timber Press, 1981), p. 114.

balance of the text's description makes clear that *Titus* cannot help but celebrate such landscape manipulation as a premier human achievement.

If the space devoted to describing the lake's construction is not enough, the poem goes on to emphasize the magnificent scale of the lake by once again presenting it from the perspective of the Jews in Jerusalem, since "Þoo þei withinne þe water sawe / Stonden soo fulle in þat lowe, / Mikel wonder was hem amonge / How þe water þere outspronge" (ll. 3025-9). These observers fetch Pilate, Archelaus, and "þe gode clerik Josephus" (l. 3032) to come and see, leading all three of them to exclaim: "Whethen may þis water be?" (l. 3034). Josephus declares that, though "I not whennes it cometh, ny how, / But þurgh þe prophetes vertewe" (ll. 3041-2), giving all credit for the lake's appearance to the "Messias" (l. 3036) or prophet, Christ. This short scene reflects the text's late-medieval British context in two ways. First, Josephus' explanation of the lake as an act of God aligns the Christian side's landscaping with holy work, elevating such reshaping of the natural world. Second, the fact that the people on the wall observe this lake faintly echoes the practice of designing landscapes to provide views from a number of perspectives – including the main settlement or castle within the estate.³⁵ While here it was of course an invading force that re-appropriated the landscape to its own ends, the experience of viewing waterscapes from a wall was one familiar to the text's audiences, and could have assisted in layering the fantastic narrative atop local settings – while celebrating the creation and maintenance of local lakes and waterways. Thus, *Titus* elevates skill in landscaping to a Godly endeavor, and presents such skill as evidence

³⁵ See Creighton, *Designs*, pp. 77-95. He notes a strong "link between elite residences and views over or control of large expanses of water" throughout northern Europe and particularly Britain, but especially in the northwest, where the Gaelic influence was stronger (p. 86).

that, in a world of dangerous weather and changing environments, the natural world will at times commit itself to divinely-inspired human control.

The last two main presentations of landscape in *Titus* are both linked to fallen individuals, those whose stories take the form of inverted romances, where the protagonists make all of the wrong decisions: namely, the tales of Pilate and Judas. Pilate, proving himself a murderer as a child in a number of different households, emerges as a brutal ruler who fails to learn the proper lessons of self-control, condemning Christ to death and ultimately being imprisoned by the Romans at the fall of Jerusalem.³⁶ In this form, his story begins like that of any number of romance heroes given the opportunity to change their life around once they reach adulthood (*Sir Gowther*, for example), but he fails to take the opportunity. Later, after Jerusalem falls and he is imprisoned for a few years, Pilate despairs and kills himself, confirming his rejection of salvation. Here, his corpse's relationship with the seaside landscape of his prison provides a parallel cautionary example to Guinevere's tarn-mother in *Awntyrs off Arthure*. Buried "by a watres side / Pere noo man shulde goo ny ride" (ll. 4411-2), his wasteland grave nevertheless begins to slay people through its "stynke and cry" (l. 4415), causing those living alongside the wasteland to think it inhabited by "feendes" (l. 4416). As such, the locals decide to move the body, so they put him in a barrel and "Into þe water they hym cast" (l. 4424). However, the corpse, unable to rest or sink, harries sailors in the area "with derkenes, stynke, and hidous cries" (l. 4435), until "By the water durst no man wende / Into noo lande" (ll. 4437-8). Such a situation would disrupt not just the health and sanity, but also the economic wellbeing of the locals by driving away shipping (as the

³⁶ For the story of Pilate's childhood and life up to the Crucifixion, see *Titus* ll. 1489-1578.

body does: ll. 4441-4). Finally, when sailors report “That þei echoon the barrell gan see / Up and doun fletand wel fast” (ll. 4447-8), the local holy men advise that only prayer can save the day. As such, they pray for deliverance, and consequently “A vois þer cam, þat bid hem goon / To þe water side anoon” (ll. 4459-60) to see the body be dealt with. Soon:

... byʒonde þe water syde
A roche bygan to open wyde;
Above hem roos a wyndes blast,
Þat made hem alle sore agast,
And þerwith bothe leyt and thondre,
As al þe worlde shulde gon insundre.
This weder forth the body blewe,
Into þe roche right it threwe.
...
And evere sithen, til þis day,
Þe hoole is open þere he lay,
With stoon ny erthe ne may be dytte,
In tokenyng of þat foule pytte (ll. 4467-74, 4479-82).

While this scene may appear to be an origin story for a volcano to modern readers, the medieval account (here elaborated from the *Golden Legend*³⁷) clearly attributes Pilate’s rejection by the physical world, both land and sea, to his sinfulness. The scene of the many onlookers lining the beach, praying for salvation, provides a chilling contrast to the celebratory description of the artificial lake outside Jerusalem. Here, once again, the sea (water and stone) emerges as a physical manifestation of divine judgment – yet even it is only able to control Pilate’s undead body by suffering an unhealing wound. Such suffering also presents human beings as capable of permanently harming the natural world, albeit more by sinfulness than by conscious engineering. Nevertheless, Pilate’s stinking end pairs with Japhell’s clear, self-circulating lake to present the positive and negative effects of human activity on the natural landscape – and

³⁷ Millar, *The Siege*, p. 118.

suggests that, while some environments can be adapted to human needs, the changes to others will be forever be outside of human control.

Finally, the story of Judas³⁸ employs the romance motif of the beached foundling to present its protagonist as a character at once pitifully human and unforgivably sinful.³⁹ On the night that Judas is conceived, his mother dreams that her son “shulde be Jewes bale” (l. 4500), and upon waking, she tries to convince her husband to get rid of a son if they have one. Her husband agrees once Judas is born, and “A newe bote for hym was wrought; / Into þe see þei hym dight, / And leten hym goo where he myght” (ll. 4528-30). Eventually, on the island of Scariot (hence his name, according to the story), “Þis bote was to and froo soo cast, / To lande it come at þe last” (ll. 4531-2). Here, the poem takes pains to link the scene into the romance motifs analyzed in my previous chapter, for Judas’ boat is discovered by a shore-walker:

The Qwene come pleyand of þe lande,
With hir maydenes, by the sande.
Of þis bote she was war,
Anoon þerto she gan fare.
“Maidenes,” she seide, “cometh with me.
A bote cometh fletande on þe see.
Som wonder I hope it be, y wys;
Goo we and see what it is.”
The bote in þe sande gan feste,
As þe water wawes it keste.
Drye foot forth up þe gravell
Þei went þerto, faire and well.
A childe, in riche clothes wounden,
In þis bote þei have hit founden (ll. 4535-48).

³⁸ Again, this story is absent from the short text.

³⁹ This story also closely follows the Golden Legend; see Millar, *The Siege*, p. 119.

The figure of a noble lady playing on the beach with her entourage is one common to many romances, in addition to Chaucer's *Franklin's Tale*.⁴⁰ Moreover, the description of the "gravell" reaching up the beach would certainly be immediately familiar to anyone who had visited any British seashore. Here, however, the arrival of the boat switches the expected gender roles: instead of a male beach-comber discovering a shipwrecked maiden (with or without a male child), a queen discovers an infant boy in a beached boat. *Titus* makes sure to remind us of this reversal, following the above quote with the single-line declaration that "Þei saw it was a knave, I wys" (l. 4549). Moreover, the desire to investigate a vessel come ashore for "some wonder" demonstrates a recognizable desire for both adventure, or "play," as well as an acknowledgment of the possibility for material or economic gain on the salvager's part. The queen's gain in this case appears to be that she and her husband, unable heretofore to have a child, now have an heir. Of course, as with so many scenes of individuals taken from shipwrecked boats in Middle English romances, such an attempted rewriting of Judas' identity ultimately only brings suffering down upon those who "salvaged" him from the boat. When his adoptive parents have a son of their own, and Judas bullies that child, his origins as a foundling are revealed. Angry, Judas kills his brother, and flees to Jerusalem. Once there, Judas falls in with Pilate, and through a series of misadventures wherein Pilate asks him to steal an apple, Judas ends up murdering his own father and marrying his mother. When his "wife" reveals her back-story to him, the two realize their mistake, and she sends Judas to seek forgiveness by becoming a follower of Jesus. Finally, following his famous betrayal, Judas is disgusted with himself, and commits suicide:

⁴⁰ See further Chapter 3.

When he sawe noo better boote,
He dede hym smertly on his fote
Into a waste, a pryve stede
(A wickede maister gan hym lede),
And pere upon an elleren tree
He hongede hymself in privete (ll. 4847-52).

Interestingly, just as landscape description introduced Judas' presence in the text (there of a seashore), so too does the landscape return at the moment of his death. In a scene reminiscent of a ballad-romance,⁴¹ Judas chooses an "elleren" or elder tree in land gone to "waste" to hang himself. Apart from the privacy offered by such a setting, its particulars make it immediately relatable to a British audience. In effect, Judas here walks out of the Holy Land and into Britain: a man who tried to repent but could not stay the course, his death becomes all the more conceivable and relatable due to its placement in a British landscape.⁴² The land left to waste around this tree also suggests the untapped agricultural and economic potential of such a space, in turn reflecting and emphasizing the waste of Judas' own betrayal and hopeless death. Through descriptions of landscape, then, the stories of both Pilate and Judas emphasize themes raised in *Titus*' main narrative regarding the troubled relationship between human beings and the natural world.

At its conclusion, when Jerusalem has been destroyed, its inhabitants butchered, enslaved, or scattered, and the Romans have departed, the poem returns once more to the site of the Holy City. Now, in place of the great numbers that once occupied it, small

⁴¹ On which see further Chapter 5.

⁴² Hanging was the most common form of reported suicide in late medieval England, although it may have been overshadowed in actual practice by drowning; see Barbara Hanawalt, *Crime and Conflict in English Communities, 1300-1348* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), pp. 102-3. Hanawalt's account includes some poignant example of individuals hanging themselves, such as the story of Agnes of Middleton, who hanged herself from a tree "in her husband's close." The scene in *Titus* certainly sounds like that common to many ballads as well (although again, the form of death there is often drowning in a wasteland).

groups of Jews return to the ruins, hoping to rebuild. With its characteristic anti-Semitic fervor, *Titus* describes how God once again attempts to warn off the Jews with prophetic signs, which they only ignore. Notably, these signs appear in the earth itself, in response to the Jews attempting to inscribe “merkes on þe grounde” (l. 5090) to delineate where the buildings once were, and plan how they will rebuild. God replies by trying to scare them away: “Þei loked doun a litell stounde; / A croys þere lay on the grounde, / Of newe blode rede to þe sight, / Þat made hem to fleen yplight” (ll. 5097-5100). Despite this sign, “Another day agayn they comen” (l. 5103), and the crosses spread from the ground to their clothes (ll. 5106-8). Finally, on the third day “Out of þe erthe þere spronge a fyre / With sparkeles hoote and lowe skyre, / Þat brent hem alle thore, / Þat body and bones askes wore” (ll. 5121-4). This disturbing retribution of the land on the Jews ends attempts to rebuild Jerusalem, leaving its site a desolate, fiery wasteland. The cross drawn in blood on the ground in response to the Jews’ own attempts to write their landscaping plans upon that same earth calls to mind both the Romans’ earlier engineering accomplishments and also the opening image of Christ inscribing a warning upon the ground. In the end, the natural world in this text emerges as one that can be manipulated at times by human activity, but one whose power is always capable of foiling human attempts at control. Divine power may govern the natural world – but all save the purest of believers are hard pressed to interpret the signs and values God inscribes therein.

Titus is, in the end, a messy text. Demonstrating a pronounced desire for comprehensiveness, it compiles a great variety of tales and prophecies associated with the “Vengeance of Our Lord” tradition. This diversity of constituent parts leads the romance to present a kaleidoscope of contemporary perspectives on the issues it raises. As it

details the horribly anti-Semitic violence enacted upon the Jews inhabiting Jerusalem in 70 CE while also presenting those same individuals (Pilate and Judas among them) as all too recognizably human in their falls from grace, so too does this text perceive the natural world as a stage for celebrating divinely-inspired human endeavor while also recognizing the mysterious, terrifying power of stormy weather and geological activity. The “Holy Landscape” of *Titus* thus presents a clash between its Christian understanding of an hierarchical universe and the audience’s everyday experiences of the unpredictable, at times antagonistic environments of late medieval Britain. The contest between these two juxtaposed perspectives remains unresolved to the tale’s bitter, macabre conclusion. Yet it is that very lack of resolution that makes *Titus* such a valuable lens through which to analyze medieval British understandings of human relationships with the natural world. Charting the distant, textually constructed topography of Judea and the Mediterranean shore, *Titus* observes the realm of physical experience through blood-colored glasses, and desperately tries to proclaim its reading (or writing) of the natural world as correct – desperately, for *Titus*, like its readers, must seek to read “This wrecched erthe [that] þis oþur biwriede.”

Landscape Engineering, Total War, and the Fate of Hubris in Kyng Alisaunder

Kyng Alisaunder, the earliest of the Alexander romances written in Middle

English, was composed in the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century.⁴³ A romance that

⁴³ All citations of *Kyng Alisaunder* are taken from G. V. Smithers, ed., *Kyng Alisaunder*, Vol. I, EETS (o.s.) 227 (London: Oxford University Press, 1961 [Orig. 1952]). All three manuscripts and the printed fragments of the poem are reproduced in this edition, but my citations are taken solely from the Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Laud Misc. 622 text. For Smithers’ commentary on the poem, see the second volume of his edition: G. V. Smithers, *Kyng Alisaunder*, Vol. II, EETS (o.s.) 237 (London: Oxford University Press, 1969

has garnered rare praise from many modern critics as a well-written and engaging piece,⁴⁴ *Alisaunder's* narrative may be split into two rough halves: the first deals with Alexander's conception, birth, childhood, ascension to the Macedonian throne, and finally his campaigns against and victory over the Persian emperor Darius; the second charts Alexander's travels and conquests in India, Ethiopia, and other eastern lands, and culminates in Alexander's death by poisoned wine and the collapse of his empire into civil war. The poem is an adaptation of the Anglo-Norman *Roman de Toute Chevalrie* by Thomas of Kent, sans that text's many interpolations from continental Old French romances in its surviving forms.⁴⁵

However, as Luann Kitchel notes, "one must remember that many of the details, particularly those connected with character portrayal are original" creations of the *Alisaunder*-poet.⁴⁶ A number of these additions or emendations to the narrative by the Middle English poet consist of lyrical headpieces to various sections of the text. Such a use of headpieces is unique to only four Middle English poems, all composed in southeastern England around the turn of the fourteenth century, and "thought to be possibly by the same author – *Kyng Alisaunder, Of Arthour and of Merlin, Richard*

[Orig. 1957 for 1953]), hereafter cited as Smithers, *King II*. The dating of the poem's composition to the turn of the fourteenth-century is based on its partial survival in the famous Auchinleck MS (Edinburgh, Library of Scotland Advocates' MS 19.2.1); see Smithers, *King II*, p. 44, and further W. H. French, "Dialects and Forms in Three Romances," *JEGP* 45.2 (1946): pp. 125-32, at p. 130, who argues for a dating of 1275-1300. Both of these sources are also cited by Luann M. Kitchel, *A Critical Study of the Middle English Alexander Romances* (Ph.D. Diss., Michigan State University, 1973), at p. 81, n. 1.

⁴⁴ See G. H. V. Bunt, "Alexander's Last Days in the Middle English *Kyng Alisaunder*" in *Alexander the Great in the Middle Ages: Ten Studies on the Last Days of Alexander in Literary and Historical Writing*, eds. L. J. Engels, A. G. Jongkees, W. Noomen, and N. van der Wal (Nijmegen, The Netherlands: Alfa Nijmegen, 1978), pp. 202-229, at p. 209. Note also Kitchel, *Critical Study*, p. 24, and p. 81, n. 7, where she observes that French, "Dialects," p. 127, condemns the poem "as the work of a hack."

⁴⁵ See for instance Charles R. Stone, "Many Man He Shal Do Woo': Portents and the End of an Empire in *Kyng Alisaunder*," *Medium Aevum* 81.1 (2012): pp. 18-40, at p. 20.

⁴⁶ Kitchel, *Critical Study*, p. 22.

Coeur de Lion and *The Seven Sages of Rome*.”⁴⁷ While the authorship of these poems is a matter of much controversy,⁴⁸ the headpieces themselves have attracted a great amount of attention from modern readers of *Alisaunder*, since these lyrical passages combine personal invention with details and rhetorical strategies common to the Old French and Latin source texts. These headpieces are usually not explicitly connected to the surrounding narrative, and present scenes or gnomic statements describing daybreak, seasonal nature, the agricultural calendar, and courtly life.⁴⁹ As such, various critics have argued that these lyrical interludes represent: a simple split between episodes, or notation of the passage of time;⁵⁰ a running commentary on the contrast between the human and ideal elements of Alexander’s character, and the ultimate dominance of nature and its laws;⁵¹ disruptions of the primary chivalric, masculine narrative, and ways to link the text back to contemporary English village contexts;⁵² evidence of the English poet’s familiarity with Latin source texts, and an orientation of the “audience’s response to specific characters or episodes,” in particular presenting Alexander as maturing in a way

⁴⁷ J. Scattergood, “Validating the High Life in *Of Arthour and of Merlin* and *Kyng Alisaunder*,” *Essays in Criticism* 54.4 (2004): pp. 323-50, at p. 323.

⁴⁸ See for example French, “Dialects,” Scattergood, “Validating,” p. 323, and also Kitchel, *Critical Study*, p. 81, note 5, for an overview of earlier arguments.

⁴⁹ See Kitchel, *Critical Study*, pp. 68-72, for a convenient citation list of all 29 headpieces from the text.

⁵⁰ See *Ibid.*, pp. 66-8, who summarizes and rebuts such readings by Smithers, *King II*, pp. 35-9, and Rosamund Tuve, *Seasons and Months: Studies in a Tradition of Middle English Poetry* (Paris: Librairie Universitaire, 1933), pp. 13, 181, and 32ff.

⁵¹ Kitchel, *Critical Study*, pp. 66-80. Dieter Mehl, *The Middle English Romances of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968), posits that the headpieces, “by their regular occurrence and their insistence on the theme of mutability . . . create a system of values by which Alexander’s fate can be assessed” (p. 239); see further his analysis of selected headpieces on pp. 235-9.

⁵² Christine Chism, “Winning Women in Two Middle English Alexander Poems” in *Women and Medieval Epic: Gender, Genre, and the Limits of Epic Masculinity*, eds. Sara S. Poor and Jana K. Schulman (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 15-40, at p. 21.

superior to his main adversary in the poem's first half, Darius;⁵³ or a set of cues that remind audiences of their own relationship to different literary conventions, locate Alexander's encounters with the marvelous in a geographical, natural context, and establish the aristocratic lifestyle and values of the poem's possible early audiences.⁵⁴

In sum, while they vary widely in their ultimate conclusions, modern readers agree that these headpieces serve to place *Alisaunder*'s narrative of extraordinary achievements, places, and peoples within a recognizably contemporary perspective on the transitory nature of earthly experience. However, critics often neglect to move beyond the context of these lyrical headpieces in their discussions of contemporary perspectives on the natural world in *Alisaunder*, commenting on the text's meticulous catalogue of the "marvels of the east" that composes most of the poem's second half mostly in passing, as evidence of medieval interest in travelogues and the environments and inhabitants of foreign spaces.⁵⁵ The few scholars who do venture into extended examination of the marvels themselves usually do so in the context of comparing *Alisaunder*'s account to that of its sources,⁵⁶ or comment that the descriptions of fantastic animals by comparison to familiar Western species serves to present the marvelous as an "acceptable, real part of the world" governed by the same laws of nature as the text's audience.⁵⁷ Building from these past arguments, I thus propose to analyze the many ways in which passages of landscape description and especially landscape engineering from the main narrative of

⁵³ Louise Haywood, "Spring Song and Narrative Organization in the Medieval Alexander Legend," *Troianalexandrine: anuario sobre literatura medieval de materia clásica* 4 (2004): pp. 87-105 (cited at p. 101).

⁵⁴ See Scattergood, "Validating," especially pp. 345-50.

⁵⁵ See for instance Elizabeth A. Flynn, *The Marvelous Element in Middle English Alexander Romances* (Ph.D. Diss., University of Wisconsin, 1968), pp. 78-9.

⁵⁶ For an example, see Smithers, *King II*, pp. 28-40.

⁵⁷ Kitchel, *Critical Study*, pp. 79-80.

Alisaunder demonstrate the text's ongoing engagement with contemporary British perspectives on the relationship between human industry and the natural world. Despite its pronounced fascination with the wonders of explicitly foreign (both temporally and spatially) landscapes and environments, *Alisaunder* ultimately struggles with many of the same concerns regarding the natural world's potential to support or destroy human endeavor that characterize landscape description in other Middle English romances. Even in the trials, triumphs, and final tragedy of Alexander's interactions with the natural world, the English poet and audience of *Alisaunder* cannot help but catch glimpses of their own daily experiences.

The claims regarding *Alisaunder* that I propose above are particularly relevant to the copy of the text found in Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Laud Misc. 622, a manuscript produced in southeastern England in the late fourteenth-century.⁵⁸ This version of *Alisaunder* is the most complete surviving, and forms the base text for Smithers' edition.⁵⁹ MS Laud Misc. 622 is also especially appropriate to my discussion of *Alisaunder*'s perspectives on the natural world because, in addition to handful of short texts discussing Biblical history, prophecy, and the dreams of Edward II, *Alisaunder* shares this manuscript with the long version of *Titus and Vespasian* discussed previously. That a second (perhaps slightly later) scribe has added a prose list "of remarkable things and places seen in the Holy Land"⁶⁰ immediately following *Alisaunder* reinforces the impression that this compilation demonstrates a pronounced interest in charting the

⁵⁸ See Guddat-Figge, *Catalogue*, pp. 285-6.

⁵⁹ The London, Lincoln's Inn MS 150 text of *Alisaunder* is also notable, however, for its evidence of oral performance (despite the text's pronounced corruption); see further Simon Horobin and Alison Wiggins, "Reconsidering Lincoln's Inn MS 150," *Medium Aevum* 77.1 (2008): pp. 30-53.

⁶⁰ Guddat-Figge, *Catalogue*, p. 286.

topography of foreign places. For the reader or audience approaching this manuscript, then, the ecological anxieties demonstrated by each of the two longest texts (both pseudo-historical romances) serves to emphasize those perspectives found in the other. Moreover, the placement of human ecological concerns within an explicitly Christian conception of the universe could also apply to *Alisaunder*, especially in this manuscript. As Stone notes, the story of Alexander was often used by historians and religious writers for moralizing ends, either holding the ancient hero aloft as a paragon of pre-Christian virtue or condemning his worldly pride and recklessness, as opposed to the romance tradition of championing his martial prowess – a divided perspective on the hero shared most by *King Alisaunder* of the Middle English Alexander narratives. In particular, “Alexander’s suitability for sacred and secular storytelling alike finds its best codicological evidence in Oxford, Bodley MS Laud Misc. 622” since, although “*Kyng Alisaunder* seemingly stands apart from the overtly religious character of this manuscript... yet Alexander was frequently cast as a conqueror of God’s enemies, particularly Gog and Magog, and this would explain the association of the English romance with both the religious material of the manuscript and the spiritually inspired belligerence of... *Titus and Vespasian*.”⁶¹ Notably, my analysis of scenes regarding warfare on the landscape and in particular the use of landscape engineering to shape and control bodies of water will demonstrate that *Alisaunder* and *Titus* share many of the same concerns regarding such moments of human interaction with the natural world –

⁶¹ Stone, ““Many Man,”” pp. 19-20. Velma B. Richmond also notes this manuscript context as significant, arguing that it suggest *Kyng Alisaunder* should be read in a maralistic, didactic light; see Richmond, *The Popularity of Middle English Romance* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1975), p. 35. Mehl, *Middle English Romances*, p. 189, suggests that *Alisaunder* was included in this manuscript for instruction, a point cited and echoed by Bunt, “Alexander’s Last Days,” p. 203.

and most prominently during Alexander's campaigns against the inhabitants of Gog and Magog.

Together, then, these two romances present a concordant range of ecological anxieties prompted by the environmental conditions of late medieval England – and suggest that tales of the Holy Land and Far East provided an appropriately religious and abstract stage upon which to play out concerns over the often violent and terrifying nature of God's will as enacted through weather and other natural forces. Of course, due to its defining interest in the marvels and nature of India and the Far East, I do not have room here to analyze nearly all such passages of environmental description from *Alisaunder*; such a study would undoubtedly warrant a monograph unto itself. Instead, I focus in this chapter on what I see as the most salient moments in which the romance comments upon ecological issues that identifiably derive from concerns raised in my previous discussion of *Titus*. To see how *Alisaunder* in particular gives voice to these concerns, then, it is to the Laud MS text of that romance that I now turn.

As with *Titus*, where Christ wrote upon the earth to warn the Jews of the physical world's duplicitous nature, so too do *Alisaunder*'s earlier episodes include a religious pronouncement on the nature of worldly creation, this “djuers... myddellerde” (l. 1). Specifically, *Alisaunder*'s pronouncement occurs after Alexander has already begun to take the reins of Macedonian rule, having forced King Philip to reconcile with Alexander's mother, Olympia, and having won a number of sieges and battles against local enemies and vassals in revolt. Indeed, Alexander has just returned from putting down a revolt in Mantona when Persian messengers from Darius first reach Philip's court, where they “asken of Phillippe trovage, / Of wood, and water, and land, by vsage”

(ll. 1283-4). Given the nature of his recent assignment, the angry speech with which Alexander responds to the Persians' demands is particularly notable:

Lordynges, forsoþe, Ich 3ou telle,
He þat made heuene and helle
Afterward made man,
Oure former fader, hete Adam.
To hys ofspryng, so þinkeþ me,
Alle he made yliche free –
Water, and wodes, londes, and pleynes.
3if Darrie haueþ þorou3 his meynes
Don Philippe, my fader, wrong,
Jch am elde ynou3 and strong
A3eins Darrie hym so to wreke
Þat þe werlde shal þere-of speke,
And Ich wiþclepe and wiþstonde
þe trowage of Grece londe.
Perwhiles J may hors bistride,
Ne shal he neuer non abide (ll. 1287-1302).

First, this passage presents Alexander as having knowledge of the Judeo-Christian creation narrative – knowledge that he does not demonstrate elsewhere in the text, and that the poet does not elsewhere ascribe to him.⁶² Second, with Alexander having just enforced the Macedonian right to “trovage” from Mantona, it is especially surprising that he would immediately turn around and declare that the Creator made “yliche free” all “water, and wodes, londes, and pleynes.” The rest of the passage demonstrates in a nutshell Alexander's character in the first half of this text, as he seeks to characterize the Persians' demands as insults which he must then avenge in such a way “Þat þe werlde shal þere-of speke.”

How, then, does Alexander's speech present the physical world? It emerges as the product of a Judeo-Christian God, which was shaped by that God into various categories

⁶² On the handful of other explicit references to Christ in the poem, see Richmond, *The Popularity*, pp. 38-41, who argues that the poet ultimately presents “God and eternal life” as more valuable than any earthly accomplishments (p. 41); and also Bunt, “Alexander's Last Days,” pp. 221-2.

of landscape to be held freely and equally by all men (Adam's "ofspring"), and which serves as the stage for the establishment of fame and reputation. Clearly, Alexander's concept of the natural world already contains within it a number of contradictions. Foremost among these issues is the idea of the conqueror's own upcoming career: if he is to seek to see, experience, and command all of Creation, does he then see himself as more powerful than God, able to rewrite the hierarchical relationship between human beings and the landscape? Also, readers find here an Alexander that is naively confident of human superiority over creation: whether under the command of lords or "yliche free," humans are the clear masters of a natural world made for them to categorize and use for their own ends (whether that be performing martial exploits or spreading word of such exploits). By the end of his speech, the free landscapes of the world become, when the focus narrows to "Grece londe," entirely "trowage." Nature – water, wood, land, and plain – are Alexander's financial property. From the outset, then, Alexander establishes his perspective of the natural world as another piece of property to be conquered and evaluated, a stage for human acts. As the narrative shall demonstrate, however, such a short-sighted, one-dimensional understanding of the relationship between human beings and their environments will lead Alexander, conqueror of men, to his greatest defeats at the hands of animals and the elements. Despite calling upon the Creation story from Genesis as the validation for Macedonian freedom from Persian vassalage, therefore, Alexander reveals in his misrepresentation of the power and freedom of the natural world itself the seeds of his own downfall. The text will go on to demonstrate Alexander persevering against great odds, and often through the manipulation and ingenious engineering of malleable landscapes: but, oblivious to God's will directing his success,

Alexander will fall prey to the prideful idea that any such success proves his own mastery over the landscape. Such a lesson echoes many of the anxieties raised by *Titus* – and provides a cautionary tale to readers active themselves in seeking to control, manage, and shape the landscapes of late medieval England.

Before moving on to Alexander’s “total war” campaigns against the Persians and the text’s obsession with violence committed on and against the landscape, it is worth noting that, in addition to a grand proclamation on the nature of the earth vis-à-vis its human inhabitants, Alexander also shares another trait with the Christ of *Titus*. As in the latter text, where storms and portents in the natural world reflect its close and at times terrifying bond with Christ’s fate, so too do environmental events mark a significant moment in Alexander’s life. Whereas it was the Crucifixion in *Titus* that garnered strange storms, eclipses, and mourning from all life save humankind, however, it is Alexander’s birth that attracts such attention from the natural world in *Alisaunder*. The difference is significant, as it marks the reversed relationship with nature and creation that the two characters represent: Alexander, focused on his own experience, seeks to conquer and control, while Christ, already the creator and an integral part of every living thing, evokes nature’s lament at the moment of his separation from the physical realm. As scholars such as Stone have noted, Philip’s animal-filled prophetic dreams lead him to mourn Olympias’ pregnancy before Alexander is even born, and to pronounce when he is that “Pou hast brou3th forþ an yuel fode / ... Many man he shal do woo” (ll. 646, 648).⁶³

⁶³ Stone, ““Many Man,”” p. 18 *passim*. While I do not deal directly with representations of women in this text, this topic has garnered a fair amount of interest from modern critics. See for instance David Salter, ““Born to the Thraldom and Penance’: Wives and Mothers in Middle English Romance” in *Writing Gender and Genre in Medieval Literature: Approaches to Old and Middle English Texts*, ed. Elaine Treharne (Cambridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 2002), pp. 41-59, especially pp. 51-9; and also Chism, “Winning Women,”

Other pre-birth prophetic moments are also echoed by the actions of animals.⁶⁴ Yet the ecological context of Alexander's birth in the Laud MS *Alisaunder* serves to highlight both the connection and contrast between the ancient ruler and *Titus'* Christ. As indicated above, the event is marked throughout Creation:

Þe erþe shook, þe cee bycom grene,
Þe sonne wiþdrou3, shynyng shene.
Þe mone hire shewed, and bicom blak.
Þe þonder made many crak.
Þe day bycom derk so ni3th.
Afered was sore euery wi3th (ll. 639-44).

Stone, examining the Latin and Anglo-Norman sources influencing the *Alisaunder*-poet, identifies a peculiarly English interest in the ominous foreshadowing of the public, community consequences of Alexander's birth via public outcry over similar dramatic weather, with such an effect being particularly pronounced in the most immediate source, Thomas of Kent's *Roman*.⁶⁵ Drawing from Stone's work, then, it is especially notable that the description of Alexander's birth weather given in the Laud *Alisaunder* echoes so closely the language of the weather foretelling Christ's death in *Titus*. Surely, it is hard to establish a more ominous connection. Yet, in addition to the presaging of doom, the weather of Alexander's birth establishes beyond doubt that this individual has a personal connection to the natural world – a connection on the scale of that accorded to a god, even the God (although of an inferior caliber). Apart from the

who argues that women were part of the poem's target audience (pp. 35-6). For more on the Egyptian sources behind the presentation of Alexander's parentage and childhood especially, and thus the character of Olympias in particular, see Salter, "Wives and Mothers," p. 53 *passim*, and especially his source, Betty Hill, "Alexanderromance: The Egyptian Connection," *Leeds Studies in English* n.s. 12 (1981): pp. 185-94 (cited at Salter, "Wives and Mothers," p. 53).

⁶⁴ Stone, "Many Man," p. 28.

⁶⁵ Stone, "Many Man," pp. 20-21. For more on the Anglo-Latin sources used by Thomas, see also David Howlett, *The English Origins of Old French Literature* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1996), pp.127-9.

eclipse, too, much of this description would have been recognizable to English readers familiar with the storms that grew every more frequent in Britain as the Middle Ages drew to an end. As such, the text presents here a glimmer of the fantasy that I found earlier in texts such as *Sir Degrevant*: that is, *Alisaunder* wishes to pin the power to contest or perhaps even control the natural world onto a human actor, for better or for worse. In this way, the poem tries to make a changing environment more comprehensible as a force that could be reckoned with, as its reins would ultimately be in human hands. Yet, as my previous discussion of Alexander's later speech suggested, he, like the humans of *Titus*, will eventually fall prey to being unable to consistently interpret the messages sent him by the natural world. Thus, from the moment of Alexander's birth, the desire to pin negative ecological developments onto a (super)human actor is juxtaposed with the knowledge that, in bringing woe, that actor will be unable to bring the natural world under his control. Alexander's achievements of landscape engineering and total warfare will be impressive – but his hubris in seeking to control the Creation he himself is within will lead to the tragedy his birth weather portends.

Following his grand refusal of Darius' demands, Alexander assumes the throne following the death of King Philip and the punishment by death of Pausanias, who betrayed the old king (and was Olympias' lover). Alexander then circles the Mediterranean, accepting surrenders and gathering troops before attacking Tyre. Once in the Middle East, Alexander receives more insulting gifts and messages from Darius, and so marches into Arabia (ll. 1281-1904). As he begins attacking Persian holdings, Alexander enacts a scorched earth policy on the countries and cities he assaults – a technique that will remain his staple throughout his brief career. Such a strategy clearly

reflects an awareness of the importance of local landscapes to the continued economic and literal survival of a city. For instance, upon entering Arabia, Alexander lays waste absolutely:

Ouer al þe ost he dooþ crye
þat hij wendeþ alle to Arabye,
And setten fyre and wilde-bronde
Quyke on kyng Darryes londe,
Brenne castel and brenne cite,
And brenne doune-ri3th, wiþouten pite (ll. 1853-8).

Sixty cities fall in such a way to Alexander's troops (l. 1901), a scale that perhaps evokes the great numbers of French settlements destroyed in the Hundred Years' War and, for fifteenth-century readers of the Laud MS, an exaggerated form of the casualties caused by the Wars of the Roses and associated local feuds. In between his victories over Darius' armies, Alexander employs the same strategy to destroy Thebes (ll.2875-82), where he kills all people and animals and leaves the place "Bote as it were a wete lake" (l. 2885) after burning it down. Alexander here demonstrates with the transformation of Thebes into a "place cler" (l. 2882) and later a "wete lake" (details unique to the Laud MS account) a nascent ability to engineer landscape, which will be expanded upon later. He also finds the same scorched earth strategy employed when the city of Macedoyne unsuccessfully stands against him (ll. 3231-4). The most elaborate description of such warfare on the landscape arises when Alexander returns to the east, as he unknowingly approaches a battlefield that has been carefully chosen and plotted out by the Persian army (ll. 3419-29):

Hem tofore nys bot deþ,
For his pidaile brenneþ and sleþ
Al þat hij fynden mowe.
Ten myle wayes, Ich wil avowe,

Hij brenten doun-riȝth tofore þe ost,
And also fele þe kyng a-cost.
Hij robbeden tresores and clopes,
And brentem tounes and þe heþes.
þe smok was so gret and leyte
þat Darries ost it dude awayte (ll. 3445-54).

The destruction wreaked by Alexander's host is absolute, and the smoke from their raids clearly charts their advance for the waiting Persians. Here, notably, in the thick of a text devoted to tales of alien and exotic locales, the text cannot help but slip into an account of such destruction akin to that witnessed on English lands, as the "heþes" or open fields that supply the "tounes" of Darius' domain are put to the torch alongside the theft of "tresores and clopes." Such violence extracts an economic penalty from the harassed lands twice over, as their present and future wealth is stripped or burnt away. The poem illustrates that Alexander has become more completely aware of the economic consequences of his violence against the landscape by expanding its description of the spaces put to the torch, and the goods gained in the process.

For most of *Alisaunder*, the economic consequences of Alexander's scorched earth warfare take a distinct backseat to the protagonist's famed martial prowess. However, near the end of the poem, *Alisaunder* makes explicit the economic and political significance of controlling valuable agricultural landscapes. In doing so, it casts a reflective light back across the other slash-and-burn scenes from throughout Alexander's career, indicating the significance that each such moment may have had – and the effects of enacting such strategies of warfare against the environment in the real world. Here, Alexander and his men assault Duke Hirtan of Brye in order to recover the wife of one of his vassals:

Bote quop Alisaunder, 'Here and þere
 Tofore vs sette al on fyre,
 Forto hij comen to vs a-felde,
 Oþer þat lefdy to vs zelde.'
 Hij setten a-fyre, wiþouten pyte,
 Al þe londe to þe cite,
 And bysetten it about
 Þat hij ne miȝtten jn ne oute.
 Þe burgeys seiȝ her wynes barne –
 Eueryche oþer harme gan warne,
 And seiden wel her was þe gylt
 To ben forbarnd, to ben forswelt,
 Þat suffreden þe duk Hirtan
 Hauē in demayne oþere womman.
 Alle þe burgeis of þe toun
 Duden by on red commune –
 To þe palays hij wenten alle
 And quyk beten doune þe walle,
 Jn cuntēk and slouȝen Hirtan,
 And ȝulden to Candulek his womman.
 Þus comen þise burgeis,
 And han of her were peis (ll.7542-63).

This scene is worth quoting at length because it delineates a step-by-step awareness of the social ramifications of landscape destruction. To begin with, Alexander explicitly notes that burning the countryside will either force the inhabitants of Brye to come out and fight or to surrender the woman. That his latter supposition comes to pass implies that, over the course of his experience, Alexander has thoroughly learned the power of economic warfare. Indeed, the text goes to pains to make such costs clear by immediately introducing the “burgeys” or “burgeis” inside the town who, seeing their vineyards (and livelihoods) go up in flames, resolve to work together to protect their own interests, assaulting the ducal palace, slaying their lord, and returning the captured lady to her husband Candulek. For readers encountering this scene following the turmoil and upheaval of movements like the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, its relevance to real life in

post-plague England would be immediately apparent.⁶⁶ Moreover, this scene demonstrates the close bonds of the lower gentry and merchant classes of the growing urban areas to the management and maintenance of local agricultural landscapes.⁶⁷ This bond in turn translates into social and military power, as the “burgeys” are able to enact violent political change against the desires of their duke. Hirtan emerges as an incapable lord because, regardless of his battlefield prowess, he fails to protect or adequately control his vassals’ lands, leading to his own death. Such a scene speaks directly to concerns regarding the changing nature of aristocratic relationships with vassals and agricultural landscapes in the late fourteenth and especially fifteenth centuries. In a tale explicitly fascinated with fantasies of martial prowess, it is nevertheless “þise burgeis” that manage to “han of her were peis.” The cost of war on the landscape is too great for the common people to bear – and so bear it they will not. *Alisaunder*, then, presents in this passage an implicit acknowledgment of the power of the bond between agricultural landscape and the emerging “middle-class” or provincial urban centers. Interestingly, a shadow of this power will come back to strike Alexander down in Babylon, when a local

⁶⁶ On the “economic and social problems” driving the 1381 “Peasants’ Revolt,” see further Christopher Dyer, *Making a Living in the Middle Ages: The People of Britain 850-1520* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), pp. 286-93 (cited at p. 286). The economic significance of Alexander’s burning of the vineyards in *Alisaunder* is heavily implied, and would certainly be apparent to medieval audiences, even if vineyards themselves were decreasing in number in England in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries as the English drank more imported wine – on which see Christopher Dyer, *Everyday Life in Medieval England*, 2nd edn. (London: The Hambledon Press, 2000), p. 130.

⁶⁷ On the rising fortunes of merchants, artisans, and other townspeople in the urban areas of post plague England, despite the falling population of many such settlements and the fluctuating volume of trade in England, see for instance Dyer, *Making a Living*, pp. 298-329. On urban gardens in medieval English towns and cities, and their connections with gentry, merchants, and peasant homeowners, see also Dyer, *Everyday*, pp. 121-4. See especially Dyer’s description of the immense gardens south-west London (*Everyday*, p. 122), and his references to a 1360 controversy surrounding a royal decree to destroy gardens at Newton, in Southampton, “which would give shelter to potential French attackers” and further a “regulation [that] forbade the growing of any fruit tree tall enough to make a scaling ladder” (*Everyday*, p. 122).

bailiff charged with corruption sends him the fateful poisoned wine (ll. 7810-53)⁶⁸ – a product, literally and figuratively, of the same social forces that Alexander manipulates to topple Hirtan of Brye.

In addition to the many scenes detailing in depth or in brief Alexander's destruction of managed landscapes, the conqueror's later campaigns also demonstrate his growing ability to reshape the landscape to his own ends. I have already examined his destruction of Thebes, which resulted – purposefully or no – in its smoking crater becoming a lake. After defeating Darius and weathering the many assaults of deadly and fantastic beasts in the deserts of India, however, Alexander begins to find himself in situations that require him to rebuild the battlefield in order to win. Unsurprisingly, these environments are some of the most explicitly British of the entire text – for, the more detailed the accounts of landscape engineering become, the more they channel contemporary English perspectives on campaigning and living in their own local environments. In the process, *Alisaunder* elevates the practice of landscape design to heroic status, and imbues it with shades of Christian significance that echo the creation of the artificial lake in *Titus*. While Alexander may be a flawed hero, his endeavors in landscape engineering offer the story an opportunity to unabashedly celebrate the work of real life landscape designers and estate managers – and to act out on a broad scale some of their wildest dreams of landscape alteration.

The most prominent moment of landscape engineering in *Alisaunder* takes place as Alexander assaults the lands of Gog and Magog, particularly the capital of Magog,

⁶⁸ As Kitchel, *Critical Study*, concordantly notes, “Ironically, Alexander’s attempt to maintain law and justice in his lands causes his death[, s]ince Antipater, one of his justices . . . sends him the poisoned wine” when charged with abusing his position as bailiff (p. 41).

Taracun (“Taracumtcte”). Interestingly, Alexander decides to attack these “northern” countries instead of pursuing his intended invasion of France, Germany, and England (ll. 5935-6) – yet the landscape he encounters around Taracun seems to come directly out of England:

þe folk of þe londe herden þe sclander
Hirtan of Bryeat to hem com kyng Alisaunder.
Hij hadden warnysshed cite-tounes,
Boþe in dales and ek in dounes,
And calktrappes made ynowe,
Jn wayes and vnder wood-bowe,
Alisaunder men to afelle
And gilefullich to aquelle.
Jn to þe mores hij hem drawen,
To quede papes, to quede shawen,
Forto seke and forto slen
Of kyng Alisaunders men.
Kyng Alisaunder and his baronage
Herberewe taken, gode ryuage.
Whan hij han rested a lyte,
þe lande hij wenden to visite.
Hij founden narewe papes and li3tt fen,
Azeins hem many þousande men.
Boþe parties flungen togedres,
So doop þe hayl wiþ þe wedres.
...
Ac for hij weren in þe fen,
Kyng Alisaunder lees fele men
...
þis bataile lasted a day ri3th,
Forto it were azeins ni3th (ll. 6056-75, 6082-3, 6086-7).

Putting their intimate knowledge of the local landscape to use, the inhabitants of Magog draw Alexander’s men into the fens and moors, where the thin paths and swampy ground allow the Greeks and their allies to be split and killed via ambush and traps. The inhabitants of East Anglian fens, for one, would have been quite familiar with such

strategies.⁶⁹ Indeed, the remark that the armies came together “So doop þe hayl wiþ þe wedres” helps to emphasize the connection to an English environment. Having observed the lay of the land, Alexander nevertheless decides to attack, with disastrous results. Clearly, if he does not react to the realities of the local environment, he will be defeated by the landscape as much as the enemy troops, whose main advantage comes from their topographical position. As this point, Alexander demonstrates his ability to learn from experience⁷⁰ by calling in a vassal with a greater knowledge of landscape engineering:

Þe kyng þoo het Antiochoun,
 Þat was maister of his baroun,
 Al his folk to þe mount lede.
 He dude onon by the kynges rede –
 He blew an horne þat was yknowe.
 Þan gonne þai to þe mount drawe.
 Of hirdles and brigges hij maden flores,
 And so hij wenten jn to þe mores,
 And þere hij fouzttten and þere hij slowe
 Moo of men þan ynowe,
 And bynomen all þilk men
 Þe mores, þe shawes, and þe fen,
 And ouer dales and ouer clyuen
 To Taracuncte by strengþe hem dryuen (ll. 6088-101).

In a way familiar to medieval English audiences,⁷¹ Alexander’s troops reshape the fens to be a battlefield to their own advantage, overcoming the ecological obstacle via

⁶⁹ See H. C. Darby, *The Medieval Fenland* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1940), who notes that Ely and its surrounding fens were “a refuge for successive rebellions” (p. 106). Speaking of a series of rebellions over multiple centuries that occupied the fens and the island of Ely especially as a headquarters for looting able to hold off royal troops for years at a time, Darby notes that, although the fens gained a rebellious reputation, the rebels were almost entirely outsiders who swept in to make good use of the fens’ geography (see pp. 143-6). On literary representations of the fens as *locus amoenus* in earlier time periods, see Catherine A. M. Clarke, *Literary Landscapes and the Idea of England, 700-1400* (Cambridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 2006), pp. 36-66 and pp. 80-89.

⁷⁰ Geraldine Barnes makes a concordant point, positing that “the greatest test of Alisaunder’s prowess and *gyn* comes from the cunning people of Taracun, Gog, and Magog;” see Barnes, *Counsel and Strategy in Middle English Romance* (Cambridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 1993), pp. 102-3 (cited at p. 102).

⁷¹ See Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, pp. 106-18, for a detailed overview of causeways, bridges, and roads built through the East Anglian fens throughout the later Middle Ages. Notably, Darby’s definition of causeways

landscape engineering that turns the marshy moors into a patchwork of platforms and wooden bridges. In addition to reflecting contemporary English practices, this representation of fen reclamation not only illustrates a valid strategy for landscape or estate design, but also celebrates those who perform such work by making their literary parallels soldiers fighting against the evil denizens of Gog and Magog. *Alisaunder* here demonstrates in no uncertain terms that knowledge of how to manipulate a (recognizably English) landscape to one's advantage reaps great rewards – and suggests that even the great King Alexander would have something to learn from the environmentally savvy inhabitants of East Anglia.

As with the scene of British weather supporting the Roman assault on Jaffa in *Titus*, however, the recognizably English topography of Magog presents a problematic parallel. If the land “Of þe foule vnwrast wiȝth” (l. 6149) is the closest extended landscape description to the local environments familiar to the romance's audience, what then does that say about their own status in the Christian universe? As historic enemies of God,⁷² the peoples of Gog and Magog are among the most adversarial races encountered in *Alisaunder*, and indeed to pose a threat to the entire world, since:

For mosten hij comen to oþer londe,
 Corne and drynk and metes fonde,
 Alle þe naciouns of þe myddelerde
 He wolden don to þe swerde,
 And forfreten wiþ her teep –

accords with the description of Alexander's project in *Alisaunder*: “causeways... are in fact roads over ground of such treacherous nature that they have to be built up and strengthened with stonework or timber” (p. 106). Darby also notes how susceptible such structures were to the vagaries of weather, and how they thus required constant maintenance, especially in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries; see for example p. 109.

⁷² On the literary history of representations of Alexander the Great's interactions with Gog and Magog, see especially Andrew R. Anderson, *Alexander's Gate, Gog and Magog, and the Inclosed Nations* (Cambridge, MA: Medieval Academy of America, 1932).

Par-of Alisaunder siker beeth (ll. 6140-45).

Especially given the juxtaposition of Alexander's campaign into Magog with the postponement of his plan to invade Western Europe and England, the text appears to hold the two geographical areas in opposition. Perhaps, then, Magog emerges as an alternate England, a land of soggy fens inhabited by monsters that also appreciate the importance of understanding the strategic and practical benefits of the local landscape. Having Alexander get bogged down, so to speak, before accomplishing victory thus serves to compliment the English readers twice over, as their own experiences would give them knowledge into how one defends and develops fens. However, the recognizable landscape descriptions also serve to raise a muddy mirror to English audiences, in a way akin to *Titus'* empathetic passages of Jewish suffering in the weather-besieged cities of the Holy Land. Unlike the careful signposting of Divine intent in *Titus* – making God's will apparent to readers, if difficult to distinguish for characters within its narrative world – *Alisaunder* presents the Christian God as a force unknowable to its pagan characters except through terrifying and dangerous ecological contexts. As such, late-medieval English audiences could also empathize with the suffering of Alexander's men as they wade into hostile territory (topographically and politically), or struggle to build bridges and walkways. Indeed, their admirable accomplishments in landscape engineering may gain them victory in the fens, but fail to open up the city of Taracun to direct assault:

þe ways weren so streite and vile
þat horseman non by twenty myle
Ne mi3tten comen þe toun neize,
To greuen hem ne don ennoye,
And hij alday his [Alexander's] folk to-drowe,
Souken her blood and her flesshe gnowe (ll. 6104-9).

Despite their walkways, the Greeks and their allies find that the fens ultimately prevent them from executing a traditional siege, or indeed from getting their cavalry and horse-drawn supplies anywhere near the city. Human ingenuity has met its match in an environment that proves itself too difficult to master. Such a message would have been all too familiar for audience members watching broad swathes of land lie fallow and become reclaimed by nature in the generations following the onset of the Black Death, or for landowners that understood the frustration of attempting to put fen space to practical use. With Alexander at a stalemate, it seems that the hubris of attempting to reshape the landscape has met its match.

It is at this point, however, that the poem launches into its most hyperbolic fantasy of landscape engineering. Determined to defeat these monsters, Alexander ascends a hill to communicate with the Divine “on Sarsynes wise” (l. 6152) – and, despite his non-Christian methods, “þere hym com from heuen rede, / Hou he shulde hem destroye” (ll. 6155-6). The answer redirects Alexander’s focus from reshaping the land to harnessing the power of water. Leaving his siege, Alexander travels to a floating island-city, Meopante, in the sea “bitwene Egipte and Ynde” (l. 6160), where the inhabitants are excellent swimmers, sail pirate ships, and – most importantly – harvest and use the special clay “buttemay” or bitumen (l. 6179) to build with (see ll. 6160-200). This clay is “Stronge so yrne, touz so cyment” (l. 6167), and “þere-of hij makeþ bourse and walle” (l. 6168) and even “wyndewes closed by on gynne” (l. 6170) so that “Neuermore water comeþ þere-inne” (l. 6171). *Alisaunder* also clarifies that their water gates “ben made of

hosyers” or osiers (a small willow found in wet grounds),⁷³ “And bounden al wiþ touȝ rynde” (ll. 6176-7). In this way, the text presents the Meopantes as capable on account of their ability to use a variety of resources from their exotic natural environment to their own ends. Indeed, when Alexander visits Meopante, the inhabitants first take him on an extended journey through their aquatic realm that familiarizes Alexander (and the audience) with the natural ecosystem and even underwater topography:

þe kyng was of hardy blod,
And wiþ hem went vnder flood.
He seiȝ þe jkeres woniyng
And þe fishes lotyng,
Hou euery oþer gan mete,
And þe more þe lesse gan frete.
þe boþome of þe ce þere he knew,
Hou þe wynde roos and hou it blew,
And þe marches of þe cee, j-wys,
From helle al to Paradys (ll. 6190-99).

While the frequent repetition by the narrator that these details are “Als we fynden on her bokes” (l. 6182) helps to establish this city as extremely foreign, the experience of Alexander examining their territory allows audiences to draw more concrete parallels to their own experience. The big fish hunting the smaller fish may be somewhat clichéd, but it immediately brings to mind the economic significance of fishing throughout England, both for coastal landowners and those holding valuable fishing rights to inland ponds and rivers.⁷⁴ The survey of “þe boþome of þe ce” is fascinating, as it demonstrates the text’s understanding that political power may be illustrated by the presentation of property, with topography symbolizing one’s own social reach. It also presents the poem’s perspective on the ocean as a space whose foundation is another landscape – one that borders

⁷³ See the *MED* entry for “osier (n.),” all meanings.

⁷⁴ See again my discussion of English perspectives on fishing in Chapter 2, particularly my analysis of *Havelok the Dane*.

otherworldly realms, perhaps, but that is still part of, or at least conceivably akin to, the human world. “þe marches of þe cee... From helle al to Paradys” are more than enough to impress Alexander, who, instead of seeking to conquer the Meopantes, strikes up a business relationship with them:

Poo he had yben þere
þe mountaunce of half a zere,
He had purveyed of þe londe
Many þousande shippes, J vnderstonde,
Ful ycharged of her clay,
þat men clepeþ butumay,
þat water non ne may to-ryue,
Ne jrne ne steel ne metal to-dryue,
Who-so it tempreþ by powere,
So it askeþ on his manere (ll. 6200-209).

Alexander has found his secret weapon. While his men spend 102 days fruitlessly battling with the people of Taracun (l. 6215), the king enacts a new plan:

Wiþ help of hem of Meapant,
To stoppe þe cee of Caspias,
Wharþorou3 hij hadden her pas,
Jn and out forto ride
And robbe shippes wyde and side,
And oþer men of diuerse londe
Forto don wrong and shonde
(And out of þe londe ne mi3th ship go
Bot bitwene roches two,
Als hei3e as any man mi3th seen –
þat was two milen bitwen).
...
He þere cast butumay,
Of Meepant þat tou3 clay,
Wiþ peelers of metal stronge
þat ben an hundreþ feet longe,
And made swiche a stronge muray
þat neuere in-tyl domesday
þere ne shal shippe out passe (ll. 6217-27, 6230-36).

Building a clay dam that blocks the entire Caspian Sea, Alexander ensures that there is no way for the peoples of Gog and Magog to leave their water-circled home “Bot ouere þe mountayne to þe sky on heize” (l. 6243), and forces those evil monsters to await the coming of the Antichrist (l. 6280). In this way, Alexander manipulates natural resources, economic networks of sea trade, and the landscape of the Caspian Sea to his advantage, demonstrating a thorough understanding of a variety of practical and economic human(oid) relationships with the natural world. Since the text presents Alexander making use of sea trade to gain possession of the clay, and identifies the many ways in which the citizens of Gog and Magog depend on water trade and pirating to survive, the significance of cutting off such sea routes to the denizens of Gog and Magog resonates with the readers (many of whom also had ample experience with water-based trade).⁷⁵

While the story of Alexander building his “gate” had a long literary history preceding *Alisaunder*,⁷⁶ the Middle English account in the Laud MS echoes the manuscript’s broader themes regarding the championing of landscape engineering performed in service of God’s will. In particular, the fact that Alexander creates an enormous inland sea provides an interesting parallel to the artificial lake built by the Romans in *Titus*, which allows them to wreak God’s vengeance upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem. While *Alisaunder* is unique among Alexander narratives in presenting Alexander being “able to block the passage to the country of Gog and Magog without the help of God,”⁷⁷ he still performs God’s will in defeating or at least restricting the allies of

⁷⁵ On water-based trade in medieval Britain, see for instance Dyer, *Making a Living*, pp. 215 (rivers), 301-5 (overseas).

⁷⁶ See Anderson, *Alexander’s Gate*.

⁷⁷ Gerrit H.V. Bunt, *Alexander the Great in the Literature of Medieval Britain* (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1994), p. 24.

the Antichrist. In support of a God-approved siege, then (as in *Titus*, if less explicit), Alexander's accomplishment also designs a waterscape that allows, if not an absolute victory, for the citizens of Gog and Magog to be essentially removed from the world by virtue of the water and the mountainous landscape. Moreover, as with the Romans' use of a local guide familiar with the landscape to reshape that same topography to their own ends, so too does Alexander enlist the help of the Meopantes to employ the special bitumen clay that allows his dam to become a reality. Of course, as I stated earlier, the scale of this land- and waterscape engineering endeavor greatly dwarfs any realistic undertaking in medieval Britain, and thus would not provide an immediate, concrete parallel to everyday experience. That said, Alexander's accomplishment still elevates the endeavor of environmental design to the status of Divine work, celebrating related real-life accomplishments such as the alteration of harbors and the redesign of rivers and streams for human use.⁷⁸ This scene, then, allowed English audiences to vicariously live out fantasies of achieving absolute control over the oceans and waterways that they fished and travelled over every day – and, in the process, exposes the anxieties arising from their own inability to interpret unerringly the will of God as expressed in the variable nature of land and seascapes.

The other great engineering accomplishment of Alexander's career also occurs near the "Caspias" (l. 7078), where he finds the perfect spot to build his city, Alexandria ("Alisaunder"). Here, however, in place of Divine guidance or at least favor directing him to a savvy understanding of the landscape's ability to support his endeavors, Alexander's

⁷⁸ On such endeavors in a concordant British ecological context, see Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, pp. 147-68, and also my discussions throughout Chapter 2, above.

city-building project appears to be an attempt in the face of great adversity to insist on the ability of human beings to shape their environment. Notably, this expedition also begins and is led by “latymers” or interpreters (l. 7080) found in the area, and so relies upon the landscape knowledge and experience of locals (foreign experts in the eyes of English audiences). Yet these guides prove inept at reading the environment’s true nature. When these men “leden hym to heiȝe rochers, / To rochers and to wilderness,” then “He fonde hard waie and grete destresse” (ll. 7081-3): up in the rocks, Alexander loses thousands to the assault of strange and antagonistic highland beasts. Indeed, “Țe kyng ne ȝoled so gret damage / Neuere er in al his viage” (ll. 7114-5). High in the mountains, Alexander recognizes his greatest defeat. For the only time in his life, he is forced to flee the field, defeated by the forces of nature so near to the site of his magnificent victory over Gog and Magog:

To a wood he fleiȝ vnneȝe,
 Forto askape ȝere ȝe deȝe.
 ȝere he dude his meignee alle
 Abouten ȝe diche maken walle,
 And holde hem wiȝinne wiȝ grete wardynges,
 For doute of ȝe foule ȝinges (ll. 7116-21).

While the text does not explicitly divulge whether or not Alexander’s retreat is motivated by fear, the move he makes is inarguable the only sound tactical decision available to him. Overcome by natural forces, he seeks to establish a bastion of human fortifications within which his men can attempt to hold the non-human environment at bay.⁷⁹ Interestingly, Alexander next seems to seek a way to compensate for his recent failure by erecting an urban edifice that will demonstrate his continuing ability to

⁷⁹ See my discussion below of the parallel instance at ll. 5231-8, where, in the midst of a clear-cut forest, Alexander has his men build gigantic fires to hold off the night – with disastrous results.

dominate his surroundings. By presenting the creation of Alexandria in this context, however, *Alisaunder* undercuts the magnitude of its titular character's architectural achievement via the recent reminder of his all-too-human inability to force the natural world to obey his every whim. The city that Alexander goes on to craft, then, while suitably impressive, nevertheless becomes a symbol of his misguided perception of his position in the global and local ecological contexts. Having rested within his makeshift encampment and written for reinforcements, Alexander sets out in an attempt to reinscribe his authority on the local landscape:

Whan þe kyng haþ message sent,
 Þe cuntre to seen he is went.
 On his honde stant a speruers.
 He seeþ faire medes and ek ryuers,
 Large wodes and ek heiȝe,
 Gode londe, aysee cuntre.
 On a pleyne he cheseþ a place
 Þat biclippeþ a mychel space.
 Sex and sixty milen aboute
 It contened, saunz doute.
 Abouten he maked a wal stronge
 Þat sex and sixty milen was longe.
 Wiþinne þe walles he dude house
 And made þe streets merueillouse.
 Of his gentyl-men he herited þare,
 And þo þat of þe londe ware,
 And ȝaf þe toun a name of prys –
 Alisaunder, after hym-seluen, jwys,
 Þat is now cite þe noblest
 Of Ynde londe, and þe best (ll. 7130-49).

Alisaunder's landscape description, so recently at pains to establish an alien land of rocks, mountains, and monsters, here reverts back to an idealized topography that

could fit into the more fanciful accounts of European or even English estates.⁸⁰ Off once more “þe cuntre to seen,” Alexander takes the audience on a tour through a landscape full of economically and aesthetically significant features: forests for wood, charcoal, and hunting; fields for agriculture and riding; meadows (near water) for haying, and rivers for water-trade, fishing, and transportation. To demonstrate his ownership and control over this abundance of literal and figurative natural wealth, Alexander encloses a space the size of a small county, and fills it with both his followers and the indigenous human population. Such a diversity of inhabitants provides testimony to the extent of his political clout. Yet, in attempting to write himself onto the natural world – indeed, his naming of the city after himself makes this point almost painfully clear – Alexander provides a perverse reversal of Christ writing in the dirt at the opening of *Titus*. Here, instead of God, a recently shamed man (a pagan nonetheless) seeks to impose a mask of civilization onto the native topography – a mask that will reflect his own power back to him, and reassure him of his place as ruler of the world. The poem cannot help but admire Alexander’s achievement, since it marks the city as “þe noblest” and “þe best” settlement “Of Ynde londe.” Yet the parallel with Christ in the Laud MS text of *Alisaunder* is damning. Unknowingly, Alexander has written not a symbol of his power, but a representation of his hubris: namely, his inability to recognize or interpret the many messages of human limitation the natural world of the East has consistently sent him. In effect, the king has built his own Tower of Babel, a symbol of hubris – albeit without an

⁸⁰ See for example the concordant image of an ideal estate from *Partonope of Blois*, discussed above in Chapter 2.

explicitly linguistic nature.⁸¹ Alexandria, model estate and city that it is, thus ultimately serves as the nail in Alexander's coffin, as it exposes and serves as a lasting reminder that, despite his ability to engineer the landscape to his own ends, the great king fails to comprehend fully the Christian Creator behind those ecological features he can only understand as territory to conquer.

Notably, Alexander's attempt to overshadow his recent losses in his highland "battles" against nature fails. Porus, having learned of Alexander's impending doom as related by the Trees of the Sun and Moon (ll. 7024-9), hears of the conqueror's defeat by the mountain monsters and seizes the opportunity to exploit Alexander's weakness. He informs the assembled lords of India that "Wilde bestes habbeþ yslawe / His [Alexander's] gode kniȝttes and to-drawe /... in wilde wast" (ll. 7182-3, 7185), and sends messengers to Alexander informing him of the revolt. Describing the course of their journey, the messengers seem to ride across a British landscape:

Pise dukes riden in her waye
By dounes, by dales, many journeye.
Alisaunder romeþ in his toun,
And deuisseþ to his masoun

⁸¹ The image of the Tower of Babel was well known to contemporary English readers. See for instance John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, where, in the *Prologue*, he notes:

That Nembrot such emprise nom,
Whan he the Tour Babel on heihte
Let make, as he that wolde feihte
Agein the hihe Goddes myht,
Wherof divided anon ryht
Was the langage in such entente,
Ther wiste non what other mente,
So that thei myhten nocht procede (ll. 1018-25).

This citation is taken from John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, 3 Vols., 2nd edn., ed. Russell A. Peck (with Latin translations by Andrew Galloway) (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2006), Vol. I. Although in *Alisaunder* the city of Alexandria may not be overtly linked to issues of discord spread by difference in language, such issues would clearly be applicable to the diverse empire Alexander seeks to control (and that will immediately fracture following his death).

þe toures maken and þe torels,
Vavtes, alures, and þe kirkels.
þan comen þise dukes swiftly flynge,
And brouȝte Alisaunder tydyng (ll. 7198-205).

That Alexander is in the midst of charting, planning, and building his city when the messengers arrive is entirely appropriate, as it highlights his shift in priorities over the course of the poem's second half. After defeating Darius, his major political adversary, Alexander has spent thousands of lines doing battle more against the natural world and monstrous races of the East than any human opponent. His focus on city building here thus illustrates his warped priorities: as a leader, he should have continued to focus on the political wellbeing and unity of his vassals, and not stopped to conduct such a massive building project in person. While the poem here does not necessarily condemn such a vast undertaking, it does present via juxtaposition the political costs of failing to delegate issues of city planning and estate management to vassals and household members. *Alisaunder* adds to these issues by having the messengers include "citees makeþ, walles rare" (l. 7224) among the crimes that Alexander has committed in India (according to Porus and his allies), demonstrating how these vassal lords have been upset by the foreign king's attempt to impose markers of his military and political might onto their local landscape.

Alexander responds to Porus' demand that he quit the country with a "leighȝe smale" (l. 7232), and suggests instead that he and Porus fight a duel to see who shall be king (ll.7250-9). Although he desires to do what is best for his and for Porus' barons by minimizing casualties (ll. 7258-9), Alexander's approach to the revolt of India is akin to his strategy for building a city, or plotting an estate: he will do it himself. This parallel is

again emphasized as, immediately after answering the messengers, he takes them on a tour of the new city to demonstrate his wealth and power:

Wel he knew þoo barouns tweye,
And shewed hem al þe cuntreye,
Of his folk þe pyte,
And þartyre of þat city (ll. 7260-3).

Alexander attempts to demonstrate via performance and spectacle that he understands the nature of his local environment, and can exploit that nature to his own ends, crafting great cities and enclosing broad swathes of rich countryside. That Alexander naturally turns to such activity as a way to impress his enemies demonstrates the text's awareness of the importance of landscape management and appearance for crafting a noble identity. Moreover, Alexander will go on to defeat Porus in single combat, demonstrating once again his martial might – although it will prove the most difficult military engagement of his entire career (ll. 7372-7415).⁸² Yet the king misreads his local accomplishments as representing his dominance over all of the natural world, and indeed the Divine forces behind it. Even the political master of the world misreads his own vassals' needs and loyalties, and manages to send thousands of his soldiers to fruitless, violent deaths in the East's mountains and deserts. Nature remains an enigma, despite one's power in the moment – and Alexander's death by poisoning, and the immediate collapse of his empire, show the transience of human accomplishment in the face of Creation.

Throughout *Alisaunder*, Alexander retains a thoroughly anthropocentric view of the universe that discounts not only the power of the natural world, but that of the God

⁸² See Kitchel, *Critical Study*, pp. 31-2 on the difficulty of this fight and the attribution of Alexander's win to his chivalry and nobility, instead of his normal martial prowess.

behind it. While driven at times by the curiosity to see natural wonders,⁸³ Alexander still interprets them as items to be collected, territory to be owned. Even at the Trees of the Sun and Moon, a famous set of living landmarks from a variety of medieval travelogues,⁸⁴ Alexander seeks to find a way out of his pronounced fate: having learned the time and place of his death from first the Tree of the Sun and then the Tree of the Moon, he returns to the former tree in order to learn the identity of his killer, so as to cheat death (ll. 6928ff.). The tree provides but half an answer, telling him the exact date (March 24th) and cause (poison) of his death, and then condemning him for asking too much: “Nomore, Ich hote þee, aske þou me! / Goo out of oure wode snelle, / For nomore nyl J þee telle” (ll. 6961-3). These trees, of course, represent the natural world’s connection between the mortal, time-bound realm of human experience and the otherworldly realms of God and fate, which transcend time. The landscape of the Far East thus emerges as a wealth of knowledge regarding the fate of humankind, as well as a repository of information regarding those who have gone before.⁸⁵ The fact that Alexander is forced to leave this “holy” landscape (ll. 6780-92; the land is noted to be “holy” at l. 6790) represents in turn the distance that he moves away from understanding the messages that the natural world carries for him. From here, Alexander will go on to his disastrous expedition in the Caspian Mountains, and then to building the edifice of Alexandria – endeavors that demonstrate his outright failure or provide an empty symbol

⁸³ Kitchel, *Critical Study*, notes that “Alexander alone among the great romance heroes is motivated, at times, by nothing more than curiosity” (p. 51); see also pp. 54-5, for examples of Alexander being motivated by curiosity.

⁸⁴ See for example ll. 2647-52 of T. Kohanski and C. D. Benson, eds., *The Book of Sir John Mandeville* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007). This text identifies the two trees as “the which men sayn ben trees of the sonne and the of the mone that spake to Kyng Alisaundre and told hym of his dedes” (ll. 2647-9).

⁸⁵ See further my discussion of the romance and ballad traditions surrounding *Thomas of Erceldoune* and *Thomas the Rhymer* in Chapter 5, below.

of his adversarial relationship with the natural world. In his desire to reach the level of a God, Alexander misunderstands the nature of his own relationship with and place in Creation. Instead of leading us on a tour of his conquests, he instead unwittingly charts the bounds of God's domain, and reveals in contrast the insignificant scale of even his most spectacular accomplishments of landscape design.

In closing, it is important to reiterate shortcomings of the primarily global perspective that Alexander seeks to maintain on the natural world. Throughout *Alisaunder*, laborers (particularly those with Biblical professions), closer to the natural resources they harvest and manage, demonstrate a greater awareness of how human survival depends upon an understanding of one's local environment. When Alexander charges suddenly into a river in full armor, only the medical knowledge of a simple fisherman can save him, in a scene that the Middle English poet takes pains to explain he altered from his sources to highlight the good nature of the laborer (ll. 3481-517). Later on, lost in the deserts of India, his men and animals dying of thirst, Alexander stumbles upon a black lake whose poisonous waters would have slain his entire army had not an angel disguised as a palmer arrived and demonstrated how a local herb served as the water's antidote (ll. 5041-80). Soon after, desperate for water once more, Alexander comes across another fisherman, who points the Greek army through a forest to a river (ll. 5207-24). Following these directions to the river, Alexander finds water, and immediately orders his men to set great fires to keep the night at bay:

þe kyng dude onon afelle
Many þousand okes, Ich telle,
Beches, birches, of þe fairest,
And hete sette on fire on hast.
Hij maden fyres vertuous

Fyue hundreþ, vche gret als an hous,
For þe kyng wolde haue swiche liȝth
He nere bitrayed vpon þat niȝth (ll. 5231-8).

Together with “two þousande laumpes of gold and on” (l. 5244), these bonfires “casten also mychel liȝth / As by day þe sonne briȝth” (ll. 5245-6). This wholesale destruction of a notably British sounding forest (given the list of trees provided) provokes the attack of wave after wave of hideous beasts, from whose assaults Alexander’s army must subsequently be saved by yet more alien creatures coming to their (incidental) rescue (ll. 5247ff). In great contrast to the fishermen and holy palmer that have assisted him with knowledge of the natural world, then, Alexander seeks to dominate nature via destruction and physical might, clear-cutting the forest in a way that would have made the owners of carefully managed British woodlands cringe at the waste. Here, for one of the first times in the text, the might of the natural world appears to respond directly to Alexander’s claim for authority – and the fact that he must rely on animals to save him from the forces he provokes should prove that the natural world is not his alone to control. Yet, as Alexander’s future expeditions demonstrate, the conqueror fails to note the power of these new (or familiar) environments. Unlike the humble laborers who survive by becoming acquainted with the characteristics of a particular biome or local topography, Alexander seeks to consume the entire world – and demonstrates the folly of such hubris. Implicit in this presentation, then, is the view that laborers and managers possess real and valuable knowledge of the natural world’s importance to maintaining human lives and endeavors – a lesson that awaits the careful reader, even if Alexander may ultimately fail to grasp it.

In the end, the bird that heaven sends to order that Alexander's corpse be buried in Alexandria after his death (ll. 7990-8000) chooses an especially appropriate memorial to the fallen campaigner. As a divine messenger of the natural world, this bird directs that Alexander's body be laid to rest in the empty symbol of his attempt to reshape the world in his own image, and to rewrite nature as his servant. That this city stands juxtaposed to the mountainous stage of the conqueror's worst defeat provides a memorable monument to the scale of the natural world's power, and the importance of seeking to understand and obey the Divine will that directs that world. While the animals may be foreign and distant, the power of nature to disrupt human affairs is all too familiar. As such, the fact that Alexander is laid to rest in an idealized, Anglicized landscape is also especially appropriate – for it reminds readers of the fact that, no matter how successful their own forays into estate management, the might of the natural world eclipses even the greatest human's reach. Such an underlying anxiety regarding the ability of one to determine the proper place of human beings within creation by reading the symbols of ecological phenomena thus permeates both the major texts of the Laud MS, and offers a window onto the daily concerns that even the most exotic landscapes of foreign romance could not allow late medieval English audiences to escape.

CHAPTER 5: THE FOREIGN AT HOME

Landscape in the Ballad Romances¹ of Scotland and the Anglo-Scottish Border

The previous chapters in this study have focused on delineating the many ways in which late-medieval British, but especially English, romances represented human relationships with the environment, with a particular emphasis on landscape description as a locus of such analysis. Moving from boundaries, natural resources, and waste lands to waterscapes and seashores, and finally across the sea to the Holy Lands and foreign climes at the heart of many heroic narratives, I have sought to elucidate the many ways in which these often popular texts reflected or responded to contemporary concerns regarding the economic – and at times ethical – treatment of landscape features and local environments as the necessary foundation of an agricultural society. Landscape was valuable – and concerns over the utilization and distribution of that value are inescapable in even the fantastic worlds of romance.

Having examined a variety of purportedly foreign landscapes in these texts, in closing I would like to turn to a body of texts explicitly concerned with local settings: the

¹ I adopt this phrase, “ballad romances,” from Emily B. Lyle, *Fairies and Folk: Approaches to the Scottish Ballad Tradition* (Trier: WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2007), p. 93, where she uses it to identify *Sir Colling the Knycht* as a romance text shaped by the influence of ballads about the same narrative. I use this term to refer more broadly to romances that are associated with ballad traditions, or that demonstrate pronounced influences of ballad style.

ballad romances of Scotland and the Anglo-Scottish Border zone.² Of course, I have already examined some texts whose provenance links them to this area, but in different contexts. Moreover, Randy Schiff has demonstrated that fifteenth-century romances such as *The Awntyrs off Arthure* and *Golagros and Gawane*, along with the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, may be identified as belonging to a group of alliterative texts composed in a “Revival” zone roughly synonymous with the Border region.³ Schiff identifies these texts as works “informed by the ceaseless cycle of possession and dispossession that haunted the Anglo-Scottish borderlands,”⁴ and which “reveal a nostalgia for the bravado and localism of war-torn times” in the face of national consolidation efforts by England and Scotland, at the same time that “they also speak to the devastation and misery produced by an economic world built upon violence.”⁵ Building on this characterization of these romances’ relationship to their tumultuous, late-medieval Border context, my analysis investigates how some of the issues that Schiff identifies are linked to representations of landscape in contemporary romances and their associated ballad traditions, while also

² While I will often refer to this area simply as the “Border,” I do so with an understanding of the fact that such a term denotes not just an arbitrary line drawn across particular topographical features, but rather a broad area encompassing much of northern England and Southern Scotland – and thereby a variety of highland and lowland environments. As Richard Firth Green notes, “though physical features (a river or a range of hills) may serve to demarcate the political or military reach of a dominant state, these will rarely mark the full extent of its linguistic, cultural, or institutional reach, nor will they completely sequester it from the influence of the world beyond. Frontiers, in such circumstances, are often better thought of as zones than simple lines on a map;” see “The Border Writes Back” in *The Anglo-Scottish Border and the Shaping of Identity, 1300-1600*, eds. Mark P. Bruce and Katherine H. Terrell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 103-19, at p. 103.

³ As Schiff posits, “the *Awntyrs* and *Golagros* resist classification by nation and are read more readily as texts tied to a militarized borderlands, broadly conceived, from southern Scotland to Yorkshire, in the east, with all of Cumberland in the west;” see Randy P. Schiff, “Borderland Subversions: Anti-imperial Energies in *The Awntyrs off Arthure* and *Golagros and Gawane*,” *Speculum* 84.3 (2009): pp. 613-32, at p. 615.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 632.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 613. For more on the economics of “the brutal and fluid world of border warfare, where profit regularly trumped patriotism” (p. 613), see further Schiff’s discussion at “Borderland,” p. 622. For an examination of the economic significance of landscape description in another fifteenth-century romance that Schiff attributes to the Border region, see also his “Sovereign Exception: Pre-National Consolidation in *The Tail of Rauf Coilyear*” in *The Anglo-Scottish Border and the Shaping of Identity, 1300-1600*, eds. Mark P. Bruce and Katherine H. Terrell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 33-50.

delineating the ways in which these ballad romances both proudly and anxiously attribute such a violent historical context to the nature of the local landscape itself. Such a brief analysis as my own cannot hope to be entirely comprehensive. Instead, my focus here is to examine how three specific traditions of texts – those concerning *Sir Colling*, *Eger and Grime*, and *Thomas the Rhymer* – demonstrate an evolving view of the role of landscape in romantic literature at the close of the Middle Ages in Britain. This selection of “northern” narratives straddles the boundary between the late medieval and early modern periods, and even includes a scattering of nineteenth century ballad survivals.

Consequently, examining the various iterations of these particular works will allow me to analyze how the economic concerns of landscape scenes from other romance texts evolved into an obsession with marking identifiably local landscapes as spaces of violence, drama, and encounters with the alien, superhuman forces of nature. Again, examples of many such themes can be found in earlier romances, and it is not my argument that these northern texts are utterly unique in engaging with such concerns. For instance, I examine how the *Thomas the Rhymer* narratives clearly developed from a variety of earlier texts and stories from numerous “Otherworld Vision Literature” traditions. Yet the focus on the boundaries of fairy otherworlds and topography as an indicator of both genre and everyday experience becomes particularly pronounced in these works. As such, this chapter seeks to examine how the Scottish and Border landscapes of hilly moors, rocky shores, and violent family feuds is recreated in the ballad romances of *Colling*, *Eger*, and *Thomas* – and chart how these texts communicated a set of compelling iterations of the northern, British landscape as a realm of fantastic topography to post-medieval audiences both north and south of the Border zone.

Economic value in landscape description, of course, does not disappear; but it is joined by an even more explicit characterization of the British landscape as uniquely integral to the creation of romantic narrative.

Labor, Narrative, and Landscape in Sir Colling and Its Ballad Tradition

Introducing the tendency to meditate on the intimate relationship between Border audiences and their local environment is the late-medieval/early-modern ballad romance, *Sir Colling*. This extremely condensed Scottish narrative, as a number of scholars have noted, straddles boundaries of time and genre. The earliest known copies of this text are *Sir Colling the Knycht*, a sixteenth-century Scottish survival (Edinburgh, National Records of Scotland MS RH13/35), and *Sir Cawline*, a seventeenth-century English version (copied in the famous Percy Folio, British Library MS Additional 27879).⁶ Emily Lyle describes these earliest versions as “ballad romances,” and further suggests that both derive from an earlier, late-medieval Scottish romance.⁷ The survival of the story via oral transmission is also well attested by two nineteenth-century ballads that appear to derive from the earlier, Scottish text.⁸ In sum, *Sir Colling* provides a fascinatingly hybrid text

⁶ In naming these texts, I follow the titles given by Rhiannon Purdie in her edition of the MS RH13/35 text in *Shorter Scottish Medieval Romances: Florimond of Albany, Sir Colling the Knycht, King Orphius, Roswall and Lillian*, Scottish Text Society Fifth Series, no. 11 (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2013). For a description of the manuscript and its original social context, see further pp. 33-43. The original rediscoverer of this version of the text was Marion Stewart, who published her findings as “A Recently-Discovered Manuscript: ‘*ane taill of Sir colling ye kny*,’” *Scottish Studies* 16 (1972): pp. 23-39, and again the following year in *King Orphius, Sir Colling, The Brother’s Lament, Litel Musgray: Poems from the Scottish Manuscripts of c. 1586 and c. 1680* (Cambridge, UK: Ninth of May Publications, 1973).

⁷ See Lyle’s *Fairies and Folk*, pp. 85-102, quoted at p. 93. Her argument hinges on using correspondences between the two versions to posit an earlier romance form for many of the shared scenes and stanzas.

Lyle’s point about the ballad’s origins is also cited by Purdie, *Shorter*, p. 15.

⁸ On which see Lyle, *Fairies and Folk*, pp. 85, 101-2, and also Purdie, *Shorter*, pp. 14-16. The relevant ballads, along with an early edition of the Percy folio’s *Sir Cawline*, are printed as *Sir Cawline* (Child 61), II:56-63, and further notes at III:508 and IV:463. Citations of ballad(s) and their variant designations are taken from Francis J. Child, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, 5 Vols. (New York: Dover

that allows for analysis of how the conceptions of landscape explored in other late-medieval Scottish romances like *Eger and Grime* translated into the ballad form.

I shall primarily examine the earliest version of the tale, the ballad romance *Sir Colling the Knycht* (hereafter *Sir Colling*). However, I will also note the survival or amendment of significant landscape details in the later *Sir Cawline*, as such features demonstrate how the topography of the narrative's setting helps to fit the text into new locales. Despite its short length of 246 lines, *Sir Colling* manages to present a robust and action-packed narrative.⁹ In brief, the story is composed of three episodes; for, once the hero admits his love to the local lord's daughter, he goes on to face three adversaries: 1) an elfin knight and his lady; 2) a marauding giant, come from the sea; and 3) a lion smuggled into court by a traitorous steward. After overcoming the first challenge, Colling is promised the lord's daughter's hand in marriage; the second encounter interrupts the marriage itself; and after the third, Colling's wife bears him sixteen children before passing away. While fairly simple in its structure, this fast-paced narrative nonetheless allows space for some notable considerations of landscape. In particular, the countryside surrounding the hill where Colling encounters the elfin knight demands much of the narrator's attention, and betrays in its description a number of implicit attitudes toward the effects of violent contest on the land itself – and further, those who manage, work, or survive upon the resources of that landscape. In such a way, *Sir Colling* demonstrates some of the same concerns as its medieval forebears – and, as I shall show, manages to weave these details into a story that reflects not only the historically-contingent interests

Publications, Inc., 1965 [Orig. 1882-1894]). Page numbers from this series are cited in the form "Vol#.Page#."

⁹ Citations of his text, unless otherwise noted, are taken from Purdie, *Shorter*, pp. 104-11.

of its original manuscript provenance, but also resonated for the audiences of both the seventeenth-century English of *Sir Cawline* and the nineteenth-century Scottish ballad renditions.

Rhiannon Purdie, in her edition of the text, presents arguments by herself and other scholars that place the poem in a tradition of self-aggrandizing propaganda put out by the Campbell family of the earls of Argyll.¹⁰ In particular, Purdie notes how the poem's initial mention of the Bruce's early fourteenth-century campaign in Ireland links the text to the time of the Campbell ancestor Sir Collin, who served with the Bruce and was the first Campbell to be named in legal records as holding land near the Loch Awe in Argyll.¹¹ Moreover, the arrival of the three-headed giant may allude to the Campbell's ongoing role in subjugating the Gaelic peoples of Western Scotland on behalf of the Scottish crown – an image of themselves that the Campbells continued to perpetuate into the sixteenth century.¹² The convincing work of Purdie and other scholars thus provides a real-world location for the origins of the romance, however hyperbolic the tale itself became. It also suggests the geographic context that would have been evoked for late-medieval and early-modern audiences of the romance: the rocky western coast of Argyll, as well as the long, much-castled shores of the Loch Awe just inland from that coast. It is thus no surprise that beaches and waterside hills dominate the terrain of the brief narrative, as such details reflect the distinguishing characteristics of the landscape from which the text originally emerged. Of course, the topography evoked in this brief romance, while startlingly clear at points, nonetheless remains vague enough – the lack of

¹⁰ Purdie, *Shorter*, pp. 18-21.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 20-1.

place names in this version being a significant factor – that the story's stage could be mapped onto a variety of similar environments throughout Scotland and northern England. The immediacy of the landscape as recognizably local, then, emerges as one of its most powerful characteristics – and one which served to capture the attention of a variety of different audiences by imbuing recognizable terrain with the aura of romance.

The text first explicitly addresses the landscape setting of the narrative when the local lord's daughter confronts the lovesick Sir Colling at his bedside. Explaining the reason for his illness, Sir Colling asks for the chance to prove himself by feat of arms, and gain the lady's love (since, as he is "sa sempill ane knycht / I may not be thy [her] peir" [ll. 52-3]). The lady responds by anchoring the concept of such a martial contest to a specific place in the local landscape, even before she evokes the identity of the proposed adversary:

Scho sayis, 'Vpone 3one allreche hill¹³
Pair on standis ane thorn:
And 3e wald valk ane vinter nicht
And baldlie blaw 3our horne,
Ane alreche knycht is mikill of mycht
Will compeir 3ow biforne.
Pair com newer ane away with lyf
Sen þe first tyme þat I vas borne' (ll. 56-63).

The scene that the lady describes sounds akin to many medieval and later stories of entrances to the fairy otherworld, or the settings for encounters with fairy knights. For instance, the specification of the season and the sound of a blowing horn that she describes may call to mind the end of Thomas Chestre's *Sir Launfal*, wherein the eponymous hero returns each year upon a certain day, announcing by the loud neighing

¹³ As Purdie notes here, fading in the manuscript leaves the last word as nearly indistinguishable, with only the final "-ll" visible; however, all modern editors have completed the word as "hill" here, based on the context.

of his horse that he will joust any comer in the name of his fairy mistress.¹⁴ Gervase of Tilbury, writing in the early thirteenth century, records an account of the knight Osbert Fitz Hugh encountering a fairy knight at midnight within the Iron Age hillfort ruins atop Wandlebury Hill in Cambridge that also shares details of *Sir Colling's* setting, adversary, and chronology.¹⁵ *Sir Colling's* hill may not contain the ruins of an old fort, but, as I shall demonstrate, descriptions of its topography and vegetation are integral to establishing the narrative's identity, linking it both to other fairy texts and to the area from which it originally emerged.

The association of the hawthorn tree (*Crataegus monogyna* or a related variety) with fairy gates is well noted in Scottish and North English folk narratives.¹⁶ Widespread throughout Europe, the hawthorn grows quickly and heartily in waste lands, and was and still is an integral hedge plant.¹⁷ As Susan Eberly has aptly demonstrated, the hawthorn existed as a prominent literary and folk symbol in the Middle Ages, representing the contrasting concepts of worldly, carnal lust, in the figure of ancient Greek wedding and medieval English May Day garlands, and the suffering of Christ via the crown of thorns.

¹⁴ See the penultimate stanza of *Sir Launfal* in Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury, eds., *The Middle English Breton Lays* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995).

¹⁵ See Gervase of Tilbury, *Otia Imperialia*, eds. and trans. S. E. Banks and J. W. Binns (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), pp. 668–73.

¹⁶ See Purdie, *Shorter*, p. 215, n. 57, and further the number of references there, which note the thorn's frequent association in early-modern times with both fairies and witches. James Hardy, ed., *The Denham Tracts*, 2 Vols. (London: David Nutt, for the Folklore Society, 1895), Vol. II, pp. 136–7, relates a brief Northumberland account from the nineteenth century describing how, in the recent past, "there was not a solitary hawthorn tree away out on the green hills, standing amid its circuit of fine cropped grass, that was not witness to the fairy revel and dance held beneath its encircling branches in the twilight or by the pale light of the moon." Similarly, a lowland Scots' folk tale relates how a farm "lad" who was plowing a field was rewarded with food and wisdom by the local fairies in return for carefully avoiding plowing through their trysting place, which had a hawthorn tree in the center; see Thomas Keightley, *The Fairy Mythology, Illustrative of the Romance and Superstition of Various Countries* (London: George Bell & Sons, 1878), pp. 352–3. Linking the land to prophecy is further discussed below, where I analyze the traditions surrounding *Thomas the Rhymer* and *Thomas of Erceldoune*.

¹⁷ See Paul Sterry, *Collins Complete Guide to British Trees* (London: Harper Collins, 2007), pp. 234–7.

The hawthorn was also well known as an excellent grafting plant, linking it to the traditions associating “ympe trees” with both the suffering of Christ and the unity of the Trinity, as well as encounters with the fairy or elvish otherworld.¹⁸ Hawthorn also serves as a particularly hot-burning firewood, making it practically valuable as both fuel and fence, while its blossoms and fruit were used in a variety of medicinal recipes, including those healing wounds inflicted by thorns themselves.¹⁹ Indeed, hawthorn blossoms were an integral element of many Anglo-Norman and English recipes through at least the fifteenth century.²⁰ However, Celtic tradition held that “it was unlucky, if not fatal, to cut down these shrubs,” perhaps because their flowers’ exude a “scent of death” – demonstrating yet another element of hybridity, or the grafting of different traditions, atop the valued but enigmatic hawthorn.²¹ As a result of juxtaposed symbolic and practical values, the hawthorn unsurprisingly serves as an apt location for encountering the elven knight: at once familiar and alien, natural and artificial, worldly and religious,

¹⁸ Susan S. Eberly, “A Thorn Among the Lilies: The Hawthorn in Medieval Love Allegory,” *Folklore* 100.1 (1989): pp. 41-52, esp. pp. 41-3. On the tradition of grafted or “ympe” trees tying British romances to Christian iconography of the grafted tree as a symbol of the suffering and redemption of Christ and the Trinity, see especially Sharon Coolidge, “The Grafted Tree in *Sir Orfeo*: A Study in the Iconography of Redemption,” *Ball State University Forum* 23 (1982): pp. 62-8, also cited by Eberly, “A Thorn,” p. 52, n. 11. South of the Border, Henry VII adopted a crowned hawthorn as part of his royal badge, which Virginia K. Henderson argues was a way for him to tap into the potent religious symbolism surrounding the connection between the crown of thorns and the common tree; see her article “Retrieving the ‘Crown in the Hawthorn Bush’: The Origins of the Badges of Henry VII,” *Traditions and Transformations in Late Medieval England*, eds. Bouglas Biggs, Sharon D. Michalove, and A. Compton Reeves (Boston: Brill, 2002), pp. 237-59, particularly pp. 254-9 (where she shifts from a discussion of roses and rosebushes in general to hawthorns in particular). As Henderson notes, “the image of the crown-encircled rose-tree may have given rise to the legend of the hawthorn bush of Bosworth, rather than the reverse” (p. 259), once the religious significance of the thorn tree was largely lost in the Reformation.

¹⁹ Eberly, “A Thorn,” pp. 42-3.

²⁰ Hawthorn serves as a thickening agent or main ingredient in pottages and meat garnishes; see Constance B. Hieatt and Brenda M. Hosington, “From *Espinee* to *Sambocade*: Flowers in the Recipes of Medieval England,” *Petits propos Culinaires* 59 (1998): pp. 28-36, esp. pp. 28-31.

²¹ See the entry “hawthorn” in Maria Leach and Jerome Fried, eds., *Funk and Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1972), pp. 485-6, quoted at p. 486. Eberly also cites this source, at “A Thorn,” p. 52, n. 7, on the corpse-like or deathly scent of the hawthorn’s flowers.

the hawthorn delineates the boundaries of fields at the same time that it embodies a wall (and thus a connection point) between different aspects of the landscape's identity (as mortal stage and immortal entity). The everyday value of the hawthorn as a marker of agricultural space and as a possible fuel also adds a layer of economic competition to the encounter between Colling and the elf – a point to which I shall return below, in my discussion of the fight itself.

At this moment in *Sir Colling*, the elevation of the hill helps to make the spot stand out, quite literally, against the largely undistinguished backgrounds that have gone mostly unspoken in the tale thus far. Moreover, the striking adjective of “alliche/alreche,” a form of “eldritch,”²² imbues this hill with an otherworldly liminality from the onset, calling to mind such famous topographical features as the Eildon Hills of *Thomas the Rhymer*, or perhaps narrative-rich landmarks more local to a particular audience. As Henderson and Cowan, speaking of Scottish conceptions of fairyland, have noted, “placenames reflect mentalities as well as toponymic information;” thus, “placenames and landscapes can also be seen to incorporate and reflect the beliefs and ideas of the people.”²³ Landscape first emerges in *Sir Colling*, then, as a border to another realm of existence; heretofore unmentioned, the hills and trees around Sir Colling's castle

²² See both the *OED* and *DSL* entries for “eldritch.”

²³ Lizanne Henderson and Edward J. Cowan's *Scottish Fairy Belief: A History* (East Lothian: Tuckwell Press, 2001), at p. 42. See further their discussion of anthropological and folkloric approaches to defining Elfland as a place of liminality, or a border between “known” and “unknown or dangerous” spaces, at pp. 39-45, esp. p. 40. Their comparison of Scottish accounts of fairies to work on myths leads them to posit that “fairy belief is also demarcated by a temporally and spatially specific geography,” both in ballads and particularly in Scottish witch trial accounts from the seventeenth century (p. 43). While I agree that such a perspective is certainly demonstrated in *Sir Colling*'s obsessive concentration on delineating the space of the thorn hill (Henderson and Cowan mention *Sir Cawline*'s thorn hill in passing on p. 40 as an example of a liminal fairy space), I also argue that the introduction of that space through the lady's narrative associates that topographical feature with a realm of otherworldly, yet still terrestrial, experience beyond the scope of the particular time at which the protagonist can encounter the elfin challenger.

first appear when that pseudo-urban, decidedly human space must be set aside for landscape that allows for violent encounters.

Beyond just a division of “cultured” and “wild” space, however, this move serves to highlight the significance of the landscape features as they are introduced, imbuing them with a history of narrative that reaches beyond the particular story of *Sir Colling*. In this regard, it is especially notable that the first mention of a landscape feature is from the mouth of the lady, a character within the story – for her description of the landscape places it already within this larger framework of an explanatory story merely gestured at here, one whose temporal reach extends long before her (or presumably Sir Colling’s) lifetime. The thorn-topped hill thus becomes an ancient landmark at once both immediately familiar and alluringly alien, as the lady’s tale casts the landscape which that hill stands in for as the boundary between the brief mortal experiences of human beings and otherworldly expanses of time and space – a realm just beyond human experience that the landscape both obscures from, and connects to, the human world within the castle. Despite its small, focused iteration at this point, then, the landscape of the single hill nonetheless gestures towards a sense of the Scottish landscape as at best only partly knowable by its human inhabitants. Again, it is notable that the story told by the lady is what anchors this otherwise mundane topographical feature to a realm of mystery – a move which suggests that landscape itself invites and necessitates narrative at the same time as its inexpressible scale ultimately escapes an explanation more exact than its status as “allreche.” The tale’s audiences may have been intimately familiar with local hills and thorn trees that they passed or used frequently in their everyday lives; but as the landscape swallows bodies buried after death, so too could narratives suggest that the

everyday environment contained an identity – Nature’s identity – alongside (and perhaps antagonistic toward) that audience’s own.

In *Sir Cawline*, this initial presentation of the hill-space remains largely unaltered, although some cosmetic details of the encounter with the “eldrige king” (l. 66)²⁴ are changed. Once again, it is the lady that describes the setting for the encounter, although here it is after she demands that the hero perform a feat of daring (unlike the offer he provides in *Sir Colling*):

Upon Eldrige Hill there growes a thorne,
Upon the mores brodinge;
And wold you, sir knight, wake there all night
To day of the other morninge? (ll. 62-5).

The significance of the hill in the English text derives not only from its role as a space whose nature is constructed through narrative (presented by the words of the lady), but also from the fact that the hill itself can be used as a catch-pin to associate the tale with both other texts and other real world locations (the Eildon Hill where Thomas the Rhymer meets an Elf Queen, for instance, comes to mind; see my discussion in Section III, below). Of course, “Eldrige Hill,” topped with a thorn and rising from broad moors, remains vague enough to map onto a variety of northern English environments. Consequently, the hill in *Sir Cawline* serves a sort of inter- and intra-textual double-duty, linking the narrative to others related to interactions with otherworldly royalty and famous border topography while also betraying the tendency to map stories onto local landscape features. Indeed, such impulses seem to inspire the two nineteenth-century ballad versions, which also adopt this figure of the hill while applying new (perhaps

²⁴ This and all subsequent citations of *Sir Cawline* are, unless otherwise noted, taken from Lyle, *Fairies and Folk*.

local) names to the specific landmark.²⁵ As such, this utilization of landscape as both a self-consciously literary symbol and a reflection of the Scottish landscape continues well beyond the late-medieval period.

Sir Colling (or his alter-ego Cawline) accepts the lady's challenge, and swears to face the elfin knight. Colling offers first one hand and then the other, swearing "I sall valk at þat thorne" (l. 65) and "I sall walk at þat plain" (l. 69). Here, Colling characterizes his action as moving toward or through different landscape features – the thorn on the hill, the plain that (presumably) lies before it – and swears to bring "ane vad" or token (ll. 66 and 70) back or die trying. While the characters and the audience realize that the challenge he faces is to fight an elfin knight, Colling's phrasing still makes clear that, in his view and the lady's, such an encounter must be presented as traveling to a certain landmark, and interacting with that space (removing a "vad"). The language that these characters use to set the stage for this fight, as it were, may thus draw the audience even further in, by explicitly characterizing the encounter first and foremost in terms of travelling to a particular landscape feature. Again, the narrative thus makes itself more

²⁵ See Child 61, II:61-3. The first ballad, the 1859 transcription of *Sir Colin*, runs as follows:

Unless you watch the Orlange hill
An at that hill there grows a thorn;
There neer cam a liven man frae it,
Sin the first nicht that I was born (Stanza 8).

The second ballad, *King Malcolm and Sir Colvin*, attributes yet another name to the hill:

But on the head o Elrick's hill,
Near by yon sharp hawthorn,
Where never a man with life eer came,
Sin our sweet Christ was born (Stanza 8).

King Malcolm repeats the name "Elrick's hill" or "Elrick-hill" frequently throughout, so that the audience can scarcely forget the setting for the encounter. Here, the name perhaps echoes the "Eldrige" or "eldritch" of *Cawline*, although it may also be a distant echo of "Eildon."

immediately mappable onto a variety of British landscapes that share any of these features. Since travel to a thorn tree on a hill is a readily replicable activity in the real-world, its elevation to dramatic significance serves to allow readers similarly to elevate their own experiences.

As soon as Colling sets off on his journey to the “allreche hill,” the poem uses descriptions of weather and the landscape to clearly distinguish his movement away from the urban realm. When Colling “fuir furth fra þe toun; / Þe thunder and þe fyr flauchtis / Com ouer þe bentis broun” (ll. 77-9), providing a cinematic fury of sight and sound that serves both to heighten the drama of the moment and to evoke the familiar scene of a thunderstorm rolling across the moors. Such a powerful storm preceding an encounter with otherworldly forces also echoes late-medieval Scottish and northern English Gawain romances such as *The Awntyrs off Arthure* and *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle*.²⁶ The text here uses environmental details as intertextual allusions, linking Sir Colling into the ranks of Border romance heroes that include Gawain. Moreover, elves and fairies were often believed to have power over stormy weather, particularly at night, and so its appearance here could signal the impending confrontation – even more closely linking such forces to the powers of Nature, and placing both as adversarial to human endeavors.²⁷ Finally, the realistic, yet dramatic tenor struck by this scene was not lost on

²⁶ See the hail-storm in *Awntyrs* (ll. 75–82) that presages the arrival of Guinevere’s undead mother, and also the rising mist in *Carle* (l. 121) and the later storm (ll. 340–2) that again precede and then punctuate the hero’s encounter with an otherworldly character (the cursed Carle), both in Thomas Hahn, ed., *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995).

²⁷ For instance, a Wycliffite Epistolary Sermon for the 21st Sunday after Trinity, speaking of ‘feendis of þe loweste ordre [that] ben clepid ‘gouerneþ of þis world’’, states that ‘þei worchen in derknesse þat heuene makip of þe nyȝt’ and further that ‘summe dremen of þes feendis þat semme ben elues and summ gobelynes’ – but concludes that, regardless of their name, ‘it is lichli þat þes feendis haue power to make boþe wynd and reyn, þundir and lyȝtting and oþir wedrus; for whan þpei moeuen partis of þis eyre and bryngyn hem neyȝ togidere, þes partis moten nedeli bi kynde make siche wedir as clerkis knowen’; see

later audiences, as both nineteenth-century ballad versions retain the storm as their second primary description of landscape.²⁸

Sir Colling's description of the storm, violent despite its brevity, develops into a description of the site of encounter which reveals an element of the hill's local landscape heretofore undisclosed: for, "At midnycht quhan þe mone did ryss / [and] It schew him littil lycht[,] / He saw betwein him and þe sey / Full fast cumand ane knycht" along with his (perhaps fairy) mistress (ll. 80-3). The seaside placement of the "allreche hill," and especially the elfin knight's arrival along the shore, is significant for a couple of reasons. In a general sense, the liminality of a beach, bordering as it does both land and sea spaces, is immediately apparent, and helps to emphasize a sense of encountering the "other" (and perhaps the "otherworldly") – forces from beyond the realm of local

Anne Hudson, ed., *English Wycliffite Sermons*, Vol. I. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 686, ll. 32–42. A fifteenth-century grammar school lesson from Exeter also contains an exercise for Latin translation which reports that: 'A general rumor is spreading among the people that the spirits of the air, invoked by necromantic art to find mines of gold, silver, azure, and other treasures hidden in the ground, have appeared in bodily form, stirring up great tempests in the air which are not yet calmed, it is believed, nor allayed'; see Nicholas Orme, "An English Grammar School ca. 1450: Latin Exercises from Exeter (Caius College MS 417/447, Folios 16v-24v)," *Traditio* 50 (1995): pp. 261–94, at p. 280, C20.

²⁸ Lyle, *Fairies and Folk*, pp. 101-2, notes this correspondence of lines to suggest that the ballads descend from the *Sir Colling* text, or even that "the picture of a violent thunderstorm... may have included the elements of thunder and lightning and high wind in an ultimate source" (p. 102). Such correspondences lead Purdie to conclude that "*Sir Colling* has accordingly become an important illustrative example of how ballads can circulate orally and invisibly for centuries before resurfacing in written form" (*Shorter*, p. 15); Purdie also notes the survival of the thunderstorm in the later ballads (*Shorter*, p. 215), as does Stewart ("A Recently-Discovered MS," p. 38). I would merely like to add to these earlier points that I find it striking and significant (for the points explained above) that such details of landscape and weather would be among the few details to survive centuries of oral tradition.

The relevant nineteenth-century ballad stanzas (Child II:61-3) are as follows:

The wind blew trees oot at the rutes,
Sae did it auld castles doon;
'T was eneuch to fricht ony Christian knight,
To be sae far frae ony toon (*Sir Colin*, Stanza 13).

At midnight mark the meen upstarts;
The knight walkd up and down,
While loudest cracks o thunder roard
Out ower the bent sae brown (*King Malcolm and Sir Colvin*, Stanza 11).

authority or even human control. More specifically, however, the juxtaposition of a thunderstorm with the arrival of a threat along the sea embodies in some sense the danger of visiting the beach or encountering the sea itself during a storm. As in the many romance scenes that evoke the sea's dangerous ability to wreck ships against a shoreline, the text here focuses (via juxtaposition) the threat of a stormy sea into the form of the elfin knight, riding up beside (and perhaps from) the stormy waves to battle the hero ashore. Indeed, the sense of a storm battering both hero and land is made more explicit in the description of their fight, as “Þe trie bitwix þam tua þai bair / In schundderis doun it fell” (ll. 98-9). Presumably the “trie” here refers to the spear that Colling carries – but notably, the use of the word “trie” also calls to mind the thorn tree, which marks the place of the confrontation. As such, the text may unwittingly evoke the image of the storied tree itself being injured – suggesting damage to the local environment on account of the violence perpetrated.²⁹

True to the form of this extremely concise text, Sir Colling's fight with the Elf does not last long:

Sir Collyne with ane straik sa hie
Fra him he straik þe hand,

²⁹ The dangers inherent in actually striking or cutting a thorn tree, according to Celtic tradition, would doubtless not have been lost on many audience members, further driving home an implicit condemnation of such violence against the land; see my discussion on pp. 227-8 above, and especially n. 18. The late thirteenth-century Middle English romance *Havelok the Dane* (ll. 2745–57) and the late twelfth- or early thirteenth-century Old French romance *Amadas and Ydoine* (ll. 6278–6326) both also include instances of the titular hero cutting off an adversary's hand in a fight, although in *Havelok* the antagonist is decidedly human, while *Amadas's* adversary has been holding the protagonist's lady, Ydoine, in a state of illusory death through the use of an enchanted ring; see Graham Drake, Eve Salisbury, and Ronald Herzman, eds., *Four Romances of England: King Horn, Havelok the Dane, Bevis of Hampton, Athelston* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997) and Ross G. Arthur, ed. and trans., *Amadas and Ydoine* (New York: Garland, 1993). The connection between the loss of a hand, magic, and the fate of a lady in *Amadas* is echoed in *Sir Colling* and its associated texts, suggesting a longstanding association between magic or otherworldly power and a hand injury. Will such a loss may carry multiple resonances, my reading focuses on elucidating the consequences of such an injury on human relationships with, and conceptions of, the natural world.

And heich it flew aboue his heid
And lychtit on þe lie land (ll. 104-107).³⁰

This strike ends the fight in a means faintly reminiscent of the famous encounter in *Eger and Grime*.³¹ Much of the description of this martial contest, then, is taken up by charting the course of the elfin knight's hand through the air. Only two lines (ll. 101-2) are devoted to describing the "alreche knycht" as "stif and stur;" otherwise, the passage recounts violence upon a specific spot in the landscape, the flying hand, and its fall onto "þe lie land." The phrasing of this last detail is interesting, for it bookends the encounter with a reminder of its location within the local landscape. Indeed, the use of the word "lie" here is particularly notable. On the one hand, "lie" may simply be an alliterative way for the poet to remind the audience that this fight takes place alongside the barren moorlands, or "bentis broun" noted above (l. 79). On the other hand, however, one of the primary meanings of "lie" is as an adjective denoting farmland left fallow or unworked.³² Of course, the "bentis broune" may also have been meant to evoke the course, brown grass growing over fields similarly left fallow or gone to waste – but it is the use of the word "lie" here that seems to bring this meaning more firmly to mind. Interestingly, while *Sir Cawline* omits the storm and seaside location of *Sir Colling*,³³ the later text does

³⁰ Purdie, *Shorter*, p. 216, n. 107, notes that her reading diverges from that of the other editors at this point, as Stewart transcribed "hie land," while Lyle sees the "lie" as crossed out. Purdie argues that, based on the faintness of the cross-line and the existence of the "lay land" in *Sir Cawline*, "lie [untilled] land" is the intended reading here. Clearly my reading of the line depends upon Purdie's.

³¹ As noted by the various editors of this text; see for instance Purdie, *Shorter*, pp. 17-18.

³² See *MED*, "lei(e (n.(3)),) meanings 1a: "a piece of open land; a field, meadow, lawn," 2a: "a piece of fallow ground," and 2b: "an unplowed strip, a balk." Notably, this same phrasing is maintained in the seventeenth-century, Percy folio version of the tale, *Sir Cawline*, suggesting that the phrase's significance may have maintained its value for later audiences.

³³ As Stewart opines, *Sir Cawline* portrays a hero who awaits the elf "in no such vivid, eerie landscape" as in *Colling*; as such, the shift that Stewart charts from first sighting the elf in *Colling* to hearing his horn in *Cawline* parallels the later text's emphasis on the storm in place of describing a seaside setting for the hill

take pains to reiterate that the hill lies on “the bents soe browne” (*Cawline* ll. 71, 81), and also observes that the hand, “flying over his head soe hye, / ... fell downe of that lay land” (ll. 106-7). While such a discrepancy may merely reflect different textual histories of the two versions, it nevertheless suggests that the detail of the “lay land” and brown moor grass remained accessible and compelling to the seventeenth-century, English audience living in a similar natural and agricultural environment.³⁴

Such a characterization of the setting for this encounter as a space left fallow or gone to waste on account of the lack of human labor suggests a note of tension running beneath the entire encounter. The knight’s sword hand – which committed the violence – is removed, and falls upon the land which lies unworked, perhaps on account of the hill’s status as “a(l)lreche” land under the threat of violence from the Elfin forces. The fact that the hand falls on “lie land” also reinforces the impression of effort lost or wasted, of hands that could have been set to working the land instead destroyed while committing violence.³⁵ The text reiterates the latent value of this land when, after allowing the fairy

(“A Recently-Discovered MS,” p. 34). Purdie, *Shorter*, p. 216, posits that the seaside setting is omitted in *Sir Cawline* due to textual corruption.

³⁴ Interestingly, this detail is omitted from the nineteenth-century ballads – perhaps reflecting the fact that they were recorded during the periods of parliamentary enclosures and “improvements” of the Scottish and Anglo-Scottish Border’s agricultural landscapes.

³⁵ Speaking of changelings in eighteenth-century and later Swedish folklore, Lindow makes a concordant observation when he avers that “the notion of changelings certainly served as an explanation for some very ill people in rural northern Europe,” in the “sense [that] the illness made an exchange: a productive worker for an unproductive dependent;” see John Lindow, “Changelings, Changing, Re-exchanges: Thoughts on the Relationship between Folk Belief and Legend” in *Legends and Landscape: Articles Based on Plenary Papers Presented at the 5th Celtic-Nordic-Baltic Folklore Symposium, Reykjavik 2005*, ed. Terry Gunnell (Reykjavik: University of Iceland Press, 2008), pp. 215–234, at p. 223. He concludes that “belief in the supernatural beings provided not just an explanation for illness, and a way of thinking about the consequences of illness, but also a means of dispelling potential bad feelings among neighbors” (Lindow, “Changelings,” p. 224). While *Colling* deals with a direct confrontation with an elven knight, and not the plight of a changeling, the concentration on the loss of labor or wasted agricultural space evoked by the dead hand and lie land emphasizes the economic potential of work on such a landscape, here regained in place of the changeling’s symbolized loss. Moreover, pinning the responsibility for the lack of landscape development at this hill squarely on the elves focuses human anger over such a state of affairs on the

mistress to retreat with her mortally wounded knight, Colling steps forward to retrieve the hand “Quhair it lay on the lie” (*Colling* l. 127), and the narrator reveals of the many precious gemstones on the hand’s rings that “Þai war worthe ane erldome of land / In his [probably the Elf’s] contrie at hame” (ll. 132-3). Whether the value is measured in human or elfin lands, however, the fact that the hand’s value is presented in terms of landholdings, immediately juxtaposed with a repetition of the word “lie” to describe the setting, reinforces the impression that the threat of Elfin violence has been keeping the value of the lands surrounding the “alreche hill” below their premium rates. An implied side effect of Colling’s efforts, therefore, is that his victory opens the surrounding lands to development for human use.

The first encounter of the narrative, between Sir Colling and the Elfin knight, takes up nearly half the entire text in both the sixteenth- and the seventeenth-century versions, and seems to have been the most enduringly popular; making a similar point, Lyle also notes that “it is only this elvish knight story that is found in the nineteenth-century versions” of the Sir Colling tale.³⁶ Getting the lion’s share of the text, this scene also dominates the tale in terms of space devoted to landscape description. The mentions of such landscape in the second half of the tale are markedly briefer, but still all point to the danger of the local coast as an area vulnerable to unpredictable violence.

For instance, when the three-headed giant appears, his army sails in upon “Four and tventie greit schipis” that “struikin in þe raid” or local anchorage (ll. 150-1). Further,

otherworldly forces, and not on other human beings, as Lindow claims the changeling helps to redirect human anger over a loss of labor. That said, this parallel should not be pushed too far, since the monstrous forces that appear in the second of Colling’s encounters are, as many scholars have noted, probably representations of Gaelic peoples from Western Scotland; see footnote 12 above.

³⁶ Lyle, *Fairies and Folk*, p. 93.

when the giant bursts into the marriage feast to challenge the local king, the antagonist declares that he has come “to bruik þour landis braid,” (l. 161), again threatening violence against the local countryside, and providing a faint echo of the “lie land” left wasted before the preceding engagement. The giant also demands that he fight the king’s champion “Wpon þi bentis broun” (l. 164), returning the combat to a setting reminiscent of (or perhaps the same as) Colling’s fight with the elf. Notably, while *Sir Cawline* notes that “four and thirty stripes [ships?] / Comen beside the rood” (ll. 128-9), it alters the threat that the giant makes to one aimed at a very particular aspect of the cultural landscape, as he declares “I will bren thy temples hye, / Or Ile have thy daughter deere” (ll. 140-1). This ambiguous reference to religious spaces seems interesting, given the elven context of the rest of the narrative. Perhaps the replacement of the general “broad lands” of *Sir Colling* with the later “temples hye” reflects a growing concern with attacks on Protestant England by Catholics from overseas – or instead contains a memory of Reformation violence. Either way, the interest has, as with the earlier omission of the storm but maintenance of “lay land,” moved away from a broader interest in landscape to a more concentrated, explicit focus on human-crafted elements of natural space and landscape, as opposed to the greater catalogue of natural details in the older text. That said, the “broade lands” are mentioned three times (ll. 148, 164, 166) in the later text – but only specifically as the reward that the king first offers and then delivers to Sir Cawline for defeating the giant.

Although the encounter between the giant and Colling takes place in *Sir Colling* on a rather plain “field of veir” or war (l. 200), the hero’s betrothed manages to work in one final mention of the local landscape in the earlier text – a mention that presumably

alludes to folk practices or beliefs regarding fairy relationships with the realms of the dead (and is absent from *Sir Cawline*). Since she does not want to be wed to the intruder in the case of Colling's defeat, she asks of her father that:

“3e burne me heich vpone 3on hill
Or 3on foull theif [the giant] cum agane.
3e burne me heich wpone 3on hill
And ding me in pouldar small,
Or 3on foull theif cum agane
To burne me quyt away” (ll. 181-6).³⁷

Once again, readers encounter the space of the hill as mediated by the half-told narratives of the lady, whose stories imply significance to that topographical feature. Here, presumably, the hill that she refers to is the same upon which Sir Colling defeated the Elfin knight; but why does she wish to be burned in this particular place? As a memorial to her beloved's victory? As a recognition of the hill's special status as an “alreche” place? Or is it the association of the hawthorn tree with both corpses and the souls of the dead?³⁸ The specification that, after being burned, she be ground into powder suggests both the possible existence of a local practice and an acknowledgement of the fact that the same landscape that serves as a stage for violence will receive and cover the bodies of the dead. As with the preceding image of the disembodied hand upon the “lie land,” so here does the text gesture towards the status of the land as an entity whose true nature and scope extends beyond the mortal realm. As such, *Sir Colling*'s final mention of the landscape (again missing from *Sir Cawline*), though one of its most clichéd,

³⁷ Stewart also notes that this detail is unique to *Sir Colling*, but does not analyze it; see “A Recently-Discovered MS,” p. 34.

³⁸ See n. 18, above; Lowry C. Wimberly, *Folklore in the English and Scottish Ballads* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1959 [Orig. 1928]), pp. 41 and 69, who cites examples of thorn trees growing on graves in numerous British folktales, and perhaps thereby embodying the souls of the dead; and also Eberly, “A Thorn,” p. 43, who notes the thorn as a “holy tree” in ballads.

nevertheless serves to unite the realms of human endeavor and mortal limitation that the landscape of this text so vividly embodies: for, after the lady bears Sir Colling sixteen children, the narrative concludes by observing that “deid is cummit in þe land; Þe ladie is borne in beir” (ll. 245-6). So ends the tale of *Sir Colling* – a text that acknowledges land’s agricultural value and necessity for human life as continuously juxtaposed with that same landscape’s roles in containing – or composing – worlds beyond the mortal realm.

Building Stories from the Ground Up – Narrative Landscapes in Eger and Grime

This chapter’s next text capitalizes on *Sir Colling*’s technique for presenting landscape through the mouths of human characters, allowing them to craft narratives of dramatic sociopolitical significance for such topographical features before implying their economic significance. This accomplished fifteenth-century British romance, *Eger and Grime*, survives in two substantially different forms: an English version, copied in the seventeenth-century Percy folio; and a Scottish version, surviving in prints from the seventeenth century (although printers’ records suggest that versions of this tale were printed throughout the sixteenth century as well).³⁹ Both versions of the romance have

³⁹ For the history of these two different versions, see further: Deanna Delmar Evans, “Re-Evaluating the Case for a Scottish *Eger and Grime*” in *The European Sun: Proceedings of the Seventh International Conference on Medieval and Renaissance Scottish Language and Literature*, eds. Graham Caie, Roderick J. Lyall, Sally Mapstone, and Kenneth Simpson (East Lothian, UK: Tuckwell Press, 2001): pp. 276-87, at pp. 277-8; James Ralston Caldwell, ed., *Eger and Grime: A Parallel-Text Edition of the Percy and Huntington-Laing Versions of the Romance, with an Introductory Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933), p. 13; and Mabel Van Duzee, *A Medieval Romance of Friendship: Eger and Grime* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1963), pp. 5-9. Two versions of the print, from 1687 and 1711, are practically the same apart from a few minor spelling differences, and are thus known collectively as the Huntington-Laing version (as Evans notes, this name is “in honour of a library and an earlier editor;” see “Re-evaluating,” p. 277). These prints are also, as Van Duzee (*A Medieval Romance*, p. 6) and Evans (“Re-evaluating,” p. 278) point out, nearly identical to the earliest surviving print of 1669. As such, the texts of *Eger and Grime* are commonly grouped into two versions, the P (Percy folio) and the HL (Huntington-Laing prints). I shall refer to these texts by such designations in my discussion.

attracted centuries of antiquarian and scholastic interest, especially since the accounts of the Scottish royal treasurer indicate that, on 19 April 1497, James IV paid two fiddlers who performed Graysteel for him (Graysteel being the main antagonist in *Eger*), indicating that the narrative had currency reaching back into the fifteenth-century.⁴⁰ Due to the generally positive reception that *Eger* has received from modern readers, different critics have been at pains to claim the text as a Scottish or English work, arguing variously for P or HL as the earlier, original, or more authentic text.⁴¹ Since such studies have helped modern readers to recognize the difficulty of deciphering the narrative's origins based purely on linguistic evidence, my own reading will avoid staking a claim regarding the direct relationship between the P and HL texts of *Eger*. Instead, I develop my analysis from the generally agreed-upon presupposition that the two texts represent versions of the same tale from different, yet overlapping areas along the Anglo-Scottish border. Thus, I seek to examine how this geographic and political setting may have influenced the vivid representations of landscape in both texts.

The placement of *Eger*'s provenance in the Border area is best argued by Deanna Evans and Edith Rickert.⁴² Both scholars pay careful attention to the poem's "remarkably exact topography,"⁴³ using place-names, proper names, and geography to link the

⁴⁰ See further Evans, "Re-evaluating," p. 276, and the sources cited there.

⁴¹ For an overview of such arguments, see further Antony J. Hasler, "Romance and Its Discontents in *Eger and Grime*" in *The Spirit of Medieval English Popular Romance*, eds. Ad Putter and Jane Gilbert (Harlow, UK: Pearson Education Limited, 2000), pp. 200-18, at pp. 201-2, and Evans, "Re-evaluating," pp. 278-9. Although my reading does not correspond closely with Hasler's psychoanalytic approach, I find his comment that "the debate [over which version is earlier] surely tells us more about scholarly nostalgia than it does about *Eger*" ("Romance," p. 202) fairly perceptive.

⁴² Evans, "Re-evaluating," and Edith Rickert, *Early English Romances in Verse Done Into Modern English by Edith Rickert: Romances of Friendship* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1908), pp. xx-xxii. Evans also cites Rickert's discussion of *Eger*'s topography (at "Re-evaluating," p. 280) – and indeed, much of Evans' discussion develops from points originally raised by Rickert.

⁴³ Rickert, *Early*, p. xxi.

narrative to a politically contentious territory at the Western end of the Anglo-Scottish border, known as “the Debatable Land.”⁴⁴ As Rickert and then Evans note, the “Debatable Land” ran along the Solway, between the rivers Esk and Sark, and was the primary area of residence for the Graham clan – a fact relevant to *Eger* since Grime (P) is a variant of the name Graham (HL). Moreover, *Eger* refers to the property inhabited by Graysteel as the Forbidden Land (P and HL) or the Land of Doubt (HL).⁴⁵ Both of these designations could reflect a popular coinage derived from “the Debatable Land.” This possible specificity of setting thus balances the abstract nature of the “Celtic journey to the Otherworld” story frame identified by scholars such as Caldwell and Van Duzee, who seek to explain away topographical details as emphasizing both protagonists’ journeys through a boundary land into the Otherworld.⁴⁶ The purportedly wilderness setting of

⁴⁴ For more on the nature of the ‘Debatable Land’ as a hotbed of criminal activity, and its eventual division between English and Scottish authorities in 1552, see George MacDonald Fraser, *The Steel Bonnets* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), pp. 273-6.

⁴⁵ Rickert, *Early*, pp. xxi-xxii; Evans, “Re-evaluating,” pp. 281-3. Evans further links the Grahams to the HL text by demonstrating that some further name changes – such as the lady’s name change from Loosepaine in P to Lillias in HL – may recognize real-life members of the Graham family, such as Lady Lillias Graham (p. 283).

⁴⁶ See Van Duzee, *A Medieval Romance*, pp. 122-31, who argues in addition to her overarching thesis – that *Eger* reworks Celtic, Arthurian tales – that the mentions of landscape or place are meant to evoke a fantastic, pseudo-historical Bohemia. See also Caldwell, *Eger*, pp. 99-105, who similarly tries to link the topography of *Eger* with “the typical Otherworld landscape” (p. 102) of a number of Welsh tales, since the landscape of both *Eger* and these other texts are defined by “a multiplicity of boundaries” (p. 103). While such elements of Celtic Otherworld traditions are almost certainly an influence on the worldview of *Eger*, I argue that both the P and HL texts seek to knit such narrative traditions to the specific landscape of the Western Borders, making such abstract Otherworlds more immediately local (and carefully avoiding explicit mentions of fairies or the otherworld in either text). Sergi Mainer, “*Eger and Grime and the Boundaries of Courtly Romance*” in “*Joyous Sweit Imaginatioun*”: *Essays on Scottish Literature in Honour of R. D. S. Jack*, eds. Sarah Carpenter and Sarah M. Dunningham (New York: Rodopi, 2007): pp. 77-95, posits in passing that the entry into Graysteel’s lands is a passage into the Otherworld where the forest and river echo similar landscape features in Chretien de Troyes’ *Chevalier de la Charrette*, while Graysteel’s lands themselves provide the area of conflict between the conventions of romance and the demands of “reality” (pp. 81-2). I agree with Mainer that the romance cannot help but examine the interaction between romance genre traits and real-life warfare, although I would hesitate to call that the main focus of the narrative as Mainer does. As such, my concentration is on examining specific moments of landscape description, to discover what they reveal about contemporary attitudes toward human relationships with the natural world along the Border.

Greysteel's estate, particularly in HL, and the scenes of Loosepaine/Lillias' orchards, also demonstrate the influence "of ballad feeling and drama," as McDiarmid has argued.⁴⁷ Ultimately, then, both a recognition of place and the influence of Otherworld narrative traditions serve to shape the presentation of landscape in *Eger*. Such a confluence of strategies for assigning meaning to the landscape features of the tale emerges in interesting ways within the body of the text, as both narrator and protagonist take turns embellishing the setting of Graysteel's holdings. Finally, the P text's inclusion of scenes of warfare against the environment marks a departure from both the described topography and attitudes toward the natural world delineated by HL. In order to analyze such moments, then, it is to the two texts themselves that I now turn.

The first passage of landscape description in both texts occurs when Eger recounts the tale of his defeat to his sworn companion and roommate, Grime/Graham. Having just returned home, gravely wounded, Eger answers Grime's demands for details with a description of the landscape he rode out into:

I heard tell of a venterous Knight
that kept a fforbidden countrie bath day & night,
& a fresh Iland by the sea
where castles were with towers hye.
ouer the riuer were ryding frythes 2,
& soone I chose to the one of tho;
in short while had I rydden
in that Land that was fforbidden,
but I heard mouing in the greete

⁴⁷ Matthew P. McDiarmid, "The Scots Makars and the Ballad Tradition" in *Bryght Lanternis: Essays on the Language and Literature of Medieval and Renaissance Scotland*, eds. J. Derrick McClure and Michael R. G. Spiller (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1989), pp. 14-23, p. 17. Speaking of the HL text, McDiarmid argues that "the wooded wilderness and rivers" on the border of Greysteel's lands is reminiscent of *Thomas the Rhymer*; that the scene "in the bower [where] Lillias cures the vanquished Sir Eger's wounds with a green drink" presents the lady as a benevolent ballad witch; and that the end of Greysteel, where he tears "up herbs and roots in his death throes, is felt as a scene of daemonic possession" similar to those found in many ballads (all citations from p. 17).

as itt had beene of a steeds feete (P 101-110).⁴⁸

Here, Eger lays out the stakes of his encounter even before it begins, by concentrating on the landscape details. The close repetition of the title “fforbidden” country or land drives this point home by explicitly marking the transgression of a boundary both geographical and sociopolitical. While Eger does not divulge the reason why this land is “fforbidden,” the ambiguity of the term nicely dovetails Otherworldly connotations and Anglo-Scottish border conceptions of territorial boundaries (as suggested by the other scholars discussed above). Moreover, although the challenger knight is listed at the opening as the goal of Eger’s adventure, the concentration on describing the land here suggests that its “fforbidden” nature alone also warrants Eger’s attention. Indeed, by the construction of the statement, Eger sets off because he had initially “heard tell” of both the knight *and* of “a fresh Iland by the sea / where castles were with towers hye.” The very existence of a fortified or settled island seems to invite the construction of narrative, which in turn lures the attention and then the presence of adventurers such as Eger – or at least, such is the chain of cause-and-effect that Eger’s account suggests. The feature of the river serves to delineate the episode of Eger’s encounter with the enemy, while the sound of “mouing in the greete” or stony gravel⁴⁹ demonstrates how the landscape itself can become a player in the story, alerting Eger to a possible threat and establishing an atmosphere of tension. This introduction also serves to emphasize how closely Eger links his adversary (later revealed to be Graysteel) to the

⁴⁸ Unless otherwise noted, this and all subsequent citations of both the P and HL texts are taken from Caldwell’s parallel-text edition, *Eger and Grime*.

⁴⁹ See *MED*, “gret n.(3),” meanings 1a and 2a.

landscape around him, as the land both gives shape to their battleground and provides the first evidence of the adversary's presence.

Since these details come from Eger's account of the events, the poem here also implicitly acknowledges that its characters create associations between place and person that translate into the establishment of narratives, which in turn shape their understanding of various environments and their future interactions with those same landscapes (as with Grime's return to the site of Eger's encounter). It is thus appropriate that, when he recovers from his swoon during the fight with Graysteel, Eger reports that he "was ware of a runing strand, / & thither I crope on foot & hand, / & from my eyen I washt the blood" (P 187-9). This action allows him to see that he has lost his little finger, and will thereby carry with him a permanent marker of his defeat. A narrative of the landscape led Eger to venture into it, while interacting with that same landscape first warned him of approaching danger, and then revealed to him the loss that he had suffered. The blood mixing with the stream's water of course emphasizes the corporeal nature of Eger's experience – but the fact that this scene is reported by Eger, and thus not given directly by the narrator, serves to couch such vivid physical details within the broader context of human memory and story-telling. The scene hurts all the more because of the meanings – danger, loss, defeat – that Eger ascribes to it; and the setting in turn becomes imbued with such associations.

In the HL text, Eger's first report of the landscape bordering and then composing Greysteel's holdings is preceded by Eger's encounter with a man who passes him on the road, and tells the knight to give up on his journey, or risk death at Greysteel's hands (HL 101-116). However, despite the distancing of his initial mission from a mention of

challenging topography, HL's version of Eger's story still makes the landscape an integral element of his encounter with his superhuman adversary. Once the cautionary fellow-traveler drops out of Eger's tale, he immediately turns to describing the landscape he traversed:

I took my leave and forth I fure,
Beside a mount upon a moor:⁵⁰
Then I perceived by my sight,
...
And understood which was the Land.
A Forrest lay on every hand,⁵¹
A River that was deep and wide,
I found no entress at a side:
Un to a Foord, and over I rode,
Unto the other side but bode,
And I had but a short while ridden
Into the land that was forbidden:
When I heard moving in the street,
As it had been of horses feet (HL 117-19, 121-130).

Here the details of the sea and the island have been omitted, and are replaced by a mountain and a forest. The "mount upon a moor" of course calls to mind the narratives of adversarial encounters in *Sir Colling* and *Thomas the Rhymer*, and thus provides an intertextual link at the same time that it places the narrative in a recognizably border topography. The mount, and the landscape description that follows, thus becomes a rhetorical strategy for Eger to utilize in constructing an encounter at once conceivable and fantastic. The surrounding forest that Eger also adds performs a similar function,

⁵⁰ Caldwell, *Eger*, p. 105, tries to suggest that "the mountain seems to mark the beginning of the fairy marches" by a fairly distant parallel with the Welsh text *Dream of Maxen Wledig* (see Caldwell's discussion at pp. 103-5), which features "the highest mountain in the world" but no moor (p. 103). While his point that HL demonstrates the influence of Celtic Otherworld topography is a certainly valid, it is important to note that this "general similarity between the landscape of Eger's journey and that of Maxen Wledig's dream" should not be made too specific (p. 105).

⁵¹ As Caldwell notes, the substance of this line is repeated in P at line 414, in a context that plays even more heavily with the narrative power of landscape features; see further my discussion below.

linking the setting into the “long-ago” world of many medieval Insular romances (in the wild woods) while also referencing late-medieval and early modern areas of intense management, human labor, and valued – or abused – resources.⁵² Interestingly, the sounds of the horse’s hooves are now relayed by a street, in place of P’s “greete” – still probably referring to roughly the same surface (a gravel track), but with the added explicit reference to human endeavor in shaping the environment that “street” implies. But Greysteel’s realm remains “the land that was forbidden,” striking the same note of tension that the phrase achieves in P. This landscape still falls within the purview of human categorizations of landscape space – for even when it is designated “forbidden,” it is still ruled by its own monstrous, yet recognizable (and, as the text will later demonstrate, mortal) lord. The world of *Eger and Grime* emerges as one shaped by human systems of meaning, where even the wild areas of mountains in the moors are designated with particular narrative significance. Landscape becomes in a sense the tangible substance of story: in both P and HL, Eger relates these topographical details as much to evoke drama as he does to reinforce the veracity of his account.

⁵² See further my previous discussions of these spaces in Chapter 2. As Angus J. L. Winchester, *Landscape and Society in Medieval Cumbria* (Edinburgh: John Donald Publishers Ltd., 1987) notes, in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, “the extensive areas of oak woodland” of Cumbria attracted settlers looking to grow pigs, harvest charcoal, and smelt iron (p. 135), while the late fifteenth-century and on bore witness to the rapid division and colonization of forest spaces progressively further north along English side of the Border (p. 7). Speaking of the Scottish side, R. N. Millman, *The Making of the Scottish Landscape* (London: B. T. Batsford Ltd., 1975) observes that “from 1424, numerous acts were passed ordering trees to be planted and making it an offence to destroy trees in bloom, but little attention was really paid to them” (p. 87), while most of the southern forests (ergo along the border) were eventually cleared from the fifteenth through the seventeenth centuries as use for fuel, both in households and for iron-smelters (pp. 87-8). David Turnock, *The Making of the Scottish Rural Landscape* (Hants, UK: Scolar Press, 1995), also notes that “woodlands were being exploited in the seventeenth century and some leases... stipulated that trees should be planted by tenants, following up the interest in artificial plantations around mansion houses” (pp. 171-2) – a reaction to earlier periods of communal forest clearing (p. 184). As such, the forest would have stood out for late medieval and especially early modern Border and lowland readers as either a reminder or reflection of a space with significant economic value in the real world, and may even have reflected the landscape-design desires and projects of seventeenth-century Scottish readers.

The power of described topography to elevate a story from the mundane to the fantastic is not lost on Eger's roommate. Indeed, Grime quickly puts this lesson to work in P, when he is asked by the earl and his wife what fate has befallen the clearly wounded Eger. Wishing to help his friend save face, Grime constructs a narrative that liberally embellishes upon the landscape details of Eger's previous account, so as to set the stage for further embellishment of Eger's martial exploits:

my Lord, I shall tell you gentleye:
& vncoth Land he happened in,
where townes were both few & thinn;
giffe he rode neuer soe fast,
7 dayes the wildernesse did last.
he heard tell of a venterous Knight
that kept a forbbidden cuntrye day & night,
& a mile by the salt sea,
castles fayre & towers hye;
On the other side a fayre strand,
a faire fforest on the other hand,
on the one side run a fresh riuere,
there might noe man nighe him nere;
for he that ouer that riuer shold ryde,
strange aventures shold abyde (P 404-18).

The span of the "wildernesse" has been expanded to encompass "7 dayes" of travel, while the forest has been added (in the same line used earlier by HL), and the river gains its own narrative significance of story-traditions linking it to martial and chivalric challenges. In effect, by expanding upon the more spartan landscape description given by Eger himself, Grime seeks to convey the idea that his friend literally rode into the realm of story, and thus that it is understandable (especially given the large bands of bandits Grime later invents as Eger's adversaries) that Eger should have suffered some injury. Interestingly, this awareness of the power of landscape description to transport the audience into another level of understanding experience does not appear in the story

given to the earl by Grime's alter-ego Graham in HL. In that printed version, Graham condenses the landscape description to two, somewhat enigmatic lines, declaring that Eger encountered "A swadrick in a wilderness, / Where that never is near a place" (HL 501-2), before going on to create his own story of Eger defeating bandits. Clearly, Graham hopes that "wilderness" and the lack of any nearby "place" (presumably of human habitation) will do the same work. Interestingly, the word "swadrick" may also convey a sense of encountering the alien, non-human forces of the natural world – but its meaning remains unknown, so the modern reader can only guess as to its original effect.⁵³

Instead of presenting Graham as savvy to the narrative power of landscape description, HL makes Eger the one to embellish his own story, putting an extended landscape description into Eger's mouth at a later point in the tale, when he tells Sir Graham how to find Graysteel's lair (HL 881-905). Here, in addition to the details that HL Eger previously noted, he adds in the "great Forrest" along the seashore (HL 898) and "wilderness" (HL 899) of Grime's account in P, along with a description of Lady Lillias' (Loosepaine in P) carefully landscaped castle grounds:

Then come ye in the plainest land,
And an allay on every hand,
A fair castle than shal ye see,
Halls and Bowers of great plenty,
Orchards, Habers, and a fair green (HL 901-5).

Whereas Eger's earlier description of encountering Lillias (HL 235ff) focused almost exclusively on describing the lady and her clothes, and not on her castle's

⁵³ The entry for "swadrick" in the *DSL* only lists "?" as the meaning, while its only instance of the term is drawn from this line in HL. The *MED* word "sward (n.)," meaning 2: "Turf, sod, grass-covered earth" may give some clue as to the definition of "swadrick" as a grassy mound, perhaps reminiscent of the Green Chapel in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

grounds, at this point Eger makes clear to describe in depth the lady's property.⁵⁴ Of course, the greater level of detail here derives primarily from Eger's desire to create a mental landmark for Graham. However, taken as part of Eger's description of the entire route, these delineations of landscape – peopled at the end with the character of Lillias herself and instructions for how Graham should act towards her (HL 906-18) – provide Eger with a means for turning his narrative over to Graham. In essence, the topographical images create the stage of his story, allowing him to remove himself and then relinquish that stage for Graham. Graham cannot simply depart in search of the Knight Greysteel or even his castle; instead, Eger insists that he follow the same route. While this insistence may derive in part from traditions of travelling to Fairy Otherworlds through particular gateways or liminal spaces, it also reveals that the landscape itself is an integral part of the narrative. In other words, the route is not something to be approximated – for traveling this specific topography seems to be instrumental in creating the encounter with Greysteel himself, a force defined by the “forbidden” nature of his own property. Thus, Eger's embellishment in HL serves a different immediate purpose than the tale of Grime in P – but both recognize the powerful role that landscape description plays to create the tone and structure of a romance narrative.

Once Grime/Graham departs on his journey, the narrator finally begins to step in and describe some of the landscape firsthand. P boils its previous details down to the single observation that “All the wilderness that there bee, / Grime rode it in dayes 3” (P 723-4), while the printed version elaborates on the topography of Graham's travels:

⁵⁴ The narrator remarks that Graham observes similar details when he arrives at Lillias' castle, and sees “Orchards, harbors, and all eyes [alleys] green” (HL 1195).

He countered in the west-land,
Beyond the Fell, the water fand:
And followed as he was bidden,
And to the forrest he is ridden,
And passed it in dayes three,
That they said, fifteen it should be:
And then he saw a tokening,
A reek did rise, and a gladning (HL 1129-36).

In this description, readers get the first indication of the cardinal direction that Graham is heading (west). While in general heading west corresponds in Scotland as well as England with moving toward the fringe territories, it also aligns with the placement of the Debatable Lands, which lie at the western end of the Anglo-Scottish border. Overall, this passage by the narrator seems mostly intended to correlate with Eger's earlier account: Graham passes a mountain ("the Fell"), and follows the river or seashore down to the forest. However, at this point the description adds the new detail of a "tokening" or symbol, composed of smoke (reek) rising from what is either a bright spot – of fire, perhaps? – or a forest glade (gladning).⁵⁵ Immediately after observing this sign, Graham encounters a helpful yeoman who leads the knight to Lillias' castle (HL 1137ff). The oddness of the description, along with the timing of the yeoman-guide's appearance, suggests that this landscape is in fact mystical in some way, with the smoke rising from a bright spot or glade serving to mark the entrance to the forbidden land. Moreover, rising smoke could well communicate to late medieval and early modern audiences a sense of disquiet, especially given the frequent raiding and local conflict endemic to the Border areas in these periods. The description in HL, then, validates Eger's earlier description and heightens the sense of danger, while demonstrating again how the landscape of the

⁵⁵ See *DSL*, reek (n.1.); *MED* gladen (n.), meaning 1a, "a cleared space in a wood;" *MED* gladen (v.), meaning 5, "to brighten" or "to fill with light;" and *MED* glad (adj.), meaning 5a, "bright, shining."

tale simultaneously establishes it as a romantic adventure while also reflecting contemporary, real-life Border experience.⁵⁶

Upon reaching the border of Graysteel's territory, the two texts deviate significantly in their presentations of the landscape that Grime/Graham encounters. I turn first to HL's description, as it is the shorter of the two:

... he would be in that steed
Where many man had left their head,
Ere it was mid-morn of the day,
He came where that the place did ly.
Which was called the land of doubt,
A forrest lying round about,
In Roman stories who will read,
Two miles of length and two of bread:
He saw nothing into that steed,
But great felloun down Deer and reed,
He saw beside him on an hight,
A faire castle with towers wight,
A deep river both long and brade,
Was never one that over it rade (HL 1443-56).

This passage marks the first time that HL designates Graysteel's holdings as "the land of doubt," a moniker that echoes perhaps even more closely the real-life "Debatable Land" of the Grahams. The narrator here also identifies this landscape space as an intertextual marker, linking its extremely specific measurements and details to a tradition of "Roman stories."⁵⁷ Oddly, the description notes of the river that there "was never one

⁵⁶ That, in both P and HL, Grime/Graham puts the charters for Eger's lands up in return for the loan of a powerful sword (named Erkyin in P) serves an acknowledgment of the exchange of property in return for military support that characterized the alliances of different warring families in the Border area, while also nodding toward traditional feudal power structures and explicitly stating the value of landed property. As the two texts put it: Eger "prayeth you [the Earl's daughter] to lend him his vnckles brand / & there he hath sent you the deeds of his land" (P 585-6), or Eger "prays you for a noble brand, / And take the Charters of his land" (HL 817-18). This explicit mention of deeds/charters may in turn provide another possible explanation for the texts' obsession with boundary spaces; see further my discussion of *Sir Isumbras* in Chapter 2.

⁵⁷ Here it is unclear whether the text is employing the common romance formula of "in romance stories as we read," meaning most often French romance texts, or whether it refers to purportedly Latin texts.

that over it rade.” Of course, Graham quickly “sought a foord and that he gat” (HL 1460), and he goes on to examine the far side. Yet, if he has returned to the original site of Eger’s encounter with Greysteel, then Eger must also have crossed this river that none have ridden over. This river, then, can be read in two ways: either it is a previously uncrossed boundary that signifies a strange capacity for self-recreation on the part of Greysteel’s property, or it indicates the depth of the river, suggesting that it is too deep at most points to cross without a ferry. While the fanciful first reading may suggest that the river serves as a boundary with some sort of otherworld, the more practical second interpretation ultimately reads as more representative of the text’s world, since Graham does cross by means of a ford. This more realistic reading of the river would also further link the story to the Border landscape. Finally, the deer that Graham observes mark the space as aristocratic, demonstrating that, despite its situation alongside a forest and separated from Graham’s home by wilderness, the topography and animal population of this land are still under the careful control of the local lord – a sense that is even further driven home by the fact that Greysteel has two men up on the ramparts of the nearby castle, observing the same landscape (HL 1476).

In the Percy folio, the corresponding passage from Grime’s journey marks the opening of what the manuscript labels the narrative’s “5^d parte.” As such, the scene described in P embellishes its landscape description – albeit in extremely clichéd terms – to declare the opening of a new episode in the narrative:

Early in that May morning,
merrely when the burds can sing,
the throstlecocke, the Nightingale,
the laueracke & the wild woodhall,
the rookes risen in euery riuier,

the birds made a blissful bere;
It was a heauenly Melodye
pro a Knight that did a loue bee,
on the one side to heare the small birds singing,
on the other side the flowers springing.
then drew forth of the dales the dun deere,
the sun it shone both fresh and cleere,
Phebus gott vp with his golden beames,
ouer all the land soe light it gleames;
hee looked vpon the other side,
see parkes & palaces of Mickle pryde,
with 7 townes by the salt sea
with castles fayre & towers hyee.
ouer the riuer were ryding places 2,
& soone Grime chose to the one of tho (P 919-38).

While perhaps to some extent true to life on a spring morning, the opening part of this passage clearly reflects the influence of the *locus amoenus* tradition, with the characteristic catalogue of birds, amorous birdsong, flowers, an anthropomorphized (and deified) sun, and running deer. As such, these initial lines perform a similar function to the “In Roman stories who will read” of HL, as they connect this text to a tradition of literary landscapes that mark the narrative as an artificial work of art. The lines that conclude this landscape description, however, chart a well-settled area that stands at odds with the lonely estate of HL. While the printed text may imply that Graysteel’s property is carefully managed, it is empty of human habitation save its single castle, and it stands far out in wilderness. In the “forbidden land” of P, on the contrary, a variety of urban and architectural spaces are identified, with even multiple seaside castles. In addition, the text reminds us that the river has two nearby fords, suggesting the possibility of traffic in the area. As such, at the same time that P presents a self-consciously artificial opening, the manuscript poem also describes a landscape remarkably close to centers of human habitation, a river bordering both the flowery moors, home to birds and deer, and a

number of rich and well-defended, seaside cities. While Grime may have crossed three days of wilderness to reach this place, it is not wilderness itself. Despite its overtly literary opening, then, the passage in P ultimately draws closer to the real-world space of the western, Solway Firth shore of the Border zone, and suggests in the opulence of the castles' defenses the economic virility – or at least importance – of the area.⁵⁸ Graysteel thus becomes in a way a much more immediate, real-world threat: while he may be fantastically huge, he still lives right next door, as do the warriors of the audience's neighboring clans.

After the central encounter between Grime/Graham and Graysteel takes place, and the hero takes his leave of the Lady Loosepaine/Lillias, he must travel back to the bedside of his friend Eger. The two texts go about describing the landscape of this return journey in markedly different ways. The Percy text, for one, elides the journey almost entirely, merely remarking that Grime “came to a forrest a priuye way” (P 1283) and suddenly finds himself back with Eger at the earl's castle.⁵⁹ This elision emphasizes the proximity of Graysteel's lands to the heroes' home, and also denotes a transition in the narrative. The printed text varies from this approach, and instead emphasizes the remoteness of Graysteel's holdings. As the return journey begins, “Sir Grahame when he saw the West-land, / And great mountains on his right hand” (HL 2325-6), he sees a number of deer, but “he saw neither rich nor poor, / But moss and ling [heather],⁶⁰ and bare wild moor” that stretches for a journey of four or more days (HL 2331-2). I find this passage to be one of the most naturalistic of any in either version of the romance. As the

⁵⁸ Rickert also notes that this particular description seems to evoke an image of the Debatable Lands area (*Early*, p. xxi).

⁵⁹ Notably, however, a landscape detail again opens a new section of this text – here, the “6^d parte.”

⁶⁰ See *DSL*, “ling, lyng” n. 1.

text paints an image of an isolated, heather-coated moor, it draws readers into the narrative, recreating the western border landscape that they regularly observe and labor in. This location also serves to remind the audience simultaneously of Greysteel's isolation (in HL) and the proximity of this narrative to the realm of real-world experience, anchoring its encounters with the fantastic within the natural environments of the everyday. Moreover, for readers of the original Edinburgh printings (HL), even at their remove from the border itself, the narrative's description still evokes a landscape at once recognizably Scottish and irrefutably romantic. The Border's topography is thus made into the stuff of story.

Graham's return through the western moors marks the final moment of extended landscape description in the HL text; from this point, its concentration shifts entirely to following the convoluted journeys of the various relationships, as Graham is granted Greysteel's lands but dies suddenly, and Eger gains and loses Winliane's love (she leaves Eger when he admits that Graham defeated Greysteel) before winning Lady Lillias' hand in his old age. In the poem of the Percy folio, however, Grime evades an untimely death, and combines forces with his brother Pallyas and with Eger to invade Greysteel's territory:

then wold they noe longer abyde,
but into Gray steeles Land can they ryde;
they brake his parkes & killed his deere,
rasen his hauens & shipps soe Cleere;
They tooken townes & castles of stone (P 1419-23).

Here, the heroes systematically destroy or conquer each of the defining characteristics of the former adversary's lands. Moreover, this passage brings the manuscript romance closest to the flame of real-life Border strife, as it details war against

specific landscape features and animals as well as places of human habitation. These lines also betray a late-medieval recognition of the economic value of the features earlier attributed to Graysteel's holdings. On the one hand, breaking the parks and slaughtering deer echoes *Sir Degrevant*, as the heroes shame the memory of their adversary by removing these carefully managed natural markers of his aristocratic status. On the other, the focus on destroying harbors and ships clearly implies a recognition of the importance of seaborne trade. Eger and Grime's (and Pallyas') actions, then, reveal themselves to be motivated by a savvy understanding of the economic significance of seaside settlements, as they presumably seek plunder at the same time that they cut off Graysteel's lands from foreign markets. In the event, these actions cause Greysteel's sole heir, a daughter, to offer herself and her lands in marriage to Pallyas, thereby bringing this property firmly into family of Grime (since he and Pallyas are brothers). This final description of human interactions with the environment, then, provides a closing nod to the clan-based warfare of the Anglo-Scottish border, as Grime's family allies itself with that of Eger to bring some neighboring lands into its holdings, and redefine the boundaries of the "forbidden lands."

Vision Literature Motifs and Sociopolitical Landscapes in Thomas the Rhymer

In the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century survivals of the medieval and early-modern ballad of *Thomas the Rhymer* (Child 37), the fairy realm is presented as a world alongside all others – beneath the hills of Scotland, yet down a different path than those

that lead to either Heaven or Hell.⁶¹ Speaking of a similar geographical arrangement in the closely-related, fourteenth-century romance *Thomas of Erceldoune*,⁶² Ad Putter describes this “bizarre ‘mapping’ of the otherworld” as one that embodies “the connections between the constructs of the fairy world and the religious otherworld, ... in a cosmos where the fairy world is geographically intermediate between our world and the afterlife.”⁶³ Both the romance and ballad traditions surrounding the story of “True Thomas” weave together topographical details from medieval texts describing visits to, or visions of Purgatory and Earthly Paradise (and even occasionally containing glimpses of the final landscapes waiting in Heaven and Hell).⁶⁴ Most prominent among the source

⁶¹ Variants A, B, and C (Child's designations) of *Thomas the Rhymer* (Child 37) are taken from I.323-6. Variants D and E (my designations) are given as untitled appendix additions in IV.454-5. Variant F (my designation) is given as stanzas 4-12 of Variant M of the ballad *Tam Lin* (Child 39), at IV.458. Child notes as well that Variant F is also from the *Thomas the Rhymer* tradition. Hereafter, all citations of ballads will be by Variant letter and stanza number. Two other, twentieth-century variants definitely exist, one from Aberdeen and one from North Carolina, but both are obviously lifted wholesale from versions given in Child (Variants C and A, respectively), and thus will not be discussed here. On these later variants, see further C. E. Nelson, “The Origin and Tradition of the Ballad of ‘Thomas Rhymer:’ A Survey” in *New Voices in American Studies*, eds. Ray Browne, Donald M. Winkelman, and Allen Hayman (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1966), pp. 138-150.

⁶² Citations of the romance are taken from the authoritative edition of James A. H. Murray, *The Romance and Prophecies of Thomas of Erceldoune*, EETS (o.s.) 61 (Ludgate Hill, UK: N. Trubner & Co., 1875). Reference will usually be to the Lincoln, Lincoln Cathedral MS 91 (hereafter Thorton MS) copy of the romance; note will be made if this is not the case. The “chicken-and-egg” problem of the relationship between the romance and the ballad, however, will not be addressed here; on such topics, see instead Emily B. Lyle's “The Relationship between *Thomas the Rhymer* and *Thomas of Erceldoune*” in *Leeds Studies in English* n.s. 4 (1970): pp. 23-30 and especially her slightly updated version of this article in *Fairies and Folk*, pp. 29-36.

⁶³ Ad Putter, “The Influence of Visions of the Otherworld on Some Medieval Romances” in *Envisaging Heaven in the Middle Ages*, eds. Carolyn Muessig and Ad Putter (New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 237-51, at p. 240.

⁶⁴ This point has been raised by a number of modern readers, predominately in the context of discussing the three “farlies,” or paths to Heaven, Hell, and Elf-Land. See for instance Emily B. Lyle's “The Visions in *St. Patrick's Purgatory*, *Thomas of Erceldoune*, *Thomas the Rhymer* and *The Daemon Lover*” in *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 72 (1971): pp. 716-722; Putter, “The Influence,” esp. pp. 239-40; David C. Fowler's *A Literary History of the Popular Ballad* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1968), p. 193; Howard R. Patch's *The Other World: According to Descriptions in Medieval Literature*, Smith College Studies in Modern Languages N.S. 1 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950), pp. 262-3; Wimberly's *Folklore*, pp. 116-19, 127-9, 153-5. For a comprehensive survey of more secular analogues and possible source texts, see Josephine M. Burnham, “A Study of Thomas of Erceldoune,” *PMLA* 23.3 (1908): pp. 375-420; and also Child's introduction to his section on Thomas the Rhymer (I.317-323). Yet even

texts identified by modern scholars stands H. of Sawtry's eleventh-century vision *Tractatus de Purgatorio Sanctii Patricii* [*St. Patrick's Purgatory*], and its subsequent proliferation in Middle English translations of the fourteenth century.⁶⁵ However, the majority of these associations have been drawn mostly from *Thomas the Rhymer's* inclusion of references to possible routes to these otherworlds frequented by vision literature.

In addition to this general agreement among academics as to the existence of geographical links to the realms of medieval Christian afterlife, yet unremarked upon in contemporary critical discourses are some of the specific details that *Thomas the Rhymer* shares with other texts from the visionary tradition.⁶⁶ Moreover, the description of Thomas's journey to the fairy realm, while concordant with the general template for these routes described by H. R. Patch in his comprehensive study of such motifs,⁶⁷ nevertheless contains a peculiar mix of particulars that, surprisingly, echoes literary and folk traditions describing the biblical exodus of Moses and the Jews through the Red Sea. My aim, therefore, is to explain how specific details of Thomas' journey to fairy land, such as the opening scene, the red-blood river, the forty-day journey, and the appearance of the

Burnham, speaking of the first-person narration of the romance's opening stanzas, remarks that, "if one were to read them without knowledge of the story to follow, one would doubtless suppose them to form the induction to a vision of some sort" ("A Study," p. 384). Also, my reading is not concerned with the validity of the historical figure Thomas of Erceldoune; on such a topic, see first Cyril Edwards, "Thomas of Erceldoune (fl. late 13th cent.);" in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004/2006).

⁶⁵ On which see further R. B. Easting, ed., *St Patrick's Purgatory*, EETS (o.s.) 298 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. xliii-xc. For an account of similarities between a thirteenth-century Middle English translation of the *St. Patrick's Purgatory* in the *South English Legendary* and the *Thomas of Erceldoune / Thomas the Rhymer* tradition, see further Emily B. Lyle's "The Visions in *St. Patrick's Purgatory, Thomas of Erceldoune, Thomas the Rhymer and The Daemon Lover*," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 72 (1971): pp. 716-722, and its reprinting in *Fairies and Folk*, pp. 43-9.

⁶⁶ This aim will perhaps uncover further evidence to support C. E. Nelson's observation "that the ballad is as *much* literary as it is traditional" ("The Origins," p. 138; italics are Nelson's).

⁶⁷ Patch, *The Other World*, p. 3.

orchard may reflect the influence of both exegetical folk traditions and a specific scene from one Middle English translation of *St. Patrick's Purgatory*. This discussion will also lead us to consider how these specific details sustain an alternative, local account of Thomas' death. Together, these observations suggest that already existing folk motifs regarding prophets and visits to the otherworld were combined with the narrative of a prominent local figure's death, and the nature of the area's geography, to craft a fairy-world foundation for the legitimacy of the "prophecies" associated with his name. Finally, I will consider how the readily identifiable details of local landscape from the ballads' introductions help to reinforce the credibility of the *Thomas* story, and to make its fantastical, escapist narrative appealing to a regional audience by virtue of its implied availability. Such localization, in turn, lends these narratives an unique perspective on the Border inhabitants' understanding of their landscape's economic, social, and political values as a natural reflection (or persevering reminder) of such communities' staunch claims for independence.

The relationship between the ballad *Thomas the Rhymer* and the tradition of visionary literature associated with *St. Patrick's Purgatory* has been most directly addressed by Emily B. Lyle.⁶⁸ She points out that the earliest Middle English version of *St. Patrick's Purgatory*, which appears in *The South English Legendary* (thirteenth century), contains a line that identifies "þe way þat geþ to heuene blis" (l. 609).⁶⁹ Lyle concludes that this line may be the source of the multiple otherworld paths in the ballads and romance of *Thomas*. While Lyle focuses exclusively on this system of paths and the

⁶⁸ See Lyle, "The Visions in *St. Patrick's Purgatory*," and its reprinting in *Fairies and Folk*, pp. 43-9.

⁶⁹ Cited at Lyle, *Fairies and Folk*, p. 45, from Charlotte D'Evelyn and Anna J. Mills, eds., *The South English Legedary*, Vol. I, EETS (o.s). 235 (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 106.

view of ‘heaven’s bright hills’ as a way to link the Thomas works into the visionary tradition, there also exists a connection via the details used to describe Thomas’ journey into the otherworld.⁷⁰ In Variants B, C, and E of *Thomas the Rhymer*, the protagonist meets the Fairy Queen beneath a tree atop a hill. He is then led or carried by her into the ground, and away from the mortal realm. In Variant A, Thomas experiences the relevant fantastic journey immediately upon his departure with the Fairy Queen, as:

For forty days and forty nights
He wade thro red blude to the knee,
And he saw neither sun nor moon,
But heard the roaring of the sea (A.7).

In Variant C, notably, this stage of the journey comes after Thomas has already been taken through a desert, and shown the three paths to Heaven, Hell, and Elfland. Choosing the latter, the Queen and Thomas then continue:

O they rade on, and farther on,
And they waded thro rivers aboon the knee,
And they saw neither sun nor moon,
But they heard the roaring of the sea.

It was mirk mirk night, and there was nae stern light,
And they waded thro red blude to the knee;
For a’ the blude that’s shed on earth
Rins thro the springs o that countrie (C.15-16).

These two variants both share the river of red blood that Thomas encounters after leaving the initial “brae” or “banke.”⁷¹ On the one hand, this river may indicate the influence of almost any of the prophecies associated with the romance tradition, as most

⁷⁰ Lyle elsewhere considers many of these same scenes in a different light, detailing their similarities with the late medieval Middle English romance *The Turk and Gawain*, suggesting that the romance is another source for these scenes from the *Thomas* tradition; see *Fairies and Folk*, pp. 49-54. The Exodus story elements that I discuss below may thus have also had an influence on both the Thomas and Gawain romances.

⁷¹ See also lines ll. 169-174 of the Thornton MS of *Thomas of Erceldoune* (quoted below).

of them foretell the shedding of Scottish and/or English blood. One that is particularly similar in this regard is the passage foretelling the death of a Scottish king:

Be-twixe a parke and an abbaye,
A palesse and a paresche kyrke,
Thare sall 3our kynge faill of his praye,
And of his lyfe be wondir jrke.
He sall be tane, so wondir sare,
So þat a-waye he sall noghte flee;
Hys nebbe sall rynne, or he thethyne fare,
þe rede blode tryklelandevn-to his knee (Thorton, ll. 431-440).⁷²

Interestingly, this passage places the king's fall between a park (secular/natural), an abbey (religious house), a palace (secular house) and a parish kirk (church) – an arrangement that faintly echoes the paths available for Thomas himself to choose in any version of his tale, as those routes and spaces upon the land lead from this life to the next. Moreover, the association of red blood and knees may suggest this particular prophecy as an inspiration for the details of the Variant A and C versions of Thomas' journey. However, the link is tenuous at best (not least without the mention of a river), so the ballads almost certainly reflect the influence of additional analogues.

One such source may be found in a passage whose relevant details are unique to the Auchinleck MS version of *Owayne Miles*, a fourteenth-century Middle English version of *St. Patrick's Purgatory*. The relevant experience occurs when Sir Owain, on his tour through purgatory, is forced to experience the punishment for malice and spite:

Thai [devils] ladde him forther with gret pain,
Til thai com to a mounteyn
That was as rede as blod,
And men and wimen theron stode;

⁷² The concordant passages from the other manuscripts of *Thomas of Erceldoune* are almost exactly the same.

Him thought, it nas for non gode,
For thai cride as thai were wode.

...

Ther com a windes blast,
That fende and soule and knight up went
Almest into the firmament,
And sethen adon him cast

Into a stinkand river,
That under the mounteyn ran o fer,
As quarel of alblast,
And cold it was as ani ise
The pain may no man devise,
That him was wrought in hast (90-93).⁷³

While in the vision narrative it is the mountain that is blood-red, the text still associates an otherworld hill, that color, and a river beneath the mountain. Moreover, both Variants A and C precede this journey with the metaphorical declaration that the Elf Queen's "steed flew swifter than the wind" (A.6, C.8). The "windes blast" that casts the suffering souls – and visiting knight – off the hill and into the river in *Owayne Miles* thus serves a parallel purpose to the Fairy Queen's wind-swift steed, which carries Thomas into the blood-red river. Variant C's further observation that "a' the blude that's shed on earth / Rins thro the springs o that countrie" reinforces the link between the fairy world and the afterlife or the realm of the dead. Strangely, it also concentrates on the bodily experience of death, perhaps emphasizing the corporeal nature of Thomas' otherworldly experience – another detail which his account shares with the *St. Patrick's Purgatory* tradition. The version of this scene presented in four variations of the romance *Thomas of*

⁷³ Citations of *Owayne Miles* (Auchinleck MS version) are cited by stanza number, and taken from Easting's *St Patrick's Purgatory*, pp. 3-34.

Erceldoune further serves to highlight the correspondence of the vision and Thomas traditions:

Scho ledde hym jn at Eldone hill,
Vndir-nethe a derne lee;
Whare it was dirke als miydnyght myrke,
And euer þe water till his knee.
The montenans of days three,
he herd bot the swoghyng of þe flode (Thorton, ll. 169-174).

Thus, while not a direct model for the scene that appears in Variants A and C of *Thomas the Rhymer*, these stanzas from the Auchinleck *Owayne Miles* nevertheless provide evidence of a template of characteristics associated with the otherworld in circulation in the early fourteenth century that may have made their way, via literary or oral traditions, into the locality of Erceldoune, and thereby into the ballad of Thomas.

Another current in the confluence of traditional motifs influencing the topographical characteristics of Thomas' journey to the otherworld in *Thomas the Rhymer* may ultimately derive from the legends regarding Moses leading the Israelites across the Red Sea. While the historical – and spatial – distance between the biblical account of Exodus and the context of the tales of Thomas is vast, the specific details of geography that the two share suggest, at the very least, a model establishing the geographical setting appropriate to the deliverance of prophecy. Specifically, the ballads of Thomas reflect the influence of an Insular tradition regarding green paths, red water, and miraculous orchards connected with the travels of Moses.

The association between certain details of landscape and Insular representations of the Israelites' journey first arises in literary tradition with the Old English poem

Exodus (eighth century).⁷⁴ As Hugh Keenan has pointed out, line 312 of this poem curiously describes Moses leading the Jews *ofer grenne grund*, “over green ground.”⁷⁵ Ruling out the possibility of realism for such a description of the miraculously-bared Red Sea floor, Keenan compares this instance to similarly peculiar passages from *Christ and Satan* (ninth century), Psalm 141 of the *Paris Psalter* (mid-tenth century), and the early Middle English text *Poema Morale* (mid-twelfth century) to suggest that a green path serves as an allegorical trigger, marking the “way” in question as the route to paradise. This significance in turn derived from a “poet’s consciousness of a well-established typological interpretation of the passage of the Israelites through the Red Sea... a familiar type for the Passage to Paradise, the Entry into the New Jerusalem.”⁷⁶ As Keenan also interestingly points out, this representation of the green way to Paradise later suffered a reversal in meaning in the literary tradition, coming to represent the path to hell after being usurped around 1400 by the “golden ways” of the Book of Revelation.⁷⁷

Yet the motif of a green way to heaven does not stop here. In a later article, Keenan goes on to describe how this tradition appears to have maintained currency in Insular folk traditions long after 1400.⁷⁸ Equally relevant to the tale at hand, Keenan also

⁷⁴Hugh Keenan, “*Exodus* 312: The Green Street of Paradise,” *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 71 (1970): pp. 455-60.

⁷⁵ Keenan, “The Green,” p. 455.

⁷⁶ Keenan, “The Green,” p. 459. In an observation not noted by Keenan, Patch reports that Seth follows a “green path (*viam viridem*) marked by Adam’s and Eve’s footsteps back to Eden” in the “most popular version” of third- or fourth-century story of earthly Paradise, the *Legend of Seth (The Other World)*, p. 155). This narrative suggests an even earlier, and more widespread, source for the “green road” motif.

⁷⁷ Keenan, “The Green,” p.460.

⁷⁸ He cites as one example the East Anglian folk tale of a green pilgrimage road to Walsingham, which stated that children who took this road were miraculously and instantaneously transported to their destination – with the slight side effect of being turned green for a time upon their arrival (Keenan, “*Exodus* 312: Further Notes on the Eschatological ‘Green Ground,’” *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 74 (1973): pp. 217-19, at p. 219). See also Keenan’s source, Sacheverell Sitwell, *Monks, Nuns and Monasteries* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), p. 45. Those from fairy realms were often thought to be green as well, including the account of two green “fairy” children found in a Suffolk pit

identifies an account from the Jewish commentary text *Midrash Rabbah* (eleventh or twelfth century) that describes a miraculous orchard for the sustenance of the Israelites during their passage through the Red Sea.⁷⁹ The account of Exodus from the Apocryphal Book of Wisdom xix.7 presents a parallel scene, describing the Red Sea's freshly revealed floor to be a *campus germinans*, or “green/springing/grassy field.”⁸⁰ Finally, Keenan suggests that these Jewish eschatological accounts influenced the description of the Red Sea path in the Old English *Exodus*, and from there entered into the Insular literary tradition. In turn, these works provided models for the representation of otherworld paths that entered into the menagerie of motifs active in the realms of folk narrative. As Keenan concludes, “the concept of a green way to Paradise, whether drawn from the Old Testament story of the Red Sea journey or from the green palm-strewn Entry of Christ into Jerusalem (its antitype) survived as an eschatological image in English medieval folklore.”⁸¹

Again, bringing this discussion even closer to the topic of *Thomas the Rhymer*, Thomas Hill observed that this same motif appears in one Shropshire version of the nineteenth-century ballad *The Wife at Ussher's Well* (Child 79).⁸² Drawing on the work of

during the reign of King Stephen, as reported by the chroniclers Ralph of Coggeshall and William of Newburgh (see Leslie E. Jones, “Fairies: Fairy Realms” in *Medieval Folklore: A Guide to Myths, Legends, Tales, Beliefs, and Customs*, eds. Carl Lindahl, John McNamara, and John Lindow [New York: Oxford University Press, 2002], pp. 129-30, at p. 129).

⁷⁹ Keenan, “Further,” p. 218.

⁸⁰ Ibid. As Keenan points out, this is particularly important because the Book of Wisdom, foundational to the development of liturgical practice in the Western Church, contained the roots of the same trend evident in the (much later) *Midrash Rabbah* (for which, see S. M. Lehrman, trans., *Midrash Rabbah*, Vol. 3: Exodus [London: Soncino Press, 1939]). On the importance of Wisdom to the Catholic liturgy, see further Edgar J. Goodspeed, *The Apocrypha: An American Translation* (New York: Vintage Books, 1958 [Orig. 1938]), pp. xx-xxiii, 177 and Bruce M. Metzger, *An Introduction to the Apocrypha* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1957), pp. 75-6 (both cited by Keenan at “Further,” p. 218).

⁸¹ Keenan, “Further,” p. 219.

⁸² Thomas D. Hill, “The Green Path to Paradise' in Nineteenth-Century Ballad Tradition,” *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 91 (1990): pp. 483-6, pp. 483-4.

both Keenan and A. N. Doane's survey of the "green way" in pagan Scandinavian and Germanic literature,⁸³ Hill ultimately posits that the motif developed from pagan, "folkloric" roots into a Christian symbol that retained currency in oral traditions long after it fell out of literary use.⁸⁴ This brief review of critical literature shows, then, that a concept regarding a green path to paradise, and related to eschatological accounts of the Exodus through the Red Sea, survived the early Middle Ages to emerge again in the literary record via the ballad tradition. Consequently, this chain of influence provides a valid site of inquiry into the milieu of motifs available to the late medieval folk-society of the Anglo-Scottish border from which *Thomas the Rhymer* emerged.

The journey of Thomas and the Elf Queen to the otherworld demonstrates a number of characteristics from this tradition associated with the passage of the Jews through the Red Sea. As I have already shown, the blood-red color of the water is one detail that matches up with the name of the sea, at least in Variants A and C of the ballad (cited above).⁸⁵ Of course, the water in Thomas' case reaches to his knee, and is not miraculously split. This incongruence may reflect the influence of either the previously-discussed prophecy from the romance, or perhaps a description of a river local to Erceldoune in flood.⁸⁶ In Variants A and C, the sound of the "sea" quite clearly crashes around Thomas and his fairy guide, although they never reach it. Variant E replaces "sea"

⁸³ A. N. Doane, "The Green Street of Paradise: A Note on Lexis and Meaning in Old English Poetry," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 74 (1973): pp. 456-465.

⁸⁴ Hill, "The Green Path," p. 485.

⁸⁵ Wimberly, on the other hand, reads this river in an entirely non-Biblical sense, positing that "the rivers of 'red blude' through which Thomas and the fairy queen... wade or ride on their Otherworld journey are clearly evidential of some sort of water barrier to the land of the spirits" (*Folklore*, p. 109). Speaking later of the ballad's three paths, however, he does acknowledge that "the Christianization of the fairy queen's cosmography is noteworthy" (Wimberly, *Folklore*, p. 118).

⁸⁶ Such a flooded river could reach to the knees of one on horseback; see further my discussion of the river in flood, below.

with the “sound o' the flood” (10).⁸⁷ This, then, agrees with the sense of the Israelites crossing the path opened between the tall walls of water sounding to either side of them in the Red Sea.⁸⁸

Moreover, the time-period for the crossing provides some cause for speculation. Speaking of both the river of blood and the 40-day period recounted in Variant A, Child remarks that “there is much exaggeration in the ballad: they wade through rivers in darkness and hear the sea roaring, C15, A7, as in [the] R[omance], but they also wade through red blood to the knee, A 7, C 16, and the crossing occupies not three days, as in R[omance stanza] 31, but forty days, A 7” (I.321). However, this specific span of time could hearken back to the forty days that Moses twice spent on Mt. Sinai – notably, while receiving his prophecies the first time,⁸⁹ and in the second instance receiving the Ten Commandments.⁹⁰ In both cases, the Vulgate biblical account has Moses on the mountain “for forty days and forty nights.” The second time, Moses also refrains from eating or drinking, just as Thomas does while crossing the river. While this connection may seem tenuous at first, it is possible that the story of Moses on the Mountain from Exodus may provide a motif-model for a man gone to collect prophecies. If so, the timespan in Variant A reflects the influence of another element of this motif on the Thomas legend.

In all versions of the ballad (and romance), the crossing or fording of the river (red-blooded or no) leads directly to a paradisaal garden, where Thomas attempts to satiate his overwhelming hunger. As Variant E puts it:

⁸⁷ This may also reinforce the reference to a local tradition relating to the disappearance of Thomas in a flooding river; see further my discussion below.

⁸⁸ See Exodus xiv.22, 29.

⁸⁹ Exodus xxiv.18.

⁹⁰ Exodus xxxiv.28-9.

Then they rade on, and farther on,
Untill they came to a garden green;
To pu an apple he put up his hand,
For the lack o food he was like to tyne (11).

As already suggested above, this provides a setup that echoes the *Midrash Rabbah* explanation of Exodus xiv:⁹¹

The daughters of Israel passed through the sea holding their children with their hand; and when these cried, they would stretch out their hands and pluck an apple or a pomegranate from the sea and give it to them, for it says *And he led them through the depths, as through a wilderness* (Psalm cvi.9). Just as they lacked nothing in the wilderness, so also in the depths they lacked nothing.”⁹²

This parallel sets up the possibility that the place where Thomas has been led is in fact an earthly paradise, a green garden that echoes the green field or path of the Red Sea bed.

Yet in all versions except Variant C, the Elf Queen immediately admonishes Thomas not to eat of the fruit (in some versions, as here, specifically an apple), for it is the “fruit of hell” (E.12). Thus, the fruits of paradise become in this sense reversed, just as the motif of the “green path” to paradise gets turned upon its head in the literary tradition following 1400.⁹³ Yet the appearance of the garden, and the “farlies” or paths that lead from it to various realms of the Otherworld (in all except Variant C), when placed in the context of crossing the “blood-red” water, still display elements that may be the lingering effects of

⁹¹ Part of this passage is also cited by Keenan (“Further,” p. 218).

⁹² Lehrman, *Midrash*, p. 272. Following Keenan (“Further”), examples from the *Midrash Rabbah* are used to illustrate apocryphal traditions regarding the Exodus account that reflect the parallel trajectories of explanations discussing the Book of Wisdom that proved so influential in shaping the Western Church. Thus, my suggestion here is not, of course, a direct link from these Jewish texts to the Scottish ballad; but rather to say that their shared details may provide evidence of an indirect influence on folk motifs of journeys to a paradise/otherworld via influence on the Insular literature from the explicative, religious traditions of which the *Midrash Rabbah* is one example.

⁹³ Wimberly, for one, ultimately concludes that this scene “represents a confusion of Christian and pagan beliefs, and it is possible that the tree of the subterranean, paradisiac orchard was originally the tree of life, a universal conception. Of course, so far as the ballad story goes, the tree or the fruit gives us the well-known incident of the eating taboo to which mortal visitants to the Otherworld are subject” (*Folklore*, p. 155).

the motif-model identified by Keenan, even if it has broken down over the course of centuries of oral transmission. Indeed, although the core aspect of the “green path to paradise” is not exactly replicated in any version of *Thomas the Rhymer*, and the road to Hell universally appears as fruitful and broad, the influence of the folk traditions derived from the Old English *Exodus* literary image still lingers in the way to Elfland itself, “that bonny road / which winds about the fernie brae” (A.14, C.13). The “bonny” or “beautiful”⁹⁴ path to the parallel of earthly paradise that is fairy land may carry the vestiges of a positive connotation from the motif Keenan has identified. As such, the jumbled elements that appear in *Thomas the Rhymer* may testify to the widespread popularity of this tradition.

In addition to its wellsprings within the labyrinthine, literary depths of otherworld vision traditions, the river of red blood through which Thomas wades in Variants A and C may also reflect the influence of certain folk stories explaining the end of Thomas' life. James A. H. Murray, in the introduction to his edition of *The Romance and Prophecies of Thomas of Erceldoune*, relates two local tales regarding Thomas' fate.⁹⁵ One popular story has Thomas leaving a meal to follow a hart and hind down a village main street and into the woods, never to be seen again.⁹⁶ This tradition presumes that Thomas returned to fairy land. Yet, however widespread this particular narrative, Murray presents in a footnote another tale that had survived until the nineteenth century – one that preserves a

⁹⁴ See *DSL*, “Bonny, adj.” meaning 1.

⁹⁵ Both of the following accounts are briefly summarized in Henderson and Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief*, at p. 150. They also note that “it was [Sir Walter] Scott and Scott alone who, in *Minstrelsy*, first recorded the tradition concerning Thomas’s return to Fairyland” by following “a hart and hind” down a village street (p. 150). Beyond remarking that Murray seems to have relied upon age of teller and vernacularity of account as evidence of a tale’s validity, however, they do not analyze the stories.

⁹⁶ Murray, *The Romance*, p. xlix.

very different kind of end for Thomas. This second account that Murray relates is noteworthy enough to reproduce in full:

My friend, Mr. Andrew Currie of Darnick, has sent me the following tradition of the disappearance of Thomas, which he took down 35 years ago from the mouth of “Rob Mercer, a very intelligent matter-of-fact man, well versed in all traditionary lore about Earlston, and possessing a wonderful memory for a man of 85”: “Ye want to ken if ever aw heard how Tammas the Rymer disappeared? – Weel, aw can tell ye something about that, as aw had it frae ma graanfaither, an' nae doot he had it frae his fore-bears, for we're als auld a family in Yerlsten, – or raither Ercildoun, as it was caa'd i' thae days – we're als auld as the Learmonts. D'ye see thae auld waa's i' the front o' yeir ain shop? Weel man, aw mind o' that bein' a gay an' substantial hoose in maa young days, an' Tammas the Rymer was last seen gaan' oot o' that hoose eae nicht afore the derknin', an' he set off up Leader for Lauder Cas'le; but he ne'er gat there – he never was sene againe. Aw've heard 'at he geade in there to get some deed signed or wutness 't, an' that he was carryan' money wi' him to some Lord or great man up there, 'at he was intimate wi'. But ma granfaither uist to say – an' nae doot he had it handit doon – that Leader was i' great fluid at the time, an' that Tammas the Rymer had been robbit an' murdert an' hi body thrawn into the water, whulk nicht take it to Berwick. An' that's likker-like than the Fairy story! Sae ye hae 'd, as aw had it, frae thaim 'at was afore us.”⁹⁷

This story corresponds with the ballads' accounts of Thomas crossing the river in a number of significant ways. For instance, two of the ballads include Thomas taking a number of days to wade through the river (40 days in Variant A, 3 days in Variant E; see also the romance, at for instance Thornton ll. 173-4, cited above). This lengthy duration may reflect the influence of Rob Mercer's tradition, in that Thomas' body would have spent days flowing down the flooded river. Moreover, the “blood-red” color of the water makes even more sense when Thomas' “wading through the flood up to his knee” is taken as a metaphor for the passage of his thief-battered corpse, bleeding out into a muddy, flooded river. A journey into the otherworldly realms, where roads lead both to Heaven

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 1, n. 1.

and to Hell, again aligns this story with the visionary tradition of near-death experiences – with the caveat that the roots of this tale lie even closer to that mortal boundary. Also, Thomas' destination of a castle corresponds with his destination – the fairy hall or castle – in all versions of the ballad and romance. This, then, suggests that Mercer's story may retain a number of the core elements that served as seeds for the fairy account that grew into the tale(s) of Thomas.

Of course, the orchard that features prominently in all versions of the tale remains absent in Mercer's account. Yet enough details converge between Mercer's inherited story and those existing in the literary record to suggest a close relationship between these traditions. This correspondence could be seen to work in two ways. First, the oral tradition may preserve the roots of a local story, which then was mixed with literary traditions regarding visits to, or visions of the otherworld. This combination, supplemented by a switch in the order of events (with the river crossing and castle appearing earlier in Thomas' life, and not at the end), while maintaining the sense of timelessness encapsulated in Mercer's account of Thomas' disappearance, then in turn grew to produce the ballad and romance stories, with their associated prophecies, along with other popular stories reframing Thomas' eventual “death” as a final trip back into fairy land. On the other hand, Mercer's account could represent a local anti-tradition reacting against the dominant Thomas narrative, seeking to instill instead a rationalized explanation of Thomas' disappearance, either by creating his end anew, or through the appropriation of a pre-existing real-life account (since riverside murders, as even other ballads make plainly clear, were not rare occurrences). Either way, the relationship of the

Thomas-narrative traditions, oral and literary, clearly demonstrates the similarity of the ground they cover by virtue of the geographical details they share.

Thomas the Prophet and the Topography of Independence

Over the course of reviewing a number of different analogues for specific details of landscape in the journey to the Fairy Otherworld in *Thomas the Rhymer*, I have sought to identify the possible roots of these red-blood rivers and miraculous orchards in earlier literary records. In particular, the focus has remained upon biblical commentaries, otherworld vision literature, and the romance version of the Thomas story, along with a snapshot of (perhaps more practical) folk-traditions regarding Thomas' fate. Yet all of the observations heretofore have remained provisional and decidedly piecemeal, especially when it comes to suggesting a direct influence upon the texts of the ballad. This hesitation derives from the uncertainty of dealing with the products of a folk tradition. The malleability of time and authorial identity in these ballads, and the inescapable reliance on the scattered literary crumbs of a vast and complicated assemblage of different, intersecting oral traditions, necessitates such a light touch, pointing the modern reader more towards the identification of similarities than the elucidation of seemingly incongruous details.

This wider frame of uncertainty, particularly when it comes to tracing veins of thematic or formal influence, is, ultimately, impossible to escape. Yet in the case of *Thomas the Rhymer*, the introductory presentation of landscape still betrays a hint of a directly addressable, analyzable impulse. All variants of this ballad found in Child anchor their action in a *local*, identifiable geographic setting. While the narrative action quickly

moves – atop, alongside, or within the Elf Queen's hillside gateway – into the jumble of stereotyped motifs employed to create a vivid, yet identifiably alien otherworld, it is important that its opening elements remain clearly in reach of the listener. Sir Walter Scott recognized the significance of the context for reception when he sought to map the Thomas story onto land abutting his own property, purchasing a gully, replanting it and renaming it “the Rhymer's Glen” to create a romantic setting for Thomas' gate to the otherworld.⁹⁸ Later, and with a decidedly more scholastic execution, James A. H. Murray (himself a local boy raised but a few miles from the ancient Erceldoune)⁹⁹ discarded Scott's explanation and went to painstaking detail to map the “brae,” tree, and hill of the ballad's opening stanzas onto the specific details of landscape from near his hometown.¹⁰⁰

Now, such a study as mine cannot, of course, attempt to analyze the legitimacy of Scott or Murray's attempts to map their beloved local tale onto landscapes familiar to them. What I can examine, however, is how these attempts betray the very move that the ballad constructs as unavoidable in its audience's minds.¹⁰¹ The song demands that its listeners place the events nearby, immediately at hand – and it is the details of landscape that construct and execute this subtle, yet effective shaping of the narrative-recipient relationship. Even when ascribing the events of Thomas' fairy encounter to a specific spot, the Eildon tree near Huntly banks, the story still links the otherworld entrance into

⁹⁸ As Murray drily opines, “it may be more than suspected that the desire of bringing some of the romance of the old story to his own estate, was Sir Walter Scott's reason for naming it 'the Rhymer's glen’” (*The Romance*, p. lii).

⁹⁹ As also noted by Helen Cooper, “Thomas of Erceldoune: Romance as Prophecy” in *Cultural Encounters in the Romance of Medieval England*, ed. Corinne Saunders (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005), pp. 171-187, at pp. 171-2.

¹⁰⁰ Murray, *The Romance*, pp. l-li.

¹⁰¹ The particular examples cited are tinged, of course, with a nineteenth-century sense of regionalism.

recognizable, knowable terrain. The border with the otherworld, this ballad suggests, is always near-at-hand.

This effect is achieved through two different strategies in the ballads, dependent upon their area of circulation. Variant A, the version recorded from the famous Mrs. Brown in 1800, was taken down away from the immediate area of Erceldoune.¹⁰² As such, the introduction that it presents lacks the specific relationship to those particular, named landmarks that appear in most other versions of the legend. Yet, notably, the opening of Variant A still demonstrates the motivation to map itself immediately and irrefutably onto the listener's local landscape:¹⁰³

True Thomas lay oer yond grassy bank,
And he beheld a ladie gay,
A ladie that was brisk and bold,
Come riding oer the fernie brae (1).

The details of the hill or elevation have been removed. Even the famous Eildon Tree is absent from this version. Yet nevertheless, the ballad still places Thomas “oer yond grassy bank,” and points to “the fernie brae,” a stream- or riverbank¹⁰⁴ just vague enough to be mappable onto the side of almost any Scottish waterway. While the ballad-singer would not necessarily be within sight of such landscape features during performance, the use of the word “yond,” and the removal of any names specific to the

¹⁰² Murray notes that the most specific location of origin for Variant A is Scotland (*The Romance*, p. liii).

¹⁰³ Speaking on the topic of place-names in ballads, Child makes a concordant point on the localization of ballad landscapes, lamenting the fact that “the topography of traditional ballads frequently presents difficulties, both because it is liable to be changed, wholly, or what is more embarrassing, partially, to suit a locality to which a ballad has been transported, and again because unfamiliar names, when not exchanged, are exposed to corruption” (IV.156; also cited by W. Edson Richmond, “Ballad Place Names,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 59.23 [1946]: pp. 263-7, at p. 265, and W. F. H. Nicoliason, “‘There Was a Lord in Ambertown:’ Fictitious Place Names in the Ballad Landscape” in *Narrative Folksong: New Directions, Essays in Appreciation of W. Edson Richmond*, eds. Carol L. Edwards and Kathleen E. B. Manley [Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1985], pp. 73-81, at p. 76).

¹⁰⁴ See “Bra, n.” meaning 1, in the *DSL*.

Erceldoune area, clearly invite the audience to make such an intimate connection with their own familiar surroundings – to place Thomas' gateway to the otherworld in their own backyards, as it were. Even (the obviously corrupt and piecemeal) Variant D, which lacks any specific geographic setting in its introduction, nevertheless reflects the narrative's link to local landscape through its final lines, having the Fairy Queen call out to Thomas “Gin ere ye want to see me again, / Gang to the bonny banks o Farnalie” (D.11).¹⁰⁵ And the localization of the events, in Variant A, goes even a step further, linking the path to the fairy world itself into this same set of environmental elements by repeating again the detail of “the fernie brae” (A.14). Elfland, the ballad reminds its listeners, lies just beyond that well-known bank.

Scott's composite version, Variant C, is “a copy obtained from a lady residing not far from Erceldoune, corrected and enlarged by one in Mrs Brown's MS.”¹⁰⁶ Notably, the major change to the opening here is that the version local to Erceldoune still contains a set of references clearly mapping the ballad's opening onto specific parts of the local landscape.¹⁰⁷

Thomas lay on Huntlie bank,
 A ferlie he spied wi' his ee,
 And there he saw a lady bright,
 Come riding down by the Eildon Tree (C.1).¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ Also, this version was recorded in Abbotsford, but a few miles from old Erceldoune (Child IV.454).

¹⁰⁶ Sir Walter Scott, *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, ed. J. G. Lockhart, 3 Vols. Vols. I-II, (London: James Ballantyne, 1802); Vol. III (Edinburgh: James Ballantyne, 1803), at vol. II, p. 251 (quoted at Child I:317). However, Murray, for one, makes no secret of his belief that the parts of Variant C not found in Variant A are the products of Scott himself (*The Romance*, p. liii).

¹⁰⁷ The romance versions which contain the Thomas and Fairy Queen narrative as a prelude to the prophecies also retain these specific place names, but the circulation of the romances through the transmission of written texts is not under consideration here. Instead, the focus is on the effects displayed by the orally-transmitted ballad versions of the narrative, when their snapshots appear in the written record.

¹⁰⁸ Variants B and E open with very similar wording. Although Variant C has been “adapted” from Variant A, probably by Scott, Nelson does observe that Variants B, D, and E “can all be traced to a common

This specification shares a parallel intent, it seems, with the move towards anchoring an entrance to the otherworld in real-world locales that shaped the evolution of religious vision literature. Notably, such an explicit connection to a real-world location was an integral characteristic of the aforementioned *St. Patrick's Purgatory*. As Peter M. de Wilde observes, this tale exemplifies the Irish clergy's creation of a "corporeal journey in the hereafter" that is made more convincing by virtue of its realistic details.¹⁰⁹ De Wilde traces the roots of this technique back to seventh- and eighth-century Ireland, explaining that, in terms of visiting otherworlds, "the image of a journey and the earthly aspects are important characteristics of the Celtic Otherworld in Celto-Irish literature."¹¹⁰ While such "realistic" details predominantly consist of descriptions of the corporeal experience of purgatorial punishments (one example of which has already been cited above), one of the most important is the real-world location of this entrance to purgatory: the cellar of a church "on Station Island in the lake Lough Derg in northeast Limerick."¹¹¹ Moreover, although "the history of the legend was chiefly a literary one ... in Ireland and England... its popularity was kept alive rather by actual visits made there from time to time."¹¹² Thus, grounding "the journey in time and space," and presenting accounts of "physical evidence," are two of the techniques that De Wilde identifies as most important to making the stories of Otherworld visions believable.

geographical point: the area near the ancient village of Erceldoune, now called Earlston, Berwickshire, Scotland" ("The Origin," p. 142).

¹⁰⁹ Peter M. De Wilde, "Between Life and Death: the Journey in the Otherworld" in *Death and Dying in the Middle Ages*, eds. Edelgard E. DuBruck and Barbara I. Gusick (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), pp. 175-187, at p. 179.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 180.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 181.

This same construction of a grounded legitimacy for an otherworld journey is also present in the three versions of *Thomas the Rhymer* (Variants B, C, and E – not to mention all versions of the romance which include this story) that mention a specific, real-world location for Thomas' initial encounter with the Elf Queen. As with Variant A's sense of the immediacy, the reachability of the fairy otherworld via a familiar landscape, the specific local spot of the Eildon tree – probably represented fairly accurately, according to Murray's account¹¹³ – allows local listeners to identify with the fantastical events of the ballad. In the words of W. Nicolaison, “when names, fictive and actual, are given an opportunity to focus and confirm, even to intensify an entertaining story in song, they become, as it were, an enriching part of that story and somehow enhance its enjoyment and believability, and therefore its survival.”¹¹⁴ This analysis has sought to provide at least one specific answer for Nicolaison’s “somehow.”¹¹⁵ Although this strategy may have roots in the literary-religious (and even earlier, Celtic folk-) traditions De Wilde identifies,¹¹⁶ it nevertheless reflects an impulse towards legitimizing a narrative via local landscape description.¹¹⁷

¹¹³ Murray, *The Romance*, pp. l-li.

¹¹⁴ Nicolaison, “There Was a Lord,” p. 80.

¹¹⁵ Of course, as Nicolaison rightly observes, for “anybody attempting to write about place names in traditional ballads ... one's arguments are bound to be shaped out an attitude of response to [W. Edson] Richmond” (“There Was a Lord,” p. 73). The current discussion elucidates a specific instance of Richmond's proposition that place names help to establish credibility for a particular ballad narrative (“Ballad Place Names,” p. 263), and seeks to extend that argument by pointing out its parallel in the development of the *St. Patrick's Purgatory* tradition of vision literature.

¹¹⁶ Particularly in the case of the romance(s) *Thomas of Erceldoune*.

¹¹⁷ Evidence of a similar rhetorical strategy may be found in one version, Variant G, of another ballad, *The Wee Wee Man* (Child 38) (see Child I.332-3). The place names in the opening stanza, although lacking accompanying landscape description, nevertheless link the miraculous meeting to a specific geographic location: “As I gaed out to tak the air, / Between Midmar and bonny Craigha, / There I met a little wee man, / The less of him I never saw” (G.1). Notably, Child also remarks that, as with *Thomas the Rhymer* / *Thomas of Erceldoune*, this ballad has a fourteenth-century romance version, where “there seems to have been an intention to make it, like Thomas of Erceldoune, an introduction to a string of prophecies which follows, but no junction has been effected” (I.330). My thanks to Rachel Waymel for pointing out to me

In addition to the move towards legitimization via real-world location identified by De Wilde, however, R. Howard Bloch posits that *St. Patrick's Purgatory*, and especially Marie de France's translation and adaptation of that work in her *Espurgatoire Seint Patriz*, participate in the colonization of Ireland by the Angevin empire of Henry II. In particular, Bloch argues that these texts use the story of Sir Owen, who enters Purgatory as a violent man only to emerge one who recognizes the immorality (and costs) of such actions, as a way to condemn the reciprocal violence attributed to pre-Conquest Irish culture. Instead, St. Patrick becomes a figure that ushers in a consciousness of law, and the enduring status of class and corporate identity from this life into the next, encouraging the Irish to accept their place within the Christian, "rational" legal and bureaucratic system of Angevin England.¹¹⁸ Focusing on the ideological aspects of colonization, Bloch posits that "the concept of Purgatory in its founding articulation in H. de Saltrey's *Tractatus* and disseminating expression in Marie de France's translation was a powerful speculative tool in the Anglo-Norman pacification and colonization of the conquered foe," since, "to the degree that the entrance to Purgatory is a physical, geographic site, ... the claim to it is the equivalent of a powerful territorial claim, one comparable symbolically to the present-day conquest and prospecting of space, the planting of a flag on the moon."¹¹⁹

Do the ballad romances of *Thomas*, incorporating as they do some elements of the Purgatorial landscape, participate in a similar effort (by either the Scottish or the English

this characteristic of *The Wee Wee Man*. "Craigha," or Carterhaugh, was apparently a popular locale from which to embark upon "fairy adventures" in the ballads (Wimberly, *Folklore*, p. 318).

¹¹⁸ See R. Howard Bloch, *The Anonymous Marie de France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006 [Orig. 2003]), particularly pp. 267-310.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 277.

crowns) to colonize the Border? In the Thornton MS version of the romance, the unique prologue asks that “jhesu crist ... / Safe ynglyshe mene both ferre and nere” (ll. 13-14), and concludes with similar formula “Bot jhesu crist, þat dyed on tre, / Saue jnglyshe mene whare-so þay fare” (ll. 23-4), suggesting a particular, nationalist perspective on Border relations. Indeed, both English and Scottish texts throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries especially (but also later) sought to appropriate the Thomas name to lend a sense of validity to their historic, nominally “prophetic” accounts of either English or Scottish military successes, along with a variety of folk-sayings (particularly north of the Border).¹²⁰ In such cases, the “planting of the flag” takes place, so to speak, in the attempt to claim the person or heritage of Thomas himself, and by extension the geographic locations with which his tradition is associated. If Thomas foretold English or Scottish success, the reasoning runs, then the eventual conquest of the area by the relevant political power is rendered inevitable.

However, as I shall discuss below, the landscape details that emerge from even the Thornton MS’ (and the other English romance manuscripts’) frame narrative suggest an independent identity for the Border area as a place whose true nature may only be known by its native inhabitants (as the Thornton MS’ compiler was himself). Such an attitude ultimately complicates, if not undermines, the sense of the romance and ballad texts discussed here as an element of English ideological colonization propaganda.¹²¹

¹²⁰ See for instance Murray, *The Romance*, pp. xlii-l.

¹²¹ Speaking of the romance, Ingeborg Nixon posits, based on linguistic evidence, that the first fitt (the frame narrative, which is similar to the ballads) is perhaps Scottish in origin, while the viewpoint of the prophetic fitts is varied, but “predominately English;” see Nixon, ed., *Thomas of Erceldoune, Pt. 2: Introduction, Commentary, & Glossary* (Copenhagen: The Department of English, University of Copenhagen, 1983), pp. 47-8, cited at p. 48. My suggestion here is that the place names (which Nixon reads

Moreover, the ballad texts, as I have shown, are first and foremost invested in the sense of the narrative as a local experience, one unique to the Border landscape. As such, these texts reflect the influence of a strong sense of an independent Border identity – not one that consciously appropriates colonizing, Purgatorial texts for its own ends, but rather one that manages to integrate such details into a tale that champions the importance of local independence.

Even the Elf Queen herself, dressed in a “skirt of the grass-green silk” (A.2; also C.2),¹²² appears in the ballad versions almost as an anthropomorphized feature of the landscape, come alive to take Thomas within and through the geographic boundaries between this world and the next.¹²³ It is perhaps particularly fitting, then, that she asks Thomas to lay his head down in her lap or knees (A.11, B.9, C.10), to show him the “farlies three,” the path to Heaven, the way to Hell, and the road to, or the castle/hall within, Fairy Land. For *Thomas the Rhymer*, interaction with landscape is the way to escape the specific locality of one's hometown, to link to and commune with the powers of the otherworld while still being able to return to one's “ain countrie” (C.14). This ballad creates an escapist fantasy specifically suited for folk who spent most of their lives in a constrained space, as its otherworld adventures both begin and end on the edges of their own farms and villages, under a tree they themselves can visit and sit beneath (or

as giving the text a more Scottish flavor) instead reflect a close association of the framing tale with the Border area, rather than either England or Scotland.

¹²² Speaking of this same detail, Matthew P. McDiarmid observes that, “when Thomas makes love to the fairy Queen on Huntly bank, under the Eildon Tree, both the scene and her green dress are appropriate to their love making and the consequent seven year capture of his soul,” since “in the ballad green is power – fully associated with love and lust... – and also with death, ill-luck, or whatever is otherworldly, witches or fairies;” see “The Scots Makars,” p. 15.

¹²³ Perhaps in a similar vein, medieval British fairies were sometimes said to be vegetarians (Jones, “Fairies,” p. 129).

the stone[s] that mark its spot once it has died).¹²⁴ The appeal of the Thomas ballads' narrative, therefore, remains inextricably entwined with its rhetorical embellishment of the listener's local landscape.

The presentations of Border landscapes in these ballad romance narratives do not serve merely to excite or capture the audience's interest, however. While they do anchor the narrative to a recognizable topography (at least at its opening and conclusion) – the descriptions of a hill, tree, and riverbank, in addition to the Elf Queen who rides upon them –, these landscape details also betray a sense of anxiety with regards to the relationship between human beings and their surrounding environments. Plumbing the depths of the earth, Thomas is rewarded by the gift of prophecy, but only after he blindly wades through underground rivers, and suffers the pains of starvation and temptation (the cursed fruit of the orchard) beyond what any other mortal could bear. In a sense, Thomas has gone into the grave and come back again – an intimately corporeal experience figured in terms of intercourse (with the Elf Queen), blood, pain, and silence (as he is forced to bite his tongue while in the fairy court). Yet the fact that Thomas returns, able to speak of not just the past, but also the future, gestures towards the powerful sense of the land – specifically the Border landscape – as existing beyond the scope of mortality and time, and thus inscribing a record of the events that have and will occur on its surface. The underhill realms of *Thomas the Rhymer* echo the meaning-rich topographies of *Sir Colling* and *Eger and Grime*, which invite narratives of explanation at the same time that they provide stages for violent death and misguided labor.

¹²⁴ On the fate of the Eildon Tree and the subsequent stones set up to mark its location, see further Murray, *The Romance*, pp. 1-11; Cooper, "Thomas," p. 172; and also many of the discussions in n. 63 and n. 64 of this chapter.

This acknowledgment of the land's abject, alien nature, however, necessarily exists in conjunction with an awareness of that same landscape's economic value and political importance. Indeed, this very sense of topography as valuable is precisely the reason that Thomas' intimate understanding of the landscape's hidden features and fairy inhabitants allows him to "read" its features and understand the sociopolitical events to come. The prophecies alluded to by the ballads, and listed in full or part by the various romance versions of *Thomas of Erceldoune*, record a list of violent exchanges of property control along the Anglo-Scottish Border. In this way, the prophecies seem at first to drag the Border into a realm of nationalist perspectives, pitting Scottish rulers against their English foes, both sides shedding their blood to feed the rivers below. Yet in the end, the land itself – whose knowledge is communicated to Thomas through its personification, the Elf Queen – remains an independent entity, observing and recording human events without fully ceding that unique knowledge to any but Thomas, local boy that he is. As such, the prophetic romance foundation of this ballad tradition withholds the true ability to interpret, to understand, and to utilize this Border landscape from all but one of its own – suggesting thereby that such inhabitants should themselves be valued for the knowledge they've earned through the accident of birth and trials of experience in a brutal landscape.¹²⁵

In conclusion, I would like to turn to some lines from the opening fitt of the romance *Thomas of Erceldoune*, as recorded in the fifteenth-century Thornton MS (itself

¹²⁵ Interestingly, later tales regarding Thomas' fate suggest that he waits, buried beneath a hill, to rise again like King Arthur when Scotland has need of him. This seemingly more nationalized belief is nevertheless still made resolutely local, tying Thomas to specific landmarks near Dumbarton and Inverness; see further Henderson and Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief*, p. 42. Such an amendment of the Thomas legend may further demonstrate the desire to appropriate the importance the narrative imbues to a particular, localized landscape for the home environments of new audiences.

a product of the southern, Yorkshire end of the Border zone). Here, I posit, readers find exemplified this sense of the Border lands' implicit economic and social value, as interpreted through the eyes of one of its own. "Fytte the Firste" begins with a first person account, presumably narrated by Thomas himself, which explains that he went "in a mery mornynge of Maye, / By huntle bankkes my selfe alone" (ll. 27-8), listening to so many different types of birdsong "that alle þe wode a-bowte me ronge" (l. 32). This *locus amoenus* opening, of course, echoes both the opening of *Piers Plowman*, when Will first lies down to dream beside a brook in the hills,¹²⁶ and also a similar scene of birdsong already discussed from the Percy text of *Eger and Grime*. Yet here, while evoking a vision- or trance-like state on Thomas' part, this opening also serves to focus the reader's attention on the setting, on the landscape, which becomes progressively less self-consciously artificial once readers are informed that, from his position "Vndyre-nethe a semely tree" (l. 34), he spies a lady riding "ouer a longe lee" (l. 36). The idyllic riverside is now situated in a hilly topography, drawing the narrative closer to the Border landscape in the same breath that the Elf Queen is first introduced.

At this point, the text launches into an extensive catalogue of the lady's rich, expensive attire, particularly noting her many valuable gemstones (ll. 41-72). Having observed this wealth, Thomas misinterprets the rider as the Virgin Mary (l. 75) and decides, after some hesitation, that he must catch up with the woman; thus, he "rane ouer the Mountayne hye" (l. 82) and "hir mette at Eldone tree" (l. 84). Ensconced "Vndir-nethe þat grenwode spraye" (l. 86), Thomas greets the lady rider, and is informed by her that:

¹²⁶ Ingeborg Nixon also notes this parallel; see *Thomas: Pt. 2*, p.25.

Qwene of heuene ne am j noghte,
ffor j tuke neuer so heghe degree.
Bote j ame of ane oþer countree,
If j be payrelde most of prysse;
I ryde aftyre this wylde fee,
My raches rynnys at my devyse (ll. 91-6).

As the Elf Queen notes here, Thomas' mistake is that he has interpreted her as the Queen of Heaven, whereas she is really a Queen of a lower "degree" – that is, she is Queen of the "oþer countree" below, yet still a part, of Thomas' own local landscape. Interestingly, she declares that she rides after "this wild fee": perhaps pointing to quarry of her "raches," but must most probably identifying the wild land (fee) that she owns, and for which she will collect taxes from her tenants – that is, the "wild" inhabitants of the natural world.¹²⁷

In sum, The Elf Queen here identifies her holdings as the source of her wealth – the wealth that both protagonist and poet have been at pains to describe in terms of her horse and decorative accouterments. Thomas' immediate lustiness – "Of lufe, lady, als þou erte wysse, / Þou gyffe me leue to lye the bye!" (ll. 99-100) – thus embodies both a sexual urge and a more abstract desire for the value of the lady's landholdings. That Thomas is at first unable to properly manage the land that, at one level, the Elf Queen personifies, becomes painfully clear: after multiple rounds of intercourse, Thomas stands up and – in a line reminiscent of his earlier gaze over the landscape – realizes that:

Hir hare it hange all ouer hir hede,
Hir eghne seemed owte, þat are were graye.
And alle þe riche clothyng was a-waye,
þat he by-fore saw in þat stede;
Hir a schanke blake, hir oþer graye,
And all hir body lyke the lede (ll. 131-6).

¹²⁷ See *MED* "fee (n.(2))," meanings 1a-f, land held in tenure.

When Thomas “laye & sawe þat syghte, / Vndir-nethe þat grenewod tre” (ll. 137-8), he cries out, and laments the lady’s lost beauty. While the horror of this scene derives first and foremost from the image of the woman’s abused body,¹²⁸ another implication of the physical markers of such abuse – particularly the loss of the markers of material wealth – is that the mismanagement of the landscape that she represents will similarly lead it to lose its value, and bear instead the painful scars of violence. This reading of an abused fairy queen, mistress to a landscape abused by human violence, could certainly have rung true to inhabitants of the Border, particularly during the tumultuous raiding of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

Importantly, it is not until Thomas has followed the lady into the landscape itself, through the river and orchard, and relinquished control over himself by placing his head in her lap, that he is shown all of the different paths that landscape contains, and finally views the lady as “Scho come agayne als faire & gude, / And also ryche one hir palfraye” (ll. 235-6). By actually experiencing and observing the landscape, Thomas comes to understand its true nature and value, returning to his gaze its many riches (as exemplified by the Queen’s attire). In turn, this understanding is what sets Thomas up, in the later fits, to force (again, in a disturbing appropriation of the threat of sexualized violence) the

¹²⁸ This transformation is somewhat reminiscent of the loathly lady motif, as seen for instance in *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell*. Nixon (*Thomas: Pt. 2*, pp. 27-9) argues that the *Thomas* Queen’s transformation most closely resembles the tortured spirit returned to warn of the dangers of Purgatory, as in *The Awntyrs off Arthure*. See also W. P. Albrecht, *The Loathly Lady in “Thomas of Erceldoune”* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1954), who posits a variety of sources and symbolic significances for the use of the motif. Albrecht also usefully lists a number of verbal similarities between the description of Guinevere’s mother in *The Awntyrs* and the transformed Queen in *Thomas* (pp. 52-4). I argue that the Elf Queen’s close identification with the Border landscape lends her transformation another level of significance – and her association with that landscape is only heightened by the echoes of *Awntyrs* found in the Thornton MS (where *Awntyrs* immediately follows *Thomas*), since such a corpse-like, female anthropomorphization of the landscape echoes that of Guinevere’s mother in *Awntyrs* (on which see my discussion in Chapter 3).

Queen to relinquish her prophetic visions to him, to carry back to the human realm. Thus, the romance of *Thomas of Erceldoune* establishes the concept that the Border landscape's value, while indivisible from the threat of violence, can ultimately only be understood by those that live upon its moors and mountains, understanding the environment's characteristics by virtue of experience. That the knowledge so gained speaks of the violence and bloodshed suffered by both English and Scottish armies suggests that such nationalist colonizing efforts may ultimately be in vain, fated to break themselves against the topography and people of Border zone. This perspective on the importance of inhabitation for a true claim to controlling a landscape thus develops into the attractive nature of locality that colors the ballad tradition growing alongside, and continuing long after, the *Thomas* narrative ceases to circulate with its medieval prophecies attached.

Conclusion

The ballad romances of Scotland and the Border counties clearly demonstrate the interplay of landscape conventions, with green bowers, hilly wilderness, and deep rivers charting the boundaries of Elven Otherworlds and contested territories. So much have other scholars noted. Here, however, I posit that this presentation of landscape as both intimately familiar and unknowably alien communicates, in simplified form, a conception of the late-medieval and early-modern Border relationship with the natural world. The passages implying or explicitly delineating the economic significance of particular landscape features that permeate English texts are in shorter supply (though not entirely absent) for their later, northern brethren. Instead, these late ballad romances work hard to transform the landscape of the Anglo-Scottish border into another type of boundary,

emphasizing how the political categorizations of space – both national and familial, in a land ruled largely by feuding clans – influence and are perhaps influenced by conceptions of the boundary between the realms of human and Nature's more alien identities. Adopting the obsession with boundary markers exemplified by such popular southern romances as *Sir Isumbras*, these Scottish and Border texts focus on an even closer connection between human nature and local environments, literally mapping libido, emotion, and mortality onto landscapes that appear at first glance remarkable only for their isolation or "wild" nature. In this view of landscape holding a mirror to human experience, I am reminded of Guinevere's tarn-mother, rising during the opening storm of the *Awntyrs off Arthure* (another text with a suspected Border provenance). Literary landscape encompasses and exceeds human experience – creating a recognizably British stage whose topography shapes the human dramas of these narratives. In turn, these narratives elevate the experiences of inhabitants of those environs' real-life inspirations. That the landscapes of *Eger and Grime* are so often reported to us by the characters themselves, then, is especially appropriate: for the heroes and their texts thereby demonstrate to readers the importance – both artistic and practical – of landscape in crafting literary and real-life human identities. Border romances and their ballad kin thus emerge as the stories of a land and its people – indivisible, despite the many boundaries they may seek to inscribe.

Over the course of this dissertation, I have traced the ways in which late-medieval British romances engage with contemporary concerns regarding the place of human beings in observably changing ecological settings. I have purposefully refrained from seeking to force these texts into a grand narrative that presupposes a specific evolution of

perspectives on the natural world. By adopting this approach, I do not mean to condemn or criticize the work of other scholars for presenting broader views, be they the epoch- and geography-spanning work of analyzing millenia of Western art,¹²⁹ or research focused more on particular time periods¹³⁰ and places.¹³¹ Instead, my intent has been to reveal the great variety of worldviews encompassed in the genre of British romance – a genre whose widespread popularity and diversity of form in the centuries studied necessitates an allowance for contradiction and the lack of resolution.

Within this rich array of agricultural, mercantile, religious, regional, legal, and artistic perspectives on environmental spaces, one cannot help but glimpse the roots of our complex contemporary matrix of contrasting understandings of the natural world's boundaries, "values," and significance – particularly in anxieties and concerns regarding human control over ecological conditions. Again, I do not mean to impose an anachronistic, twenty-first century American understanding of landscapes and waterscapes onto the romances of Britain at the close of the Middle Ages, but merely to place the ecological concerns of both time periods into conversation with one another. The romances I have analyzed were first and foremost literary texts meant for didactic entertainment, and were not primarily intended to serve as depositories of ecological knowledge. Nonetheless, their regular, prolonged engagement with realistic portrayals of human understandings of and interactions with contemporary environmental contexts

¹²⁹ Chris Fitter, *Poetry, Space, Landscape: Toward a New Theory* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

¹³⁰ See especially Derek Pearsall and Elizabeth Salter, *Landscapes and Seasons of the Medieval World* (London: Paul Elek, 1973).

¹³¹ For example, see the studies of Catherine Clarke, *Literary Landscapes and the Idea of England, 700-1400* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2006) and Lynn Staley, *The Island Garden: England's Nation of Language from Gildas to Marvell* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012).

demonstrates, if nothing else, that the natural world – and the place of human beings within it – was a topic that rarely relinquished its hold on the medieval imagination. It is in this aspect that I hope modern readers can see a glimmer of their own, diverse experiences. Though awareness of the proximity of the non-human world may have changed in nature and scope in the intervening centuries, human relationships with global and local environments remain as significant as they have ever been. Recognizing the diversity of ecological worldviews contained by medieval British romances, then, is one step towards understanding how medieval poets and audiences communicated that significance to themselves – and perhaps, in a small way, towards understanding the origins of our own complex relationships with the natural world.

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