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Preliminary Exams Rationale  
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In preparation for my preliminary exams, I have read between and across my two lists, “Old French Narrative” and “Ecocriticism,” instead of conceiving of two discrete sections with their own questions and critical discussions. At the core of my reading is a desire to interrogate the diverse ecologies and environments of medieval French literature.

The primary texts I have chosen for my “Old French Narrative” list are mostly from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and account for several different genres. I am interested in an approach that allows me to think through romances (e.g. *Le Conte de Floire et Blanchefleur*, Chrétien de Troye’s *Chevalier au Lion* and *Chevalier de la Charrette*), *lais* (e.g. *Yonec* and *Guigemar* by Marie de France and the anonymous *lais*, *Mélion* and *Tyolet*), saints’ lives (e.g. *Vie sainte Audree*, *Vie sainte Modwenne*, *Estoire de Seint Aedward le Rei*) and travel narratives (e.g. Mandeville’s *Le Livre des Merveilles du Monde*, Marco Polo’s *Le Devisement du Monde*, Benedeit’s *Voyage de Saint Brendan*) together without making strict, generic definitions. I would argue that the saints’ lives and the travel narratives on my list could also fall under the category of romance; these texts often seem resistant to generic definitions and so my task here is not necessarily to categorize them, but rather think through their shared or differing representations of human-nonhuman-environment relationships.

Despite the predominance of romances on my list and for the purposes of my exams, I would rather not to focus on one specific genre from the texts I have chosen. The critical texts on my “Old French Narrative” list have provided me with a comprehensive overview of the medieval French canon in addition to the nuances—or sometimes lack thereof—of genre in the Middle Ages. By analyzing romances, *lais*, saints’ lives, travel narratives, and bestiaries, I hope to explore the rich environments depicted in these texts as a group that blurs generic boundaries, rather than focusing

on one specific genre. I don't believe that a shorter work, like Marie de France's *lai*, *Guigemar*, for example, which comprises roughly 880 lines, couldn't be analyzed with or against seemingly disparate, significantly longer romances, or compared with a more segmented work like Marco Polo's *Devisement du Monde*.

If not genre, then, the vernacular tradition bounds together the works I have read. I began my prelims preparation believing I would focus on literature from the Anglo-Norman world. This scope, however, was too geographically, linguistically, and temporally narrow. In reading, too, I became discouraged with the critical distinction between insular French texts and those written on the continent. Reading only "Anglo-Norman" texts ignores the wider, global range of francophone literature from the Middle Ages, such as works from Ireland, Wales, Scotland, Italy, Byzantium, the Canary Islands. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne's reconfiguration of Anglo-Norman as the "French of England," and Ardis Butterfield's label, "Anglo-French," broaden the category and seemingly disrupt the focus on these francophone texts as resultant from the Norman conquest.<sup>1</sup> I am interested in decentering ideas of national borders and separation of language, and in considering trans-Channel, -oceanic, -continental, and -temporal medieval francophone literature: holding in conversation the works of Marie de France, Chrétien de Troyes, John Mandeville, and Marco Polo.

Blurring the linguistic and national boundaries that limit the categorization of these works will allow me to concentrate on the various border crossings and transgressions that figure largely into my motivation for these exams. In medieval French narratives, so much of the story is driven by characters' movement through and between the worlds they inhabit. For example, in Marie de

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<sup>1</sup> See Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, Thelma S. Fenster, and Delbert Russell, eds. *Vernacular Literary Theory from the French of Medieval England* (Rochester: D.S. Brewer, 2016) and Ardis Butterfield, *The Familiar Enemy: Chaucer, Language, and Nation in the Hundred Years War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

France's *Guigemar*, the eponymous character moves from his city, to the forest for a hunt, to a ship which carries him magically to a different land, where he is taken under the care of a lady who is confined to a tower. When he returns to his city, his beloved takes the ship to visit him in his homeland. This movement through various spaces is not distinct to the *lais*, but is present in the narratives I have read. Another example of movement comes from Marco Polo's *Devisement du Monde* and Mandeville's *Livre des Merveilles du Monde*. The narrators of these texts describe their travels over continents, across seas, and among islands. Their itineraries double as catalogs of the customs and habits of indigenous peoples, the plants, animals, and foods available in these locations, and often vivid depictions of the environments they experienced. In Mandeville, however, the narrator describes places where no one goes, either as a result of fear of harm or of the impossibility of crossing certain frontiers. Finally, in romances, such as *Le Bel Inconnu*, the titular character fights opponents who guard fords, rivers, and bridges. These adversaries prevent others from crossing physical boundaries that might otherwise be traversed.

It is the movement through such environments and spaces, as well as the crossing of borders that interests me. How are these physical, geographic boundaries represented in medieval French narrative texts? Who and what has access to these environments? What is the significance of crossing these frontiers and what are the consequences? When forests, rivers, oceans, and windows are crossed, new worlds and beings are discovered, knights encounter *aventure*, whether they seek it or not, and the story moves forward. Yet, when thinking about moving through these medieval environments, I have also been considering the material composition of these spaces: the water of seas and rivers, the wood of forests, the gaps in stone that form windows. Ecomaterialism—or materialist ecocriticism—is, in part, useful, thought-provoking, and closely aligned with the types of analysis I hope to accomplish in my exams. Jeffery Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert suggest that ecomaterialism complements cultural materialism and add that it “conjoints thinking the limits of the

human with thinking elemental activity and environmental justice.”<sup>2</sup> Cohen and Duckert’s example is more of a pin on a map, rather than a definition. It points to where ecomaterialism lies within the critical landscape: at the crossroads of several different theoretical approaches. The “limits of the human,” however, seem to strike at the heart of materialist ecocriticism, and these limits are the most compelling when considering the environments described in the primary texts above.

In eschewing the idea of the material world as comprised only of exploitable resources, this sub-genre of ecocriticism decenters the human as the primary subject, and envisions an interconnectivity between the material world and the things that inhabit it. Material ecocriticism, therefore, has a close relationship with object-oriented ontology, Jane Bennett’s *vital materialism* and Stacy Alaimo’s *trans-corporeality*, which close the conceptual gaps between humans and their environs.<sup>3</sup> It has prompted me to think about the vibrancy and agency of environmental materials in medieval French narrative, such as the role of water. One such question I have is: What is the role of bodies of water and watery bodies in medieval French narratives? Water has many uses in these texts: as a pre- and post-meal cleanser, a mode of transportation, a site of prophesy, a threat to life, a habitat, and much more. And in these texts, water becomes meaningful from the intra-actions such as in *Chevalier de la Charrette* when Gauvain nearly drowns in deep water after trying to cross the “Pont soz Eve,” the underwater bridge, into the land of Gorre. He nearly dies because so much water has entered his lungs. Another example of this type of material intra-action comes from the *Vie seinte Audree*, wherein water erupts from a stone in order to quench the nuns’ thirst. After Audrey’s death, too, a healing fountain springs forth from where her body lies. Finally, the sea congeals in

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<sup>2</sup> *Elemental Ecocriticism: Thinking with Earth, Air, Water, and Fire* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 5.

<sup>3</sup> See Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010) and Stacy Alaimo, “Trans-Corporeal Feminisms & the Ethical Space of Nature,” in *Material Feminisms* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008). See also Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, eds., *Material Ecocriticism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014)

*Voyage de Saint Brendan* and temporarily prevents the monks from proceeding on their journey to find earthly Paradise. In these few examples alone, it is clear that an interrogation of water as an agent and environmental material will be useful for my exams.<sup>4</sup>

The second part of my question about water, however, turns to watery bodies. I consider the episode of the spring emitting from Audrey's grave to be an example of the blurred boundary between human and environment: a watery body. Here the question of the limits of the human in ecomaterialism returns, in wondering where the body ends and water begins. This confused boundary occurs in other texts, as well. For example, in the *Ovide Moralisé*, the story of Hermaphroditus demonstrates water's effect on the human body, and how a fountain has the power to turn anyone who bathes in it half male. Hermaphroditus' sea change, if you will, illustrates a liquid transformation in which the water of the fountain conjoins with the body in an entangled singularity. Similarly, in the *Ovide Moralisé*, Arethusa explains to Ceres her flight from the sea god Alpheus and why she was transformed into a fountain. Arethusa bathes in a river, not knowing that the river was the liquid-body of Alpheus. She flees from him and he pursues, but she prays to Diana for help, and the goddess conceals her within a cloud. Out of fear of being raped by Alpheus, Arethusa slowly liquefies, dripping into her own stream falling through the earth. When Alpheus sees the one he desires transformed, he returns to his watery figure and mixes his liquid body with Arethusa's. This unfortunate sequence demonstrates the complexity, mutability, and dangers of watery bodies, despite the narrator's moralization, which draws connections between Arethusa's fountain, penitence, and the absolving powers of the waters of confession.

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<sup>4</sup> Most of the critical works I have read that analyze representations of water in literature are primarily focus on the Early Modern era, but I have found them engaging and helpful nevertheless. See, See Steve Mentz, *At the Bottom of Shakespeare's Ocean* (London: Continuum, 2009); Dan Brayton, *Shakespeare's Ocean: An Ecocritical Exploration* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012); Lowell Duckert, *For All Waters: Finding Ourselves in Early Modern Wetscapes* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

While these two examples are from the same text, watery bodies abound in medieval narrative, and these bodies are not always human. One last, brief example is the *Poisson Chevalier*, Fish Knight, in *Le Conte du Papegan*. King Arthur fights and defeats this knight—whose horse is as big as an elephant and who is in proportion to his elephant-sized horse—in battle. Once the Fish Knight was slain, Arthur examines the body to notice his skin was like that of a serpent and that the horse, knight, and all his weapons were attached with the same skin. Later, Arthur and his party discover that near the battlefield was a path that led directly into the sea, whence came the Fish Knight. When the entourage approach the sea, there is a momentary storm with waves that appeared to reach the sky, and cries and screams from the kin of the vanquished Fish Knight. This scene in *Le Conte du Papegan* brings to light simultaneously my curiosity for movement through space—the Fish Knight's ability to live in the sea and fight on land—and the larger role of watery bodies and bodies of water in medieval French narrative.

The example of the Fish Knight brings me to my last critical starting block for the preliminary exams: animal studies. The *Poisson Chevalier* is arguably not human because it is an assemblage of horse, knight, and weapons that lives in the ocean. What interests me are the points of contact between human and nonhuman beings. For example, in medieval French narrative texts, what relationships exist between human and nonhuman animals? How do these actors interact, or intra-act, with each other and with their environments? How do these relationships vary across different narratives? The contact between these figures is similar to what Susan Crane labels “encounters,” which she qualifies as being cross-species, lived, fantastic, instructional, and commodified among other adjectives.<sup>5</sup> Karl Steel has argued that at the heart of human-animal

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<sup>5</sup> Susan Crane, *Animal Encounters: Contacts and Concepts in Medieval Britain* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 2.

encounters is a violence and subjugation, which play into human self-conception.<sup>6</sup> And Peggy McCracken has demonstrated how certain representations of human-animal encounters in medieval French literature emphasize human dominion over nonhuman beings.<sup>7</sup> These scholars have further stimulated my interrogation of human-animal-environment relationships.

Such an interrogation is capacious, however, given the vast number of representations in Old French narrative. First, ethical, religious, and natural knowledge is attributed to animals and even stones in the vernacular bestiaries of Pierre de Beauvais and Guillaume, Clerc de Normandie. These texts provide insights into scholastic and popular understandings of animals in the Middle Ages. Yet, other narratives complement these bestiaries with meaningful depictions of human-animal, animal-animal, and human-animal-environmental relationships. In *Le Bel Inconnu*, for example, Inconnu fights and defeats opponents for a variety of reasons, but two times he engages in combat over animals: first a hunting dog that his companion won't return to its owner, and a sparrow hawk that holds a great importance to its owner and should belong to the most beautiful woman. These instances emphasize the value of certain animals in society, especially within the model of ownership; the hunting dog and the sparrow hawk are particularly meaningful for nobility, as they are trained for the hunt. Inconnu disrupts ownership, however, when he defeats his opponents and wins the animals as prizes. He then sends the owners to Arthur's court as prisoners. It is not a liberating move for the animals, however, because ownership is transferred to Inconnu and his companions. Here, animals are seen as domestic commodities to be won and traded.

This commodification of animals can be seen to an extent in *Le Conte du Papegau*, as well, when Arthur wins the *papegau*, parrot, in combat. The parrot possibly stands in for the sparrow hawk

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<sup>6</sup> Karl Steel, *How to Make a Human: Animals and Violence in the Middle Ages* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> Peggy McCracken, *In the Skin of a Beast: Sovereignty and Animality in Medieval France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

prize in *Le Bel Inconnu*, but it is housed in a large, ornate gold cage covered with gems. Arthur's parrot has a gift that the sparrow talk does not: it talks. The *papegan* interprets love songs, prophesies Arthur's successes, and shouts commands to his caretaker, the dwarf. The human-animal relationship here is complex because the parrot belongs to Arthur, but relies on the dwarf as a type of servant, which constructs a unique power dynamic vis-à-vis the dwarf's subservience to the parrot. The parrot is an imprisoned bird which seems to aid Arthur in ways that are drastically different from *Le Bel Inconnu*. In these two texts alone the differences in animal-human interaction is indicative of the wide range of relationships present in Old French narrative. I am also interested in seeing how animals can often serve as companions, even if that relationship demonstrates the animal's subservience to a human.<sup>8</sup> For instance, the lion in *Chevalier au Lion* that accompanies Yvain on his adventures, and protects him from his enemies, after Yvain kills the dragon that was engaged in combat with the lion.

In addition to animal-human encounters, I hope my exams will explore moments in these texts when the boundary between human and animal is obfuscated. For instance, in Marie de France's *lais*, *Bisclavret* and *Yonec*, two of the protagonists transform into a werewolf and a hawk respectively. In the anonymous *lais*, *Mélion* and *Tyolet*, Méliion changes into a wolf and Tyolet, a boy who can summon animals with a whistle, encounters a stag who transforms into a "beast-knight," and who helps Tyolet himself become a beast-knight. These four *lais* invite readers to consider morality, movement, and social expectations of the human and what happens when the category of human is upset by animal metamorphosis.

Finally, the last figuration I hope to explore is animal-human-environment relationship, wherein the animals and humans may be considered environment. In the *Voyage de Saint Brendan*, for

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<sup>8</sup> One text that seems useful for thinking through this interaction is Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm, 2003).

example, the monks dock on an island to celebrate Easter. They gather wood on the island, build a fire, and cook an Easter feast. The island, however, turns out to be a whale, which dives deeper into the sea and swims away from the crew and their ship. Despite this episode, the monks return to the whale every year for seven years to celebrate Easter. The whale-island is simultaneously animal and land, an assemblage of flesh and tree, and possesses a level of agency in order to retain the monks' cauldron on its back and to allow them to seek repose and habitation year after year.

Whereas the boundaries between animal and environment are questioned in the *Voyage de Saint Brendan*, those between human and vegetal are blurred in *Estoire de Seint Aedward le Rei*. On his deathbed, Edward has a dream where he sees a tree that is cleft in half and separated by three furlongs. The tree will eventually join back together and grow leaves and fruit once again without the help of human hands. In reading the tree metonymically as Edward and his lineage, or lack thereof, it is possible to see the tree as Anglo-Saxon rule and as Edward himself. This symbolic reading brings together Edward's death with the temporary death of a tree, and portends the territorial division and destruction of the Norman Conquest.<sup>9</sup> The vegetal, human, and historical are combined in this dreamscape.

Looking forward, I hope that my preliminary exams will help me to think about the worlds that comprise medieval French narrative. In reading romances, *lais*, travel narratives, and saints' lives alongside material ecocriticism, I hope to explore the movement of characters between and through spaces, paying particular attention to the vibrancy and agency of the materials that make up these literary environments, such as water, wood, plants, stone. And in thinking with critical animal theory, these exams may give me the opportunity to interrogate the wide array of human-animal encounters and relationships in medieval French narrative. The texts I have chosen are so rich in their

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<sup>9</sup> See Peggy McCracken, "The Floral and the Human" in *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral: Ethics and Objects*, edited by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Washington, D.C. Oliphant, 2012).

depictions of these environments and human and nonhuman interactions, and I hope that by exploring these textual environments and their inhabitants, I will uncover the various ecologies of Old French.