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Prelim Exam 1

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2. The historian Lynn White famously claimed a medieval origin for the modern “ecological crisis” in Christian belief in human “dominion” over the natural world. He also identified a medieval origin for an alternative model of symbiosis. What kinds of ethico-political relations between people and landscapes are valued in narrative literature? How does the landscape serve human characters? How is it altered by them? What capacity does it have to shape, instruct, direct, or otherwise inform human characters?

The landscapes of medieval literature are as varied and rich as the texts that contain them. Equally as diverse are the ways human characters in these narratives interact with the worlds around them. The importance of the material environment to medieval writers who created texts, too, is undeniable with the use of oak galls and animal skins in the production of manuscripts. Yet within these medieval narratives, the various textual landscapes are inhabited, traversed, and altered by humans just as these material environments reciprocally enact upon the characters and often exhibit agency. Forests that provide shelter and escape, orchards that serve as prisons, trees that decide life or death, healing springs, and the torturous fields and rivers of Purgatory are some of the meaningful sites of human-environmental interaction within medieval French narratives. Out of these interactions, then, one can identify various relationships that exist between people and landscape in these texts.

Lynn White, Jr.’s address-turned-article, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis” traces our modern ecological problems to the medieval Christian West, and the belief that humans possessed a God-given dominance over the earth and animals that inhabited it.¹ Western science and technology, White argues, evolved from the Christian dogma of the human

¹ Lynn White, Jr., “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” *Science* 155, no. 3767 (1967): 1203-1207.

transcendence beyond and mastery of the natural world, and continues in our current moment.² In view of Western Christianity's unparalleled anthropocentrism, White offers an alternative human-nature relationship through the figure of a medieval radical, St. Francis of Assisi, who urged the equality of all creation rather than a hierarchy featuring human dominion.³ Despite White's compelling argument, he offers almost no literary examples as a basis for his claims. Yet, his exposition leaves us with at least two possible relationships between humans and "nature" in the European Middle Ages: one that places humans in a position of dominance over the world around them, and one that seeks to establish an equality between people, animals, and the environment. By exploring the material environments of medieval French narratives, I hope to complicate White's claim and demonstrate the diverse interactions—beyond the domination/equality binary—that existed between people and the landscapes around them.

God's Creation

Many medieval European thinkers shared the belief that humans belonged to a category separate from the world and creatures around them. Not only were humans separate, they were intended to rule over the earth and its inhabitants, as is shown in Genesis I, when God commands the creation of humankind:

² Ibid., 1206. In the introduction to his edited collection, Alfred Siewers writes, "Tadodaho Sid Hill, spiritual leader of the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Confederacy, shocked a group of Euroamerican academics recently when he diagnosed for them the root of U.S. environmental problems with one short phrase: 'The separation of church and state,'" *Re-Imagining Nature: Environmental Humanities and Ecosemiotics*, edited by Alfred K. Siewers (Lanham: Bucknell University Press, 2014) 2. Whereas White identifies the source of modern ecological crises as the result of the longue durée of Christianity, certain indigenous thought points to secularization and the removal of spiritual affairs from government regulation of the environment as the source of such eco-conflict.

³ Ibid., 1206-7.

And God says, 'Let us make Man to our image and likeness and let Man rule over the fish of the sea and birds of the sky and the beasts and over the entire earth and crawling things that move on earth.'

Et ait, 'Faciamus hominem ad imaginem et similitudinem nostram, et praesit piscibus maris et volatilibus caeli et bestiis universaeque terrae omnique reptili quod movetur in terra.'⁴

Unlike birds, beasts, and crawling things, humans are unique in that they resemble God. Furthermore, this excerpt indicates that people are to hold dominion over the entire earth, *universae terrae*, which includes the animals that dwell there; and in reading earth, *terra*, as land, it is possible to locate human dominion over the environment. This environment includes the sea where the fish swim, the sky the birds traverse, and the ground where the beasts and crawling things roam. In order to interrogate this dominant relationship of people over landscape in medieval narrative, it is important to first consider the assumption of human rule over the animals that populated these landscapes.⁵

Medieval bestiaries provide further textual basis for the human authority over the natural world. These encyclopedic works moralized and contextualized the behaviors and characteristics of animals, as well as stones, gems, and even the human. Often, the openings of these texts provide an abbreviated retelling of Genesis I. The thirteenth-century Anglo-Norman *Bestiaire Divin* written by Guillaume le Clerc provides one such example:

⁴ Genesis 1.26, *The Vulgate Bible: Douay-Rheims Translation*, edited by Swift Edgar (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 6. Translations of Latin and French are my own unless otherwise indicated. Original text will be shown below translation.

⁵ For more on human dominion over animals and man's authority over women in the Creation story, see Peggy McCracken, *In the Skin of a Beast: Sovereignty and Animality in Medieval France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 12-19.

When God initially made the world and placed humans and beasts there, he bestowed different characteristics upon all creatures; and, the main point is, out of all creatures, God gave authority to people.

Quand Dex primes le monde fist
et homes et bestes i mist,
A trestotes ses creatures
Enposa diverses natures ;
Et de totes, ce est la somme,
Donna la seignorie a home.⁶

The Anglo-Norman word *nature* has a broad array of definitions, ranging from the essential quality of something to its physical form. God bestowed both physical form and characteristics upon all creatures on the earth, as is described in Genesis, but Guillaume emphasizes above all else the authority given to humans. When he writes that God gift of rule, “seignorie,” to people “the main point is/ce est la somme,” he condenses the Creation to human superiority, Guillaume does not explicitly state that the “seignorie” was only over animals. This human dominion extends beyond the beasts and to the material landscape s they inhabit.

While Guillaume le Clerc stresses the importance of human rule over all creatures on earth, his contemporary, Pierre de Beauvais, introduces his bestiary with slightly more nuance. He introduces the text:

Here begins the book called *Bestiary*, and the reason it is called that is that it speaks of the characteristics of beasts, for all the creatures that God created on earth, he created for people and for them to take example of belief and faith from the creatures.

⁶ l. 21-26. Guillaume le Clerc *Le Bestiaire Divin*, edited by Célestin Hippeau (Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1970). I recognize that this exam question is not asking about animals, but in thinking about human-landscape interactions, it seems prudent to include a brief discussion of human-animal relationships.

Chi commence li livres c'on apele *Bestiaire*, et por ce est il apelés ensi qu'il parole des natures des bestes, car totes les creatures que Dex cria en terre cria il por home et por prendre essanple de creance et de foi en eles.⁷

Pierre, instead of addressing human “seignorie,” offers a dual explanation: one that seems to commodify the animals of God’s creation and one that places animals in an allegoric and didactic role. If God created animals “por home,” then it can be assumed that they were used by people in various ways: for food, clothing, labor, and entertainment. Similarly, the “natures des bestes,” their inherent characteristics and physical forms could further reveal God’s intention for these animals to be subservient to humans. More than physical commodification, however, animals provided, according to Pierre de Beauvais, an understanding of faith in God and spirituality for humans. These bestiaries allowed for the translation of “diverses natures” into meaningful and instructional Christian allegory, and while animals are inhabitants of the landscape, these human-animal relationships lay the groundwork for understanding the various human-landscape interactions found in medieval French narrative.

In a similar generic family to the bestiary, medieval herbals describe and classify plants and herbs by their medicinal, magical, culinary, and poisonous characteristics. Like Guillaume le Clerc and Pierre de Beauvais, the author of one medieval French herbal, MS Garrett 131, introduces the text by outlining the role that herbs play in the world. Specifically, the author traces the herbs’ purpose for humans:

I will put in the vernacular and tell you about the power of many herbs, which have sufficiently greater strength when they are gathered in good faith and in prayer, and by God who gave them their gifts: that they be very rejuvenating and healing for the faithful.

⁷ 1. 1-4 *Le Bestiaire: Version Longue*, edited by Craig Baker (Paris: Champion, 2010).

De plusors herbes vos diron
La force e enromanceron
Qui assez plus grant force aront,
Quant queilletés eles seront
O bonne creance, o oreisons,
Par Dé qui lor dona ses dons,
Que eles fussent molt ajuvanz
E garissanz les bien creanz.⁸

The repetition of “force,” power and potency, within the first three lines indicates the usefulness that these herbs hold for humans. Plants, like beasts, possess inherent qualities that were given to them by God. Yet, the herbs’ value for humans is conditional: the herbs ought to be harvested while praying and being in good faith, and they are best suited for faithful Christians. It is unclear whether the herbs are capable of healing the ill if they are collected without prayer and faith, or if they can be used by the unfaithful. What the herbal emphasizes, however, is that the strength of the plants is augmented through faith in God, which is exhibited through the double repetition of “force/force” and “creance/creanz”: potency and faith are paramount in the relationship between medicinal herbs and humans. Therefore, the relationship valued in this text is one not only between humans and herbs, but between humans and God.

The bestiaries of Guillaume le Clerc and Pierre de Beauvais and the herbal exemplify the assumption and belief that God created the earth and bestowed upon each creation certain *natures*. The innate qualities of the animals and herbs depicted in these texts are often referential and they help define human-animal and human-vegetal relationships through categorization. In drawing inspiration from Genesis, these texts justify human superiority over animals—and by

⁸ 1. 1-8. *An Old French Herbal*, edited by Tony Hunt (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008)

extension, over landscape—and they treat the material world as a source of commodity and Christian didacticism. Yet, the explicit discussion of authority of humans over the environment as is found in the Creation story, bestiaries, and herbal is more implicit and even absent in other medieval narratives. In fact, “seigneurie” becomes thoroughly complicated when these narratives depict moments of human vulnerability and environmental agency, and move away from the assumption of human authority.

Seeing the Forest for the Trees

One of the most important landscape features in medieval French narrative is the forest. As a literary archetype, the forest serves as a space for hunting and diversion, chivalric *errance* and search for *aventure*, and often an entry point into the magical Otherworld.⁹ The forest is often a landscape wherein human intervention drives the narrative forward, be it a *lai*, romance, travel narrative, or saint’s life. Furthermore, the woods of medieval narrative are a heterogeneous space, varying in meaning from one text to another. Such variation in meaning of interaction, then, indicates that human characters use forests to different ends: habitat, sanctuary, play space, etc. In Bérout’s twelfth-century *Tristan et Yseut*, for example, the eponymous characters escape from court life, and flee to the Morrois Forest for nearly 1200 lines of the romance.¹⁰ By escaping to Morrois, the two to evade capture and punishment by King Mark and his barons, who are

⁹ On the importance of the forest in medieval romances see Corrine J. Saunders, *The Forest of Medieval Romance: Avernus, Broceliande, Arden* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1993). For more about the hunt à force, see Susan Crane, *Animal Encounters: Contacts and Concepts in Medieval Britain* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

¹⁰ Bérout, *Tristan and Yseut*, edited and translated by Guy Mermier (New York: Peter Lang, 1987). The Morrois Forest sequence lasts from roughly l. 1270-2440. The incomplete romance is 4485 lines long, and that the Morrois sequence is nearly a quarter of the text is quite telling about its importance to the narrative.

prosecuting them for adultery. Luckily for the young couple, Tristan has extensive knowledge of the Cornish landscape:

My lord, Tristan has escaped. He knows abundantly well the plains, woods, paths,
and fords, and he is very fierce.

Sire, Tristran est eschapez;
Les plains, les bois, les pas, et les guez
Set forment bien, et molt est fiers.¹¹

One advantage that Tristan holds over the barons hunting him is his ability to survive outside of court. He is “fiers,” meaning that he is physically and emotionally suited to endure the potential severe conditions of the landscape. If Tristan’s fierceness is read as wildness, he appears removed from, and perhaps uncomfortable in, the constraints of the courtly milieu. Indeed, to reinforce Tristan’s malaise, the use of “eschapez” holds a dual meaning: Tristan escapes from captivity after being accused of adultery, and escapes into the landscape, which he knows better than anyone else. In this way, Tristan appears better suited for a life in the woods than in his uncle’s court.

Tristan’s environmental knowledge is not limited to one area or geographic space; his familiarity with the landscape demonstrates a formed relationship which is lacking for the barons. By listing these various landscape features, the narrator draws attention to the material environments that play important narrative roles: the grassy plains which lack obstacles and are flat enough the lepers to accost Tristan and Yseut;¹² the Morrois forest, which is abundant in wildlife and resources to provide shelter for the couple; the manmade, horse-trodden paths along

¹¹ l. 1101-3.

¹² l. 1224-70. In lieu of burning Yseut, King Mark is persuaded to give her to a group of lepers led by a man named Yvain. They are in the process of leading her to the shore when Tristan’s squire, Governal, rescues her, l. 1165-170.

which travel between cities, towns, and geographic spaces is possible; the liminal, watery space of the Gué Aventuros where Yseut will prove her loyalty to King Mark in front of all of his liegemen.¹³ The landscapes that Tristan knows well hold importance both for Tristan and Yseut's escape and for the progression of the narrative.

When Tristan and Yseut escape and flee to Morrois, it becomes clear that the forest provides shelter for them in a way that court could not. The narrator says,

They leave the plain, and Tristan and Govenal go into the woodland. Yseut rejoices for now she doesn't feel in harm's way. They are in the Morrois Forest and that night they rest on a hill. Now Tristan feels safe as if he were in a castle with walls.

Lasent le plain, et la gaudine
S'en vet Tristan et Govenal.
Yseut s'esjot, or ne sent mal.
En la forest de Morrois sont,
La nuit jurent desor un mont;
Or est Tristran si a seür
Con s'il fust en chastel o mur.¹⁴

The verse here is replete with positive affect with respect to Tristan and Yseut's emotional states. That Yseut should rejoice, "s'esjot," and Tristan feel security, "seür," is especially telling of the impact that the woods have on the couple. It is not only that Tristan, Yseut, and Govenal use Morrois as a means of shelter and protection, but rather that the woodland landscape provides this security through its material features. A hill, "mont," which serves strategically as a vantage point, allows for the group to sleep at night. Similarly, while the text does not explicitly describe

¹³ l. 3436.

¹⁴ l. 1272-78.

the trees of the forest, the simile which compares the woods to a walled castle, “chastel o mur,” evokes the image of physical barriers formed by trees. This forest-castle recalls Tristan’s potential malaise at court, and the woodland becomes home. Yet, despite the ways in which the characters use the wood, the relationship between the human characters and Morrois seems ill-defined; the relationship is not one of commodification or exploitation, rather the woods appear to exhibit agency. No one in the party alters nor claims authority over the hill or the trees, but rather, these features of the landscape makes themselves available to the characters, which differs greatly from the justification given in the bestiaries, herbal, and Genesis. Unfortunately, despite the protection the Morrois Forest provides for Tristan and Yseut, it soon changes from a site of safety to one of frustration and fear.

Fear of the Forest

After their first night in the Morrois, Tristan and Yseut live a peripatetic life, never staying more than one night in the same place,¹⁵ and hunting for the food they need—surviving only on meat—since they lack milk, salt, and bread.¹⁶ The narrator tells of the suffering that the couple endures from running through the woods, and tells of their clothes being torn from the branches of the trees.¹⁷ The positive and protective description of the forest quickly becomes one of fear, seemingly echoing the struggles of Tristan and Yseut:

In the country of Cornwall, people were so afraid of Morrois that no single soul dared to enter.

De Cornoualle du païs

¹⁵ “Sol une nuit son en un leu,” l. 1430.

¹⁶ “Il n’avait ne lait ne sel,” l. 1297; “Li pain lor faut, ce est grant deus,” l.1425; “Molt sont el bois del pain destroit, / De char vivent, el ne mengüent,” l. 1644-5.

¹⁷ “Lor dras ronpent, rains les decirent / Longuement par orois füirent / Chascun d’eus soffre paine elgal,” l. 1647-9.

De Morrois erent si eschis
Qu'il n'i osout un sol entrer.¹⁸

As the couple suffers more and more, the forest takes on a terrifying characteristic for them and for others. The woodland itself becomes hostile and capable of damage as the narrator insists that the forest is the source of the animosity: "De Morrois erent si eschis." In a narrative display of pathetic fallacy, the fear that the people of Cornwall have of Tristan and the damage he can do is reflected onto the trees of Morrois. The narrator continues on to describe the violence that Tristan is capable of inflicting on the Cornish people:

For, if Tristan were able to capture them, he would hang them from trees.

Qar, se Tristran les peüst prendre
Il les feïst a arbres pendre.¹⁹

In a surprising change of roles, the Morrois trees become instruments of death rather than barriers for protection. Both roles, however, benefit Tristan and Yseut, and seemingly punish those who seek to do them harm. The woodland landscape serves here to ensure Tristan's safety.

In spite of the growing fear of the forest, one of the barons enters Morrois with his dogs for a hunt. Tristan's squire, Governal, kills him and leaves him beheaded, lying next to a tree. When his hunting companions find him decapitated, they flee:

Everyone is afraid and upset, and after that they left the forest in peace; they rarely came to the woods to hunt again. From the moment they entered the woods, even to hunt, each was afraid that Tristan the brave would meet them: they fear on the plain and more on the uncultivated land.

Poor en ont tuit et esfroi,

¹⁸ l. 1661-3.

¹⁹ l. 1665-6.

Puis ont en pes le bois laisié;
N'out pus el bois souvent chacie.
Des cel' ore qu'u bois entroit,
Fust por chacier, chascuns dotoit
Que Tristan li preuz l'encontrast:
Crient fu u plain et pus u gast.²⁰

This excerpt further demonstrates the conflation of the fear of Tristan and the fear of the forest, both of which are unwarranted, since it was not Tristan who killed the baron, but rather Governal. Such ambiguity reflects Morrois as an unnavigable space to those who live outside the forest, and this obscurity further manifests fear and avoidance of the forest. For example, the consecutive repetition of forest, “bois,” three times highlights how mobility in and access to the forest becomes restricted: leaving the forest, hunting in the forest, and entering the forest. This lack of mobility emphasizes the material importance of Morrois, especially regarding its significance to hunting. Unable to enter the forest for the illogical fear of Tristan’s wrath, the people of Cornwall abandon the hunt, leaving the resources of Morrois to Tristan and Yseut. Moreover, the fear of Tristan and of the forest eventually extends to the surrounding landscape. The plains and flatlands threaten the safety of those who search for Tristan, further demonstrating that these interconnected landscapes, which Tristan knows so well, provide protection for him and Yseut. In reading the landscape as possessing agency, then, the forest, the plains, and the moors appear to ally themselves with the young lovers.

Finally, the narrator reinforces the effect of Tristan and Yseut’s life in the forest. Tristan and Yseut are left in peace in Morrois:

Throughout the country, everyone was afraid. The forest is so frightening that no one dares to enter. Now they have the forest to their liking.

²⁰ l. 1722-8.

Poor ont tuit par la contree;
La forest est si esfreee
Que nus n'i ose entrer dedenz;
Or ont le bois a lor talent.²¹

This excerpt sees a return to the peaceful and protective version of the forest that Tristan and Yseut first encountered. For the others, the landscape itself is seen as a threat to safety, rather than the dangerous and “preuz” Tristan. The narrative repeats that everyone was afraid, “poor ont tuit,” to emphasize the potential violence the forest may inflict upon the people of Cornwall. As the passages above depict, the trees of the forest are capable of forming boundaries and protecting, oftearing clothes, they can be used for murder by hanging, and they are the resting places for depaitated bodies. These possibilities render the woodland as a complicated landscape, whose relationship with human characters is mutable and seemingly contradictory: it simultaneously protects and intimidates, it is accessible yet avoided. While Tristan’s knowledge of the landscapes of Cornwall may evoke an understanding of the forest as a metonym for Tristan himself, Morrois possesses the agency to alter its interactions with the human characters it encounters.

The final line of this passage, “Or ont le bois a lor talent,” sets the tone for the rest of Tristan and Yseut’s three-year sojourn in the Morrois Forest. They continue to inhabit the forest, with access to its plentiful resources of venison, and when they are discovered sleeping together by King Mark, he leaves them in peace rather than delivering punishment. The forest provides a space for the two to live out the rest of their exile. Eventually, the love potion that brought Tristan and Yseut together loses its effect and the two leave Morois based on the advice of Ogrin

²¹ l. 1747-50.

the hermit. While Bérout's version of the romance remains unfinished, it is clear that the Morrois Forest sequence is one of the most important parts of the narrative. *Tristan et Yseut* provides a thorough example of the ambiguous and mutable relationships that exist between the woodland landscape and human characters in a medieval French narrative.

Waterscapes

The forest and trees of Bérout's *Tristan et Yseut* exhibit several examples of the varied and shifting relationships that exist between human characters and their environments in medieval French literature. But these textual woodlands are hardly the only landscapes that depict the multifaceted human-environment interactions valued by medieval writers. Waterscapes in *lais*, romances, and saints' lives similarly demonstrate how these relationships are fluid in meaning and representation. In the anonymous lai, *lai de Tydorel*, for example, a lake serves as the conduit for a prophesy that ultimately drives the narrative forward. Given the lai's relative absence from current dialogue in medieval studies, a brief synopsis will better situate the text within an ecocritical framework and provide the foundation for understanding the waterscape in the narrative.

The king and queen of Bretagne have been married for 10 years without producing children. One day, the queen goes to an orchard where the most handsome knight in the world approaches her. He tells her that he will love her or else no one will. They travel together to the edge of a forest where the knight crosses a magic lake, often used by others to make wishes, and tells the fortune of the queen: she will have a son, Tydorel, who will never sleep and she will have a daughter whose sons will sleep more than average. The knight and queen beget three children in total. The queen gives birth to Tydorel and the king is very happy even though it is not his child. After the king dies, the knight still visits sometimes, until he and the queen are caught by a valet who then tells the Tydorel, who has become king himself. After being told by a subject that,

“he who is not born of a mortal can neither sleep nor dream,” Tydorel asks his mother to tell him the truth about why he cannot sleep.²² His mother recounts the whole story and Tydorel goes to the lake where he was conceived and where the knight crossed for love of the queen. Tydorel throws himself into the depths of the lake, and it is believed that he still lives there.

Many scholars emphasize the importance of the Otherworld trope in medieval literature, especially in Breton lais, which possess characteristics of Celtic narratives.²³ The Otherworld is often viewed as a fantastic and beautiful realm where time appears to pass differently. To enter this world, medieval characters would unknowingly traverse a physical, geographic boundary such as crossing an ocean, river or stream, walking through a forest, or passing through a hillock. Jean Frappier, for example, identifies the orchard and lake of *Tydorel* as part of the Otherworld, tracing the Celtic influence of the lai.²⁴ Similarly, Monique Ipotésie suggests that the lake itself serves as the frontier between the queen’s and knight’s worlds.²⁵ While both Frappier and Ipotési compellingly identify supernatural elements of the lai, reading the lake as a Breton waterscape, rather than as an entrance to the Otherworld, allows for a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between the characters of *Tydorel* and their inhabited environment.²⁶

²² l. 329-30, “. . . n’est pas d’ome / qui ne dor ne qui ne prent somme,” *Les Lais Anonymes des 12e et 13e Siècles: Édition Critique de Quelques Lais Bretons*, edited and translated by Prudence Mary O’Hara Tobin (Geneva: Droz, 1976).

²³ For more on the Otherworld, see Aisling Byrne, *Otherworlds: Fantasy and History in Medieval Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). In the Otherworld’s relation to an ecocritical approach, see Alfred K. Siewers, *Strange Beauty: Ecocritical Approaches to Early Medieval Landscape* (New York: Palgrave, 2009) 8-20.

²⁴ Jean Frappier, “A propos du lai de "Tydorel" et de ses éléments mythiques,” *Travaux de Linguistique et de Littérature* 11, no. 1 (1973): 561-87.

²⁵ Monique Ipotési, “Linterdit sexuel dans le lai de *Tydorel*,” *Lectures* 7-8 (1981): 91-110.

²⁶ Byrne’s book seeks to understand medieval writer’s conception of the Otherworld as a site separate from their inhabited world. Instead, I want to avoid the concept of the Otherworld and collapse the fantastic and “real” in order to demonstrate the value of land- and waterscapes to these narratives.

One of the more striking characteristics of *Tydorel* is the detailed description of the landscape. As the knight leads the queen away from the orchard, the narrative explicitly depicts the rich geography:

They did not travel for long. Beside the forest, on a slope, at the base of a big and broad knoll, he helped her down from the horse on the edge of a lake where many attempt the challenge: whoever could swim across the lake would have their heart's desire and their dreams would be realized.

N'ot erré gueres longuement ;
lez la forest, en .I. pendant,
desoz .I. tertre lé e grant
l'a descendue, sor .I. lai
ou plusor firent lor essai.
Qui le lac peüst tresnoer,
ja ne seüst de cuer penser
nule chose qu'il ne l'eüst,
e qanke desirrast seüst.²⁷

While the excerpt does not necessarily provide the details of each landscape feature mentioned, the scene of the lake is laid out very thoroughly by drawing attention to each element: “forest,” “pendant,” “tertre,” and “lai.”²⁸ Although some scholars believe that medieval literature does not sufficiently describe physical environments in order to understand human-landscape relationships, the sequential and progressive list of each characteristic around the lake does impressive work establishing the lay of the land.²⁹ Additionally, the prepositional phrases—“lez,”

²⁷ l. 90-8.

²⁸ “Lai” is an alternative spelling for “lake.”

²⁹ Kathleen Coyne Kelly writes, “In general, landscape and geography in medieval literature are not described but simply noted, participating in what might be called a ‘trope of location’ rather than in concrete or imaginative representations,” “Lost Geographies, Remembrance, and *The Awentys off Arthure*” in *The Politics of Ecology: Land, Life, and Law in Medieval Britain*, edited by Randy

“en,” “desoz,” and “sor”—clarify the spatial relationship between each of the environmental components. From forest to lake, the narrator traces the movement of the knight and the queen through the Breton landscape while leading the narrative to the plot’s crucial geographic site: the lake.

The lake is critical to the *lai de Tydorel* because this waterscape plays a role in the creation and afterlife of the eponymous character. Furthermore, the narrator explains that the lake is important to other Bretons who “fired lor essai,” who accept the challenge that this body of water offers. This trial, while explicitly emphasizing the significance of the lake to humans, offers implicit information about the lake’s materiality in relation to the local Breton tradition. If the swimming across the lake results in the swimmer’s desires coming true, then the lake is likely large enough to limit accessibility and ensure that not everyone would be capable of crossing; capability is emphasized through the text’s use of “peüst,” whoever *could* swim across. And even though the narrator does not provide detail of the lake itself, information about the lake’s characteristics can be gleaned from the interactions that occur when human characters undertake the trial. In addition to its size, the lake is vibrant, to borrow Jane Bennett’s term. Initially motionless, the water comes to life when the reader learns of its seemingly magical powers that blur the boundary between “thinghood” and humanness.³⁰ That human characters benefit from being immersed in its water and swimming its lengths demonstrates the power of the lake itself: the power to transform the lives of the submerged.

P. Schiff and Joseph Taylor (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2016), 241. I do not completely disagree with Kelly’s statement, however, the description of the lake seems detailed for the octosyllabic couplets in which word choice appears particularly important. Often, description can be implicit or made available through interactions.

³⁰ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 3-5.

The knight uses the lake for another purpose, however, and changes the life of the queen, who does not swim across the lake. Interestingly, the knight defies convention and does not actually swim:

He sat the queen down on the bank and entered the lake on horseback. The water closed around his head and he descended to the deepest depths. He remained underwater for four leagues and the lady never moved. He emerged from the other side and returned to the queen.

Sor la rive s'ëoir la fist,
tot el cheval el lac se mist ;
l'eve li clot desus le front,
e il se met el plus parfont,
quatre loëes i estut
onques la dame ne se mut.
De l'autre part est fors issuz,
si est a la dame venuz.³¹

It is unclear at this point whether, by traversing the bottom of the lake on his horse, the knight successfully completes the challenge and is awarded his heart's desire.³² What this excerpt does clarify, however, is the size of the lake, thus describing the waterscape more thoroughly: it is at least four leagues across and deep enough for the water to cover the head of a mounted knight.³³

In fact, the lake appears to be incredibly large, ranging from ten to eighteen miles long, which

³¹ l. 99-105.

³² The relationship between the knight and his horse is particularly interesting, especially the ability of both to survive for such a long duration of time underwater. If one assumes that the knight has supernatural origins, then it is safe to consider the horse as a supernatural being as well.

³³ Iain Higgins writes about the use of "league" as a measurement, "A league is a locally variable measure (about 2.5 to 4.5 miles, or 4 to 7.5 kilometers). Like the mile, it also had a longer nautical length," *The Book of John Mandeville with Related Texts*, edited and translated by Iain Macleod Higgins (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2011), 20 n. 48.

confirms that the task of swimming across it in order to achieve one's wishes is a challenge. The description of the knight's underwater crossing serves, then, to enrich the relationship between the lake and the human characters who attempt to swim it. At one point, the vibrancy of the water is what seemingly pushes the knight to complete the challenge: "l'eve li clot desus le front."³⁴ The water becomes the subject and acts upon—"clot"—the knight's body, guiding him and his horse to the lake's bottom. The water becomes vital.

Water's vitality and vibrancy is reinforced when the knight returns to the queen, and tells her of the wish that he held in his heart as he made the crossing. He informs her that she will have a son by him, that he will be named Tydorel, that he will reign over Bretagne, but that he will never be able to sleep.³⁵ The knight continues to tell the queen that she will also have a daughter, and he foresees the children her daughter will have:

She will have two brave, strong, courageous, and proud sons, and they will be very handsome, and Nature will bestow them with many gifts. But, because of their lineage, they will sleep much more than anyone else.

.II. filz avra preuz e vaillanz
preuz e hardiz e combatanz,
...
molt seront bel a desmesure,
molt s'en entremetra Nature,
...
mes par lignage dormiront
molt miex que autre gent ne font.³⁶

³⁴ l. 101.

³⁵ l. 111-22.

³⁶ l. 137-46.

This passage stands in contrast to the Old French herbal, which compared the medicinal properties and traits of plants to gifts from God. Here, the gifts are given to the queen's and knight's descendants from Nature. This is a common trope in medieval narratives, but Nature intervenes as a direct result of the wish the knight made during his crossing.³⁷ Indeed, while it may be difficult to pinpoint the exact origin of the unique sleeping characteristics of the queen's and knight's offspring, the vital water of the lake surely has an impact.³⁸ The vibrant magic of the water contributes to the creation of this "lignage" and bestows upon the queen's children their abilities. And like water, the progeny find their abilities in flux, ebbing and flowing, with Tydorel incapable of sleep and the other two resting more than anyone else.

The evidence of the water's role in the formation of the knight's children with the queen is manifested at the very end of the lai. After the queen tells Tydorel the story of the episode at the lake and how the knight is his true father, the young king begins his new life in the lake:

When Tydorel had heard everything, he left his mother. As soon as he was armed, he mounted his horse. Spurring the horse on, he came to the lake and entered the deepest depths. He remained there, like that, never to return again.

Quant Tydorel a tot oï,
de sa mere se departi ;
...
Sitost conme il se fu armez,
sor son cheval estoit montez.

³⁷ For more on the development of Nature's personification in medieval literature, see Kellie Robertson, *Nature Speaks: Medieval Literature and Aristotelian Philosophy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).

³⁸ Courtships and reproduction with "supernatural" characters occur often in the lais of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Take, for example Marie de France's *Yonec* and *Lanval*, and the anonymous *Désiré*. Apart from staying underwater for four leagues, the knight in *Tydorel*, however, seems only to garner his supernatural powers from the wish he makes in the lake. I identify here the water as the supernatural, reproductive force.

Poignant en est au lai venuz,
el plus parfont s'est enz feruz ;
illec remest, en tel maniere,
que puis ne retorna ariere.

Tydorel traces the steps of his biological father in entering the lake on horseback, but the narrative does not indicate his motivation for doing so. Like father like son, the narrative tells that Tydorel descended to the deepest depths, “el plus parfont,” showing the exact same pattern between the two. And, in returning to the site of the knight’s crossing, Tydorel also returns to the site of his conception. The lake serves as a third reproductive component for Tydorel, as a locus for the vibrant matter that gave him life. The lake is also able to sustain the young king: like his father who stayed under the water for four leagues, Tydorel leaves court and spends the rest of his life at the bottom of the lake. Thus, full circle from beginning to end of the narrative, the water of the lake guides the narrative of the *lai de Tydorel* as well as the many characters who interact with it. The human-environment relationship demonstrated in the lai is one that emphasizes the cultural and traditional importance of a waterscape to the Bretons, as well as the vital and reproductive role water may play in the lives of human characters.

Transformations and Cultivations

In Bérout’s *Tristan et Yseut* and the anonymous *lai de Tydorel*, human characters interact with their vibrant, active, material environments for many different reasons, but usually without altering the landscapes around them. Yet, the European Middle Ages were replete with human-caused ecological changes, including mass deforestation and reorganization of land- and waterscapes to create new agroecosystems.³⁹ These transformations were not always widespread

³⁹ See John Aberth, *An Environmental History of the Middle Ages: The Crucible of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 2013) and Richard C. Hoffmann, *An Environmental History of Medieval Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014). For a discussion on the importance of

or devastating, however, and their representations in medieval French narratives seldom insist upon the large shifts occurring throughout Europe. Instead, these narratives often depict the small transformations that occur in the landscape, usually to emphasize human interaction with one another, thus rendering the environment as a moderator.

The Old French *Vie seinte Audree*, often attributed to Marie de France, provides an example of the human modification of the landscape, in which God's assistance with the environment ensured protection. Saint Audrey, who had been married to King Egfrid of Northumbria, entered into the island convent at Ely in order to preserve her chastity and faith in God.⁴⁰ Egfrid regrets his decision to agree to Audrey's departure, and intercepts her and her sisters on their way to Ely. The women climb atop Goldeburch mountain and pray for help from God:

God, who protects his people at sea or in any hardship, made the sea rise and surround the hill.

Cil Dieu ki bien garde sa gent
En mer et en autre torment
Fist ke la mer multiplia
Et icel tertre environa.⁴¹

deforestation in medieval romance, especially in *le Chevalier au Lion*, see Simone Pinet, *Archipelagoes: Insular Fictions from Chivalric Romance to the Novel* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

⁴⁰ Ely was an island before the seventeenth-century draining of the fenlands.

⁴¹ l. 1335-8. *The Life of Saint Audrey: A Text by Marie de France*, edited and translated by June Hall McCash and Judith Clark Barban (Jefferson: McFarland, 2006). Similarly, in *Vie seinte Modwenne*, God causes a river to rise and entirely flood a path after a young nun steals from the monastery. *La Vie Seinte Modwenne*, edited by Alfred Thomas Baker and Alexander Bell (Oxford: Blackwell, 1947).

Intervening on behalf of the nuns, God alters the environment greatly, though without causing any apparent destruction or damage. Of course, the purpose of this transformation is to stop Egfrid from reaching Audrey, and while the text attributes such a sea change to God, Audrey can also be seen as inciting the waters to rise through her prayer. The narrator already describes the sea as a dangerous space by writing that God “garde sa gent / En mer et en autre torment;” it is capable of doing damage to those faithful to God, yet in this passage, the sea is harnessed to create a physical barrier between Audrey and her assailant, thereby altering the ethos that the narrator had attributed to it.

Redirecting the normal course of the sea, however, is not the only environmental transformation that resulted from Egfrid’s pursuit of Audrey. Audrey and her sisters remain on top of the rocks for seven days without food or drink. Moved by an immense thirst, Audrey asks the abbess to pray to God for help once more:

Saint Audrey called her superior and said to ask that God, out of his goodness and charity, he who in the desert made water flow from rock to help his people, to send them a little water. The lady kindly requested it of her creator. Then, the hard rock opened and fresh water flowed out.

Sainte Audree pria et dist
Ke nostre seigniur requist
K’un pou d’eawe par sa bonté
Lour envoiast par charité
Ky en desert fist del rochier
Issir l’eawe a son poeple aider.
Ceste dame par grant douçur
En a requis son creatur.
La roche dure si ovri

Et l'eawe douce s'en issi.⁴²

The text yet again justifies an environmental shift through God's benevolence for those who have faith in him. Yet, tension is apparent in the word "envoiast," indicating that water was sent from elsewhere, rather than issuing from the earth. There exists a simultaneous possibility of water having always lied beneath the rock on mount Goldeburch with God's manipulation of the landscape—sending water—in order to quench the nuns' thirst. Further tension in this passage comes from the fact that the mountain is now surrounded by undrinkable water. Paradoxes abound for Audrey and her sisters, as they are isolated by a sea, which might otherwise serve as a connection to other lands, and which is not potable: their protection becomes a source of suffering as it brings hunger and thirst.

The tension is finally released when the fresh water begins to flow from the rock as yet another landscape transformation saves the nuns from their trials. Unlike the rising sea, however, the fountain that appears on mount Goldeburch is a permanent change to the landscape. The narrator explains that the stream is still flowing to this day and helps to heal the sick.⁴³ In addition to the stream, Audrey's footsteps become permanently imprinted on the mountainside from wherever she stepped on her ascent and descent.⁴⁴ This brief episode in *Vie seinte Audree* exhibits three environmental transformations: the rising sea, the healing spring, and Audrey's footprints on the mountain. Together, these shifts were the result of Egfrid's callous pursuit of Audrey. And whether these transformations were temporary and permanent, a result of God's

⁴² l. 1383-98. This evokes Exodus 17.6 when God says to Moses "Look! I will stand in your presence on Horeb rock, and you will strike the rock, and out of it water will escape that people will drink." (En: ego stabo coram te ibi super petram Horeb, percutiesque petram, et exhibit ex ea aqua ut bibat populus), *The Vulgate Bible*, 366.

⁴³ l. 1401-2.

⁴⁴ l. 1403-8.

manipulation or the nuns' intervention, they reveal further facets to the way in which these medieval narratives value and depict human-environmental relationships.

If *Vie seinte Audree* exhibits the influence that God might have on the landscape, then *Le Conte de Floire et Blanchefleur* depicts the creation of a landscape through human modification: the garden of the emir. Blanchefleur is sold by Floire's parents to a group of merchants, who bring her to Babylon, where she becomes one of the emir's one hundred forty concubines. The emir keeps a wife for one year, after which he beheads her and a new wife is chosen for him through a ceremony in his garden. This garden, enclosed by gold and azure walls, is an amazingly cultivated environment, different from any other:

The garden is always in bloom and the birds always sing there. There is no tree in the world so dear—ebony, plantain, nor sorb apple, fig, peach, nor pear, nor walnut tree, nor any other fruit-bearing tree—that does not abundantly fill this garden.

Li viergiers est totants floris
et des oisiaus i a grans cris.
Il n'a soussiel arbre tant cier,
benus, plantoine n'aliier,
ente nule ne boins figiers,
peskiers ne periers ne noiers,
n'autre cier arbre qui fruit port,
dont il n'air assés en cel ort.⁴⁵

It is hard to imagine a garden situated in a climate where all of the trees are constantly flourishing. Yet, the narrator's comprehensive list reinforces the curatorial efforts put into

⁴⁵ l. 2001-8. Robert d'Obigny, *Le Conte de Floire et Blanchefleur*, edited and translated by Jean-Luc Leclanche (Paris: Champion, 2003).

ensuring this garden's perfection, going so far as to say that there is no such garden in either the East or the West.⁴⁶ This perfect, artificial space seems to serve only an aesthetic purpose since the narrator does not mention the harvesting or material use of the ever-blooming trees.⁴⁷ The constant song of birds indicates that these animals have made the garden a habitat, but the description of the garden here is devoid of any explicit interaction between it and the human characters in Babylon.

This carefully cultivated garden's purpose seems to be only as a setting for the stream and the tree that are central to the emir's ceremony in which his new wife is selected. The narrator describes the scene:

From the middle of the garden, out of a field, flows a clear and fresh spring; it flows in a canal crafted from silver and crystal tiles. A tree was planted above it, more beautiful than anyone had ever seen. Because it is always in bloom, it is called the Tree of Love.

En miliu sort une fontaine
en un prael, et clere et saine;
en quarel est fais li canal
de blanc argent et de cristal.
Un arbre i a desus planté,
plus bel ne virent home né;
por çou que tos jors i a flors
l'apelë on l'arbre d'amors.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ l. 2013-14.

⁴⁷ For more on medieval gardens, see *Vergers et Jardins dans l'Univers Médiéval* (Aix-en-Provence: Presses Universitaires de Provence, 1990). See also *Byzantine Gardens and Beyond*, edited by Helena Bodin and Ragnar Hedlund (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2013).

⁴⁸ l. 2021-28.

This description further emphasizes the human intervention in creating the garden. Like the change in the sea in *Vie sainte Audree*, the stream has been guided and directed by the canal that was built for it. Furthermore, the canal tiles underscore the material importance of the garden, drawing attention to the precious elements, “blanc argent” and “cristal,” chosen in its creation. The narrator also used the word “planté” for the first time in reference to the Tree of Love, which shows that the emir’s garden is an environment built and manipulated by humans. Arguably, the beauty of the Tree of Love was known before its transplantation, so that it could contribute to the aesthetic pleasure the emir gains from his garden. Beyond aesthetics, however, the human design of the garden echoes the created ritual through which the emir’s new wives are chosen.

In the selection ritual, all of the young women must walk across the stream mentioned above. The water of the stream indicates whether or not the women are suitable matches for emir: if the water remains clear the woman is a virgin, and if the water becomes muddied she is not. As a result, those who are not virgins are executed immediately.⁴⁹ The women who survive the first test continue on to the second part of the ritual; they must walk beneath the Tree of Love and on whomever the first flower falls is crowned and becomes the emir’s wife for the following year.⁵⁰ This process, while controlled by the machinations of the natural and the supernatural, is not without human intervention. The emir can control the flowers:

And if there is a virgin whom he prefers and whom he finds most beautiful, he can perform an enchantment to make the flower fall on her.

Et se il a o soi pucele
que il mieus aime et soit plus bele,

⁴⁹ l. 2039-56.

⁵⁰ l. 2057-68.

sor li fait par encantement
la flor caïr a son talent.⁵¹

Such a manipulation of the tree alters the course of the entire ritual. That the emir can bypass the process and change the outcome only reinforces the artifice of the garden and of the ritual. The careful cultivation of the trees is revealed to be nothing more than the result of fulfilling the emir's sexual and marital goals. Thus, in *le Conte de Floire et Blanchefleur* the manipulation of landscape can be seen as serving human aesthetic and pleasure.

Conclusion

Lynn White, Jr.'s thesis of the medieval origin of the current ecological crisis is perhaps one of the most intriguing—if seemingly unprovable—theoretical questions asked of the medieval ecocritical field. More important for this exam, however, has been White's postulation of an alternative possibility of relationships inspired by and related to the actions of Saint Francis of Assisi. Medieval writers described myriad relationships between human characters, their environments, ranging from human domination, transformation, and commodification of the landscape, to the agency of the environment to protect, threaten, and grant wishes. These spiritual and material relationships are exceedingly complex in their representation in medieval French narrative, and they transgress generic boundaries. Yet, by decentering the human characters and reading them alongside the landscapes they inhabit, traverse, manipulate, a more thorough understanding of these multidirectional, material relationships becomes available. And while it may not be possible to trace modern environmental problems to the anthropo-environmental relationships depicted in Old French literature, it is possible to identify the importance these textual landscapes held in the imaginations of medieval writers.

⁵¹ l. 2068-72.

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