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Ecopoetics and the Origins of English Literature

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Environmental Criticism for the Twenty-First Century

**Edited and Introduced
by Stephanie LeMenager,
Teresa Shewry, and Ken Hiltner**

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6 Ecopoetics and the Origins of English Literature

Alfred K. Siewers

When the Green Knight in vegetative attire and hue bursts into King Arthur's court in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, he sparks a serious disruption of the feudal order. Arthur's best knight, Gawain, ends up traveling into imaginary wilds of the Celtic borderland of western Britain, a journey that will subvert his previously well-defined and highly armored subjectivity.

Hade he no fere bot his fole bi frythez and dounez,
Ne no gome bot God bi gate wyth to karp,
Til þat he need ful neghe into þe Norþe Walez.
Alle þe iles of Anglesay on lyft half he haldez,
And farez ouer þe fordez by þe forlóndez,
Ouer at þe Holy Hede, til he hade eft bonk
In þe wyldrenesse of Wyrle. Wonde þer bot lyte
Þat auþer God oþer gome wyth goud hert louied.
And ay he frayned, as he ferde, at frekez þat he met,
If þay hade herde any karp of a knyt grene,
In any grounde þerabout, of þe Grene Chapel;
And al nykked hym wyth 'Nay!'—þat neuer in her lyue
Þay see neuer no segge þat watz of suche hwez
Of grene. (Andrew and Waldron 1996, 34, ll. 695–708)

He had no friend but his horse by forests and hills,
Nor anyone but God on the way with whom to speak,
Until he went deep into North Wales.
Along his left side he kept the islands of Anglesey,
And he traveled across the fords by the lowlands,
Over by Holy Head, until he came on the bank again.
In the wilderness of Wirral. Few lived there who
Either God or a man with good heart loved.
And always he asked, as he traveled, any man that he met,
If they had heard tell of a green knight,

In any land thereabout, of the green chapel;
 And all answered him nay, that never in their life
 Ever had they seen any knight such a hue of green.

Ironically, the geography of the route into the mysterious visitor's "green world" that Gawain seeks proves to be much more specific than that of the vanishing tracks of the "real" feudal world of Arthur's court. As the Green Knight's realm comes into focus, it even leaves a physical mark on an unarmored part of Gawain's body, in the ritual nick to his neck. Gawain travels off the grid from the actual imaginary into the virtual real, to borrow terms from the geophilosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (Goodchild 1996, 198–199). If the road to Camelot is obscure, we can trace on a map Gawain's trip to the Green Knight's fantasy domain, just as we can trace the foundational fantasy history of the twelfth-century *Mabinogi* on a map of Wales today, or that of the otherworldly tales of the early medieval Ulster Cycle on Ireland's geography, even to bicycle and hike story paths on the modern-day "Táin Trail." If the poem ends in mystery at the mound that is the Green Chapel, there are specific sites "on the ground" for that Chapel in England's northwest that scholars connect through folklore and place-name study with legends that likely shaped the fantasy overlay geography (Elliott 2002, 115). And as the beginning of the poem puts it:

As it is stad and stoken
 In stori stif and stronge,
 With lel letteres loken,
 In londe so hatz ben longe. (Andrew and Waldron 1996, 208, ll. 33–36)

In other words, the poem stands enclosed in story firm and strong, with its true letters linked or enshrined in the land where it has been so long.

Reimagining pre-Scholastic sources of Christian mysticism and native pre-Christian traditions in relation to natural landscape, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*—like its fellow fourteenth-century poetic masterpiece *The Canterbury Tales* and the longest fantasy prose text in Middle English, Thomas Malory's later *Le Morte Darthur*—evokes an experientially dynamic sense of place as mystery that includes what environmental philosophers call nature's hidden "other side" (Davis 2008). The resulting overlay of landscapes—wilds associated with the Green Knight amid actual geography of the island of Britain, with French Arthurian realms that seem to be disappearing from view in the aftermath of the Black Death and emergence of a textual landscape of vernacular English—provides a reciprocating and dynamic view of human interaction with the environment that is a noteworthy but ignored tradition for environmental cultural studies today.

Indeed, while the literary critic Northrop Frye defined a similar pattern of overlay landscape in later Elizabethan texts under the label the "green world" (Frye 1967), those texts often show genealogical links or at least analogues to earlier Middle English literary materials, which he instead

attributed to folklore. In Frye's model, green-world texts brought two worlds into contact through art, leaving any assumed totality of human life in doubt by its interface with an alternate realm melding nature and imagination. Middle English prototypes unexamined by Frye in turn had adapted an even earlier Insular model of overlay landscape, the so-called Celtic Otherworld, which emerged from a mix of native tradition and Christian asceticism adapted from Eastern deserts to a northwestern European Atlantic archipelago with intensely intermingled realms of sky, sea, land, water and wind—reflected in the entwined worlds of those stories (Siewers 2009). In early patristic imagery, the biblical Paradise formed a mountain encompassing the earth, an analogue to the Otherworld. Middle English literature adapted the latter with a more central focus on forest and countryside, echoing accelerated deforestation that left vanishing Insular woods a symbol of magical engagement with nature in prefeudal times (Cantor 1993, 554), while the sea perhaps had become negatively associated with the colonial and transmaritime *ancien régime*.

In any case, the late-medieval "green world" trope in many ways models what environmental philosopher Bruce Foltz called "nature's other side," ignored by the modern "idea of a universe that is self-subsistent—standing entirely on its own, fully operational and intelligible, independent of anything outside itself . . . inimical to any salutary relation between humanity and the natural environment (Foltz 2004, 330). Foltz, adapting Martin Heidegger's critique of Being as univocal presence, asks:

What if it is scientific objectivity (as metaphysics, and hence as irretrievably bound up with technology and control, reflected strikingly in the cybernetic notion of "ecosystem") that is itself at the root of the problem? It cannot be emphasized too often that it is not a matter of giving up technological devices or of not paying heed to scientific findings, but simply of refusing their claims of metaphysical ultimacy . . . seeing that for those who would learn how to re-inhabit the earth, it is only poetic discourse and modes of sensibility—not as something rarefied but as they infuse the everyday—that are capable of bringing about and maintaining the new relations that the earth itself and all the modes of nature call for. (Foltz 1995, 176)

Foltz's vision evokes an ecopoetic practice or worldview. But how do we define such ecopoetics from the early green-world tradition? The following sections seek to unpack briefly the meaning of ecopoetics and illustrate it by readings from this early English literature.

ECOPOETICS DEFINED

The literary scholar Jonathan Bate defined *ecopoesis*, from which comes the term *ecopoetic*, as poetic expression "which may effect an imaginative

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reunification of mind and nature," a psychosomatic and experiential inhabiting of nature linked to language that goes beyond a pastoral or technological literary setting (Bate 2000, 245). The term comes from the Greek *oikos*, meaning house or dwelling place, or habitation, and *poesis*, forming or shaping, evoking premodern views of words as in a sense magically entwined with the world. The meaning comes into further focus when considering how the related term *ecology* includes an ending derived from *logos*, one interpretation of which can be story, enabling a reinterpretation of ecology itself as "the story of home." In early medieval Christian cultures that influenced development of the Celtic Otherworld in Irish and Welsh literatures, the *logoi* of the Creator Logos simultaneously constituted both cosmos and divine energies of grace shaping and redeeming the world and human beings, a sparkle of creation in a network of cosmic language that can be thought of as iconographic, incarnational harmony (Thunberg 1985, 440; Farrell 1989, 181, 191; Maximus 2003, 45–74; Stăniloae 2003, 209; Siewers 2009, 69–81): The Logos and the *logoi* are one.

This is what ecosemiotics (or the study of the relation between nature and culture in relation to signs or meaning-making) refers to as a pan-semiotic worldview (Nöth 1998, 334–335), but one significantly more interactive than Scholastic binaries of archetype and analogue (Aquinas 1997, 112–134), which would help form the basis for the modern scientific metaphysics decried by Foltz. In early Christian ascetic practices of nature, echoed in the archipelago around the Irish Sea, the environmental framework of cosmic *logoi* evoked a range of meanings: "words," "discourses," "stories," "purposes," and "reasons" in the relational context of "harmonies." These *logoi* of the Logos thus engaged creation as "the harmonies of the Harmony," and so forth. The overlay landscape of the words of God in Genesis 1, interacting with "actual" biblical geography of earth including the four Middle Eastern rivers of Eden, combined with liturgical and Hesychastic-style chanting in "desert" asceticism as it spread to the British islands, and melded with native pre-Christian traditions.

A variant spelling *ecopoiesis* means actual physical shaping of an ecosystem (see, for example, Todd 2004), highlighting the relation between ecological restoration and narrative (Siewers 1998; Kull, Kukk, and Lotman, 2003). And A. Kent Hiatt detailed a "mythopoeic" tradition in early English fantasy landscapes expressing an underlying set of values opposed to objectification of self and others (Hiatt 1975, 1–2), which could be summed up by the concept of empathy in neurophenomenological terms valorized by mind philosophy with an environmental bent (Thompson 2007, 118–122 and 382–411).

In any case, ecosemiotics, ecocriticism, ecophilosophy, and environmental ethics combine to articulate four key aspects of literary ecopoetics:

1. *Triadic overlay*. Ecosemiotics draws heavily on the work of Charles S. Peirce, the nineteenth-century American semiotician, whose triadic

model of the process of meaning-making or semiosis arises from interaction of sign, object, and interpretant-meaning (Nöth 1998; Peirce 1998; Kull 1998; Maran 2007). In this process the "object" often consists of physical environment. In Celtic Otherworld stories, the sign of the story engages the "object" of physical geography in relation to the interpretant of traditions of a spiritual realm or overlay landscape. Such literary expressions could be part of an "ecosmiosphere" if reflecting regional culture closely associated with an ecosystem. Peirce's triadic approach contrasts with the dyadic or analogous model for semiosis found in Scholastic notions of *analogia* (Aquinas 1997, 112–134), but it correlates with early Trinitarian "energy doctrine" whose cosmology influenced the Otherworld trope (Kristeva 1989, 209–211; Siewers 2009, 17–19).

2. *Metonymic imagery*. Ecocriticism examines "how artistic representation envisages human and nonhuman webs of interrelation" as Lawrence Buell notes (Buell 2005, 138). This can highlight a metonymic effect involving metaphor entwined with physicality, as in the image of "desert" standing for monasticism or "sweat" for labor. Thus in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* the green knight's raiment, hue, and horse all suggest vegetation, and the knight himself personally embodies the Otherworld associated with nature and a transformative magic immanent in native landscape beyond the court's feudal culture. In *The Canterbury Tales* the pricking in the hearts by "nature" in the opening to the General Prologue involves energy with physical effects, not just metaphor or an abstract allegorical figure of Nature.
3. *Time-plexity*. Articulation of the plexity or interwoven and multi-stranded nature of time explicates nature's "other side," breaking down human conventions to indicate ecophenomenologically the coexistence of nonhuman times and even nontime (Wood 2003, 213–217). Non-Augustinian patristics influential on the early Irish involved four modes of time and nontime: Human, nonhuman natural, created eternal (angels and demons), and the everlasting nontime of uncreated divine energies in nature (Mantzaridis 1996; Romanides 2007, 274–275). Overlapping modes of time and nontime emerge from the General Prologue in *The Canterbury Tales* and the overlay calendars of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*—seasons, church year, dual new years (one at Gawain's departure on All Hallows, considered the pre-Christian Irish "new year"), spiritual overlay. Neither replicates the transcendently subjective Augustinian eternal present found in Dante's pilgrim-comedy.
4. *Environmental ethos*. Aldo Leopold's land ethic extends the liminality of time to the intersection of ethos as "place" and ethical behavior (Leopold 1986, 237–263), calling for an understanding of the land itself as having rights. This sense of ethos also involves a personal dialogue of responsibility that extends the ethical dialogics of Mikhail

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Bakhtin and Emmanuel Lévinas to the nonhuman (Pevear 1995, xviii–xix; Lévinas 2002). We see this in the empathy implicit in Hiatt's textual genealogy. Thus, for example, the laughter of the Green Knight in his rural realm puts a face on nature.

THE "GREEN WORLD" AND ELVISH WRITING IN THE CANTERBURY TALES

Chaucer's overlay landscape leads us on a "green world" journey along an identifiable route outdoors in the English countryside, reaching no linear destination. It shapes an edge of text and ecology, a textual ecotone engaging both the inner human and outer natural worlds on their shared border. This is apparent from its beginning. Modern editors of *The Canterbury Tales* inserted parentheses in the famous opening of the General Prologue, obscuring the presence of this overlay landscape evoked by a key line (11): "so pricketh him nature in her corages" (in other words, "so nature energizes them in their hearts" or "sparkles in them so"). The line was taken by many modern commentators to refer exclusively to birds mentioned immediately before, prompting the addition of the parentheses (Stanbury 2004). But the lack of parentheses in the original enables the meaning to flow across all the famous opening lines, punctuated below with a semicolon to suggest how the line in question easily reads as pivot point for the whole:

Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,
And bathed every veine in swich licour
Of which vertu engendred is the flour;
Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
Hath in the Ram his halve cours yronne,
And smale foweles maken melodye,
That slepen al the nyght with open eye;
So priketh hem nature in hir corages—
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,
And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes,
To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes;
And specially from every shires ende
Of Engelond to Caunterbury they wende,
The holy blisful martir for to seke,
That hem hath holpen whan that they were seeke. (Chaucer 1988,
23, ll. 1–18)

The poem here at its start evokes a palimpsest of cultural interactions with the land in rich layers of time and nontime. This move forms the

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heart of Chaucer's poetic answer in *The Canterbury Tales* to the Scholastic feudalism of the tottering Norman *ancien régime*. The pilgrims move along what apparently is the old Roman road between London and Kent in springtime. Their route from the London suburb of Southwark and their ending in the seat of the medieval church in England at Canterbury (a destination itself named for an old Romano-Celtic tribe) can figure a transition from materialistic to spiritual concerns. But both termini are "real" earthly places, and the pilgrims never actually arrive at the Cathedral in Canterbury as a spiritual space. (The assumption that *The Canterbury Tales* is unfinished as opposed to unpolished, as argued also for the masterwork of Chaucer's acolyte Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*. is belied thematically by the order of tales found in the Ellesmere manuscript, with its culmination in *The Parson's Tale*.) Rather than an entry into the interiorized virtual reality of the Gothic cathedral, the work remains "on the road," always in process in the natural world, and indirectly but ultimately reflecting on older Insular ascetic projects of grounding the mind in the heart and realizing the human in larger cosmic connections beyond any objectified ego.

Nature pricks the hearts of humans and nonhumans in spring, including birds and zodiac and rain and plants and cycles of season and life, all elementally interwoven. The atmospheric climate and creatures of the air, the emergence of plants in the spring, the astronomical realms—these are all part of nature's energizing or sparkling, which links to the second part of the opening in terms of the parallel springtide migrations of people on pilgrimages, and the incorporation of the spiritual realm into this movement of nature, including Canterbury with the presence of Thomas Becket. Becket's martyrdom occurred at the hands of the Norman feudal regime, which implicitly is called into question by Chaucer's entire project—from the poet's use of the vernacular to his existentially ironic subversion of a social hierarchy and worldview on its last legs in the wake of the Black Death, the Peasants' Revolt, and other social and religious upheavals.

Chaucer's landscape similarly grounds human personas in larger cosmic networks, subverting any sense of discrete subjectivity at odds with or controlling the natural world. This is evident in the holocaust of the grove and its nature spirits in the first actual story of the poetic cycle, *The Knight's Tale* (and in that entire tale's arguable send-up of chivalry for its objectification of both people and nature [Jones 1994]). Yet this is already apparent too in the Prologue's implicit comic contrast of the pilgrims' self-projected identities with contextualization of them in larger networks of the poem's environments. The characters that seem most honest are those most grounded in the countryside, namely the Parson and Plowman, and perhaps the Franklin, together with the Clerk, who would contextualize his interiority in teaching others. This extrasubjectivity is highlighted by Chaucer's use of the Otherworld-related term of *elvishness* as a key concept in two central stories, and in reference to his poetic project itself. The wife of Bath in beginning her tale recalls a time when the landscape of England

was inhabited by an elf queen and “fairies” (geocentric beings known from romances often derived from Celtic sources that Chaucer references also in *The Franklin’s Tale*). The sovereignty goddess in early Irish traditions was the necessary partner of a successful king, and the wife’s tale draws heavily on the motif of the Sovereignty goddess (or elf queen) as bestowing authority (and, in the case of Chaucer’s tale, freedom) upon the man who can ignore her initial appearance—in effect avoid objectification of her, as a force of nature—and partner with her in allegiance. Chaucer’s own persona later in the lead-in to the *Tale of Sir Thopas* is identified as elvish, embodying a magic of poetry in the landscape.

Likewise, immediately preceding *The Wife of Bath’s Tale* and sharing with it a central position in Chaucer’s collection based on the *Ellesmere Manuscript*, *The Man of Law’s Tale* includes a reference to the saintly heroine of that tale, Constance, as elvish. Constance’s Christian otherworldliness thus is identified with a native pre-Norman elvishness, and also with a type of Christianity linked to a mythical native Celtic Christianity through a “British” Bible. Her otherworldly power rejects and surmounts the imperialistic ambitions of various monarchs, aristocrats, and regimes in favor of a radically therapeutic Christianity (Robertson 2001). Constance embodies a different type of sovereignty figure, still within a tradition likely adapted typologically by its monastic literary compilers, related both to traditions of the Mother of God (in Ireland linked to St. Brigit) and the feminine figuring of biblical Wisdom. *The Wife of Bath’s Tale*, together with *The Man of Law’s Tale*, can be read as offering a response of sorts to the objectified courtly love satirized in *The Knight’s Tale*, and to the ribald materialism of the so-called bawdy tales involving both Scholastic clerks and rising capitalist notions of love, also emphasized in the *Wife of Bath’s* prologue. Both with their “elvish” references provide an alternative to objectified relationships amid the whole work’s vernacular assertion of an English countryside. Partnership in marriage in *The Wife of Bath’s Tale* and sacralized marriage in *The Man of Law’s Tale* through associations to the natural world via “elvishness” lend an ecofeminist edge to the poetry (Plumwood 1993). In Wendell Berry’s terms, such a premodern sense of marriage in the land figures how “one can become whole only by the responsible acceptance of one’s partiality . . . the double sense of particularity and generality: one lives in marriage and in sexuality, at home and in the world . . . it is impossible to care for each other more or differently than we care for the earth” (Berry 1977, 123).

OVERLAY LANDSCAPE AND LAUGHTER IN SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

The color of the Green Knight is clearly associated through his clothing and bough of holly with the natural world, but also in poetic tradition with

the “green pastures” of biblical Paradise as it had become entwined with a native Otherworld in Insular traditions. While the color green in the late Middle Ages had overtones of the otherworldly veering toward the demonic, sometimes associated with lust and envy, the “green street of Paradise” as a motif associating natural verdure with Paradise (although perhaps also a difficult path) had a venerable genealogy stretching back into Old English poetry (Randall 1960; Keenan 1970, 1973; Doane 1973; Sajavaara 1975), a meaning echoed elsewhere in the corpus associated with the *Gawain* poet (*Cleanness* l. 767; *Pearl* l. 37), and it also carried meanings of charity. The color term in effect, analogous in this partly to the early Irish term *glas*, spanned the sensual and the spiritual (Siewers 2005a).

Similarly, the juxtaposition of the animal-hunting scenes with the scenes in the bedroom in the Green Knight’s castle vividly evokes the entanglement of human life with the earth. As Gawain and his host’s wife go through their flirtatious chivalrous quasi-courting rituals, the role of his ideal persona as the prey of physicality on many levels becomes more apparent. To save his physical life he seemingly abandons his trust in Christ and the image of the Virgin Mary on his shield for the sake of the green girdle of Bertilak, given by his wife to Gawain as part of a scheme by the “goddess” Morgan le Fay, a figure of the elvish sovereignty goddess again. Meanwhile, the status of the beasts keeps getting more common (from royal deer to boar to rodent-fox) and the boudoir situation more desperate.

On the one hand there is the hunting, with grisly butchering (in this case of the deer):

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

(Andrew and Waldron 1996, 256–257, ll. 1330–1343)

After they slit the throat-hollow, seized the gullet,
 Shaved it out with a sharp knife and knit the white flesh;
 Then they cut the four legs and rent the hide;
 They then broke open the belly, took out the bowels.

Meanwhile, in the supposedly cultured “other world” of the castle, in an illusory mirroring of the “real world” contrast between Arthurian court and green world in the poem’s larger frame, Gawain finds his identity subverted:

“Bot þat e be Gawan, hit gotz in mynde.”
 “Querfore?” quop þe freke, and freschly he askez,
 Ferde lest he hade fayled in fourme of his castes;
 (Andrew and Waldron 1966, 255, ll. 1293–1295)

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"But that you are Gawain is questionable."

"Why?" said the knight, eagerly asking,
Afraid lest he had failed in the manner of his speech.

The capstone of the poem in Passus 4 provides a complex back-and-forth, integrating the binarized hunt and bedroom with the contrast between the peripheral rural geography of the Green Knight's realm and Arthur's Frenchified and quasi-colonial court. The laughter of the Green Knight and his green girdle catalyze the integration. The Green Knight in effect tells his alter ego Gawain to "lighten up" and realize his grounding in physicality. Gawain becomes in effect the new disruptive visitor to Arthur's court, although now bearing symbols that will remain there through the laughter and sashes of green and the story itself. Gawain's confession and penance in the countryside at the Green Chapel become also a kind of fantasy echo of extra-Catholic Lollardism. As the Green Knight says:

"Bot for ye lufed your lyf; þe lasse I yow blame"
(Andrew and Waldron 1996, 294, ll. 2368).

But because you loved your life; the less I you blame.

The laughter of the Green Knight melding into that of the court, going beyond words in a kind of redemptive environmental semiosis from the green world, recalls both the same poet's description of Sarah's laughing and God's response in *Cleanness* and Julian of Norwich's contemporary words on laughing in her mystical *Shewings*: "But in God may be no wreth, as to my syte. . . . I thowte that I wold that al myn evyn Christen had seen as I saw and than should thei al lauhyn with me" (Crampton 1994, 510-520). Unlike Augustinian theology, which saw nonbeing fundamentally as evil, nonbeing or nature's "other side" becomes a source for joy when seen as divine, an insular cosmological thread traceable back to John Scotus Eriugena's early Hiberno-Latin philosophy of nature. (Siewers 2009, 67-95).

ENVIRONMENTAL ETHOS AND LE MORTE D'ARTHUR

The Wasteland that emerges in Book 2 of Caxton's edition of Malory's opus figures the mix of the sinister and the redemptive in the forests of adventure of this fantasy history, and the spiritual realm that entwines them. Malory rehistoricizes and regrounds Arthurian legends that had been heavily allegorized and idealized in French romances at a remove from their mythic Welsh and fantasy-history Cambro-Latin origins. The grail cycle becomes placed more integratively within English geography and a quasi-chronicle framework, mirroring dimly the Wars of the Roses and struggles of the Welsh-rooted Tudors to claim legitimacy. The broken systems of the

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provides a complex back-and-forth, droom with the contrast between Green Knight’s realm and Arthur’s laughter of the Green Knight and n. The Green Knight in effect tells d realize his grounding in physical-disruptive visitor to Arthur’s court, I remain there through the laughter . Gawain’s confession and penance become also a kind of fantasy echo een Knight says:

ow blame”
ll. 2368).

less I you blame.

lding into that of the court, going : environmental semiosis from the t’s description of Sarah’s laughing Julian of Norwich’s contemporary ings: “But in God may be no wreth, hat al myn evyn Christen had seen 1 with me” (Crampton 1994, 510–ch saw nonbeing fundamentally as becomes a source for joy when seen d traceable back to John Scotus Eri-of nature. (Siewers 2009, 67–95).

MORTE D’ARTHUR

f Caxton’s edition of Malory’s opus redemptive in the forests of adven-iritual realm that entwines them. thurian legends that had been heav-romances at a remove from their bro-Latin origins. The grail cycle in English geography and a quasi-he Wars of the Roses and struggles itimacy. The broken systems of the

Middle Ages and chivalry in ruins around him, Malory the prisoner-author looks to a mythic native time and ultimately the complexly layered story landscape of Glastonbury in southwestern England for reweaving a magi-cal geography of Britain. Written immediately after the fall of Constantino-ple, like its heir *The Faerie Queene*, Malory’s work harkens back implicitly to a lost Christian *ecumene* integrating native landscape, traditions, and historical and spiritual realms in a cosmic geography of relational desire, with the story of the Sangreal itself likely a reimagined Byzantine cosmic mystery mingled with early Irish Otherworld traditions (Scavone 1996). In the process, its central landscape takes shape in the green-world tradition.

Balin’s Dolorous Stroke to the Maimed King in Book 2 of Caxton’s edi-tion emerges from offenses to feminine figures identified with an Otherworld associated in turn with nature, magic, danger, and redemptive mysteries. The underlying story pattern follows that identified by the Celticist John Carey (2007) in early Irish prototypes that influenced Welsh and Breton Arthurian legends, in which otherworldly treasure is seized from disrespected feminine guardians in magical natural landscapes, resulting in environmental cata-strophe (only if the treasure is granted as a result of due respect and what could be called a mutual empathy does it grant fertility to the land rather than shape a wasteland). Balin seizes a magic sword against the will and warning of a lady sent from Avalon (a place associated in Malory’s time both with a native Otherworld and with Glastonbury), and then in revenge beheads the Lady of the Lake, who had given Excalibur to Arthur. Fleeing, Balin slays an Irish knight pursuing him, whose lady then commits suicide, where suicide becomes the magical pretext for the Dolorous Stroke. “O Balyn, two bodyes thou hast slayne in one herte, and two hertes in one body, and two soules thow hast lost” (67). Merlin explains that because of the death of the lady due to his killing of her love, Balin will commit the Dolorous Stroke (68).

When King Pellam fights Balin, the Dolorous Stroke connects the Other-world realm of the grail with both the forests of adventure and the deadly feuds of late-medieval English chivalry. Balin runs through Pellam’s myste-rious chambers and takes the spear of Longinus and delivers the Dolorous Stroke to Pellam, causing the castle to fall atop them. As Balin rides forth again, “alle that were on lyve cryed, O Balyn, thow hast casued grete dom-age in these countrayes; for the dolorous stroke thow gauest vnto Kynge Pellam thre countreyes are destroyed, and doute not but the vengeance wil falle on the at the last” (75).

In the ambiguities of Malory’s adaptation, Pellam and Pelles seem con-founded in the figure of the Maimed King, whose Castle Carbonek connects with an Otherworld identified in turn with Avalon and geographic place in the Glastonbury area of the Somerset Levels, while on a larger scale jux-taposed with Camelot. This back-and-forth landscape focus disrupts any sense of the land of Britain as ontological object, and places limits on those who would possess it. (The line of Pellam-Pelles is also identified with that of St. Joseph of Arimathea, who traditionally brought the Sangreal to the

Glastonbury area in dim mists of mythic time. The earliest extant identifications of a pre-Christian Otherworld of Avalon with Glastonbury and its legends of ancient Christianity date to the thirteenth century [Siewers 1994, 2002]. Chaucer also may have touched on Glastonbury-related tales of Joseph for his ancient British-related figure of Arvirargus in the "Celtic" Franklin's Tale, who shares a name, mythic time frame, and geographic orientation with a ruler in the legends.)

Geraldine Heng (2004) argues persuasively for a "feminine subtext" in Malory's work, pointing to land-goddess-like figures such as the Ladies of the Lake and of Avalon, and Morgan le Fay, related through their magic to the natural landscape as Otherworld. Indeed, Irish traditions referring to the Otherworld as "the land of women" had morphed into aspects of the Arthurian cycle. In some respects the structure of the overlay landscape trope itself matches the literary theorist Luce Irigaray's sense of a double-enfolded or relational feminine landscape, and Deleuze and Guattari's quest for an ecosophical redefinition of desire as relational rather than lack (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 157; Casey 1998, 321–320; Siewers 2009, 3). Associations of a goddess of the land with the earth (Herbert 1992) parallel both apparently pre-Christian Celtic tradition and Christian identification of the Mother of God and earth (Miller 1992). The quest for the Sangreal emerges as a subversion of what, in ecofeminist terms, could be called the male-centered domination ethos of the Round Table.

Yet the Sangreal also brings resolution of sorts in the healing of the Maimed King. Galahad (bearing the sword of King David in a girdle woven from the spindles of Eve) anoints the Maimed King at Castle Carbonek with the blood of the spear and heals him. A voice addresses the gathering there as "my sones and not my chyef sones, my frendes and not my weryours, goo ye hens where ye hope best to doo and as I bad yow" (502), seemingly releasing them from feudalism. When the Sangreal is taken up to heaven, Joseph of Arimathea appears, reopening the connection to the landscape of Glastonbury.

At the end, Arthur on the brink of death comforts Bedivere by saying "Comfort thyself . . . and doo as wel as thou mayst, for in me is no truste for to truste in, for I wyl into the Vale of Auylyon to hele me of my greuous wounde," and thence is taken in a boat with magical queens including Morgan le Fay as his sword is taken back by the waters (591). Bedivere takes to the forest and encounters the exiled Bishop of Canterbury at his hermitage near Glastonbury, where lies Arthur's tomb (593). But Malory-as-narrator notes that "somme men say in many partyes of Englund that Kyng Arthur is not dead, but had by the wylle of our Lord Ihesu into another place" (592). Skeptical, he still indicates a lack of supporting evidence "of the veray certente of his deth" (592).

In any case, Lancelot at the end of Malory's cycle takes final leave of Guenever, into the forest again, and ends up at the Glastonbury hermitage and chapel "betwyxte two clyffes" (595). Later he and his posse bring

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Malory's cycle takes final leave of ds up at the Glastonbury hermit- (595). Later he and his posse bring

Guenever's body back to Glastonbury to be buried next to Arthur. After Lancelot's own burial elsewhere, his knightly friends return to the Glastonbury hermitage for a month before separating to live as "holy men" (599). The new King Constantine sends for the bishop-hermit from Glastonbury for his coronation, in perhaps another echo of Britain as a kind of Insular mystical heir to Byzantium in this story-landscape, St. Constantine the Great having had legendary British roots.

The overlay landscape of Malory's work never totally unifies Glastonbury and Avalon as objective space. The two, like the Otherworld and this-world, entwine through the historicized grail tradition as a kind of antidote to the crumbling medieval worldview, shadowing each other even from the inception of Arthur's realm. Malory's comments about the ambiguity of Arthur's death suggest Avalon could be "irretrievably outside the temporal boundaries of the narrative's world" (Parry 1997, 147). Yet the dynamic of Glastonbury landscape in relation to the forest hermitage as final setting of the fantasy history suggests an immanent "other side" both to nature and human history in the early English green world. Subsequent writers from Spenser to the Romantics would take up the pattern, influencing in turn yet others such as the foundational American landscape writer James Fenimore Cooper, whose translation of the green world to the vanishing Eastern Woodlands of America would help inspire early conservationists such as Theodore Roosevelt (Brinkley 2009, 40-41). Later adapters of the green-world tradition, most popularly J. R. R. Tolkien's fantasy history with its Ents and Elves in an ancient European overlay landscape (Siewers 2005b), would steer the trope into environmental contexts more immediately recognizable as such to modern audiences. But its roots provide an important early model of ecopoetics, still relevant amid the pressing need for more ecologically centered cultural narratives today.

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