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From Little Acorns: Trees and Wood in Middle English Romance

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis was composed by myself, that the work contained herein is my own except where explicitly stated otherwise in the text, and that this work has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification except as specified.

Parts of this work has been accepted for publication in the *Medieval Feminist Forum* journal.

Name: Danielle Howarth

Signature:

Date:

Large streams from little fountains flow;

Tall oaks from little acorns grow

D. Everett, *The Columbian Orator*, 1800

For my Nan,

who loved to grow things

Abstract

Trees occupy a paradoxical place in the genre of Middle English romance. They are central to romance narratives, but their ubiquitous presence is almost completely overlooked by the genre's protagonists, and has been largely neglected by its readership. This thesis addresses this paradox, as it seeks to account for the neglect of trees both within the narrative world of romance itself, and the broader critical discourses which have grown up around it. Drawing on a range of critical and theoretical disciplines, the thesis analyses both the broad spectrum of meanings which are attached to trees in the genre, and the ways in which trees frame and catalyse the human dramas on which romance narratives primarily focus.

Trees are essential to medieval romance, as forest, wood, wilderness, garden, and orchard settings are integral to the genre. These settings form the backdrop for chivalric encounters and expressions of courtly love, as well as for the innumerable emotional dramas and rites of passage on which romance narratives hinge. The trees that make up these spaces tend to be largely invisible, both within romance texts and within most of the scholarship that addresses them. However, trees are present in many forms in medieval literature: individual trees within these settings occasionally come to the foreground, arboreal metaphors occur at key narrative moments, and wooden objects such as weapons, musical instruments, ships, and spindles make up the material world of romance. In this thesis I argue that focussing on the rare instances of arboreal visibility in certain Middle English romances – *Le Morte Darthur*, *Yvain and Gawain*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the Middle English Breton Lays, and *Sir Tristrem* – provides a fruitful way to explore these texts from a new perspective. Drawing on aspects of ecocriticism, ecofeminism, and studies of materiality, this thesis is situated in fields that encourage this focus on the

non-human as a way to understand what it means to be human, and to enable a greater understanding of our place in the world. Using trees as a starting point to consider human relationships with the non-human reveals how human and non-human are entangled in various ways that trouble conventional hierarchies of power in these medieval romances. In particular, I explore how trees can define and construct masculine, chivalric identities, and how the feminine often has a different relationship with the arboreal. Focussing on these relationships opens up spaces for alternative discourses of power, in which the feminine and the non-human hold marginal authority. Trees, arboreal metaphors, and wooden objects witness moments of heightened tension and come to participate in the narrative as actants that both protect and threaten human identities, and which have the power to communicate from the shadows of the narrative.

Lay Summary

Medieval romance is a genre of medieval literature that is often associated with the pursuits of the nobility, and romance texts usually involve narratives of love and adventure. Often these narratives rely on tree-based settings, such as forests, woods, wildernesses, gardens, and orchards. However, the trees that make up these backdrops are rarely focussed on, despite their importance. This thesis explores the significance of trees in romance by considering how their relative invisibility makes the occasional descriptions of them all the more striking. When trees come to the foreground, they tend to interact with the archetypal figures of romance, such as knights, ladies, kings, and queens. I argue that this allows for instances in which these figures are represented as connected to trees.

Furthermore, this gives these trees a certain power that can be glimpsed when we consider how they are represented in the prose and poetry texts that form the corpus of medieval romance. Specifically, this thesis will address mentions of trees, as well as tree metaphors, in Middle English romance literature, which was produced in England in the late Middle ages and became popular in the fourteenth century. I will consider some of the most influential and celebrated Middle English romances, such as *Le Morte Darthur* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Some lesser-known English adaptations of medieval French texts, such as *Ywain and Gawain* and *Sir Tristrem*, will also be explored. Additionally, I will analyse nine Middle English lays, which are short poems that make up a sub-section of the romance genre. In my exploration of these texts, I will reveal how trees are both marginal and powerful, as they exist outwith the central concerns of romance, but are nevertheless meaningful.

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Introduction

Trees and vegetal life are nearly invisible in their less spectacular forms. You've likely crossed paths with them today and failed to register their presence consciously. No longer singular living entities but a green and quiet backdrop, they provide the context in which we live. Their leaves work as a seasonal clock. Their canopies give shade. They feed us, clothe us, house us. They are everywhere and thus nowhere.¹

Christy Wampole refers to a phenomenon that transcends time and space: trees are and always have been essential to human life on Earth, but they are usually quiet and overlooked. When they are noticed, it is almost always on human terms, with regards to what they might do for us, both practically and symbolically. Aside from the vital processes they enable and resources they provide, trees are at the heart of countless religions, beliefs, and cultural practices, not to mention the roles they have played in the literatures of the world. This thesis is concerned with the ways in which trees populate medieval romance, which is, as we shall see, reliant on the arboreal in manifold different ways. The tree-based settings of the forest, wood, wilderness, garden, and orchard provide a "green and quiet backdrop" for the action of the genre, but the trees that make up these settings are largely invisible, both within romance texts themselves, and, for the most part, in the scholarly attention these texts have received. Though Wampole is writing in a modern context, she may as

¹ Christy Wampole, *Rootedness: The Ramifications of a Metaphor* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 1.

well be referring to medieval romance, in that trees are “everywhere and thus nowhere” within this genre. At the start of her book about “absent narratives” in late medieval English literature, Elizabeth Scala provocatively states that “the primary function of the medievalist is to locate missing stories”.² In shining a light on the background trees of Middle English romance, I will uncover the arboreal stories that lurk under the surface of the genre. We now know that trees can and do communicate with one another in underground ways that we are just starting to understand.³ Likewise, the “little acorns” of tree references embedded in romance can become mighty if they are given space to grow and interact with each other.

The saying that inspired the title of this thesis – “from little acorns mighty oaks grow” – started to become popular after it appeared in Caleb Bingham’s *The Columbian Orator*, a text that brings together a collection of political and religious speeches.⁴ Aside from the fact that this type of text, being a composite of various works, is familiar to medievalists in the habit of exploring pre-modern manuscripts, this saying itself seems to have its roots in the oral culture of the Middle Ages. The *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* lists it as a fourteenth-century English proverb, and a similar image can be found in Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*: “Or as an ook comth of a litil spir, / So thorough this lettre, which that she hym sente, / Encresen gan desir, of which he brente”.⁵ I start with this saying as the arboreal metaphor

² Elizabeth Scala, *Absent Narratives, Manuscript Textuality, and Literary Structure in Late Medieval England* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 1. I will discuss Scala’s theory of “absent narratives” in more detail in Chapter One.

³ See, for example, Peter Wohlleben, *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate* (London: Harper Collins, 2017).

⁴ The quotation from this text at the start of this thesis is from D. Everett, “Lines Spoken at A School-Exhibition, By a Little Boy Seven Years Old,” in *The Columbian Orator*, ed. Caleb Bingham (Boston: Manning and Loring, 1800), 58. See Granville Ganter, “The Active Virtue of *The Columbian Orator*,” *The New England Quarterly* 70, no. 3 (1997): 463-476 for more on the contents and reception of this text.

⁵ “Proverbs,” *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, ed. Elizabeth Knowles (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), <https://www-oxfordreference-com.ezproxy.is.ed.ac.uk/view/10.1093/acref/9780199668700.001.0001/q-author-00010->

within it highlights how trees can facilitate more than just the carbon cycle. Just as they take root and branch out all over the world, and have done for longer than human memory, trees grow tall in our collective imagination, in endless cycles of meanings.

Using trees as a way through which to view Middle English romance opens a space in which we might investigate what it means to be a knight, a man, a woman, a human. This thesis will explore how these identities are entwined with the arboreal presences that witness, overshadow, protect, threaten, define, and dissolve them. Viewing the trees of romance as material things that observe and participate in the action of romance gives them the power to interact with the human. Beyond that, I will argue that a focus on trees allows us to glimpse what I will call the hidden eco-subtexts of romance, which lie just beneath the dominant human narratives of the genre. To explore this underground and foundational non-human power, I have chosen a selection of some of the most popular Middle English romances, through which to demonstrate the marginal but mighty power of trees. Over five chapters, I will use trees as a starting point to consider the complex human and non-human webs in *Le Morte Darthur*, *Ywain and Gawain*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the Middle English Breton Lays, and *Sir Tristrem*.

In general, my methodology has been to seek out individual trees that contribute to these webs. Though I will engage with tree-based settings and groups of trees where relevant, what is innovative about my approach is my close focus on precise narrative moments in which particular trees, wooden objects, or arboreal

00002681; Geoffrey Chaucer, "Troilus and Criseyde," in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), Book II, 1335-1337.

metaphors become visible and powerful.⁶ In his discussion of Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of dialogism, Michael Holquist states that "dialogism is a philosophy of the trees as opposed to a philosophy of the forest: it conceives of society as a simultaneity of uniqueness".⁷ This thesis, then, is dialogic in the sense that it seeks to hear the many voices of trees in Middle English romance, and the unique ways that they contribute to this corpus.⁸

To begin to find these voices, I will first give a brief overview of the medieval context relevant to this thesis, starting with a definition of Middle English romance according to its tree-based settings. I will then move on to other relevant medieval understandings of trees, covering some environmental history, the associations between trees and Other worlds, Christian tree iconography, and the concept of genealogical "trees". These ideas begin to reveal the multifaceted and powerful potential of tree imagery. I will then offer an illustrative example of the ways in which trees can be both marginal and meaningful in the Middle Ages, by considering an illumination of a nun picking penises from a tree in the margins BnF MS Fr. 25526. Through my analysis of this image, I will also demonstrate how I will utilise ecocritical frameworks, with interwoven ecofeminist and materialist strands, throughout this thesis. I will rely on these theoretical structures primarily as a means of articulating my own argument, and will borrow their useful terminologies and

⁶ In building this approach, I am especially indebted to Gillian Rudd's chapter on trees in *Greenery: Ecocritical Readings of Late Medieval English Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 48-90.

⁷ Michael Holquist, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and his World: Second Edition* (London: Routledge, 2002), 150-151. Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogics argues that no text is monological because the author adds their own perspective while writing, and all texts consist of multiple voices; absolute truth is impossible in literature, and more widely in society, as interpretation is individual; see Holquist, *Dialogism*, 31-35, 85-89 and 149-151.

⁸ I acknowledge that striving to hear tree "voices" is an anthropomorphic metaphor, just as my analysis of the communicative and dynamic agency of trees is, in some ways, unavoidably anthropocentric; I will discuss these difficulties, and the ways in which ecocritics, ecofeminists, and materialist thinkers have navigated them, throughout this introduction.

ideas to express how trees and wood unsettle, entangle, and strengthen human identities within the ecosystems of romance.

Defying Definitions: Moving Towards a Tree-Based Approach to Middle English Romance

The genre of romance is notoriously difficult to define. In his attempt to classify the Middle English Breton Lays, A.C. Spearing points out that romance itself is “fickle, evasive, hard to pin down in terms of genre or tone”.⁹ Siân Echard points out that attempts to define the term “romance” tend to “founder on the rocks” of its “various complexities”, as there are many different types of romance and so many aspects of it that can be focussed on.¹⁰ Some have defined the genre by its “ethos”, including “elements of fantasy, escapism, and inwardness”, while others have focussed on its “furniture”, that is, “quests, knights and ladies, forests, castles, monsters, and supernatural adventures”.¹¹ These attempts, while worthwhile, must also account for the fact that “genre was not an important concept for medieval theorists” and, therefore, “insofar as observations about the generic nature of medieval romance can be made, they must be fluid and contingent”.¹² Indeed, analysis of romance is most effective when its complexity is embraced.

In particular, approaches to Middle English romance have benefited from the growing trend to accept the idiosyncrasies of this corpus. Middle English romance is especially difficult to define, since, etymologically, the term *en romanz* has decidedly

⁹ A.C. Spearing, “*Sir Orfeo: Madness and Gender*,” in *The Spirit of Medieval English Popular Romance*, ed. Ad Putter and Jane Gilbert (Essex: Pearson Education, 2000), 271.

¹⁰ Siân Echard, “Insular Romance,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Medieval Literature in English*, ed. Greg Walker and Elaine Treharne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 161.

¹¹ Echard, “Insular Romance,” 161.

¹² Susan Crane, *Insular Romance: Politics, Faith, and Culture in Anglo-Norman and Middle English Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 10.

“non-English origins”.¹³ Furthermore, insular romance was originally written in Anglo-Norman, and romance written in vernacular English only emerged properly in the fourteenth century.¹⁴ Even when the term *romaunce* was used in Middle English, poets did not “restrict the term *roman/romaunce* to one set of characteristics”.¹⁵ This difficulty of definition has been exacerbated by the fact that Middle English romance texts have often been viewed through the lens of their French antecedents, and are consequently often found to be less “sophisticated” examples of romance.¹⁶ These sorts of arguments are underpinned by the understanding that Middle English romances were probably consumed by levels of society other than the higher classes.¹⁷ This thesis will argue against the resulting assumption that Middle English romances are therefore less complex and worthwhile, especially in relation to *Ywain and Gawain* and *Sir Tristrem*. Stallybrass and White argue that

The ranking of literary genres and authors in a hierarchy analogous to social classes is a particularly clear example of a much broader and more complex cultural process whereby the human body, psychic forms, geographical space and the social formation are all constructed within interrelating and dependent hierarchies of high and low.¹⁸

As this thesis attempts to trouble some of these hierarchies – especially those that place masculine, feminine, and the non-human above and below each other – it will also unsettle this limited view of Middle English romance.

¹³ Echard, “Insular Romance,” 160.

¹⁴ Echard, “Insular Romance,” 160.

¹⁵ Crane, *Insular Romance*, 10.

¹⁶ Derek Pearsall addresses this tendency in response to criticism of his own previous adherence to it, for example, in “The Pleasure of Popular Romance: A Prefatory Essay,” in *Medieval Romance, Medieval Contexts*, ed. Rhiannon Purdie and Michael Cichon (Cambridge; D.S. Brewer, 2011), 9-18.

¹⁷ Crane, *Insular Romance*, 9-11; also see Nicola McDonald, “A Polemical Introduction,” in *Pulp Fictions of Medieval England: Essays in Popular Romance*, ed. Nicola McDonald (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 1-17.

¹⁸ Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London: Methuen, 1986), 2.

Indeed, when we are approaching the non-human, it is best to do so without being restrictive, just as we should handle romance with openness. The tendency for humans to impose upon the non-human has been eloquently discussed in relation to trees by Richard Mabey:

We are, by our own natures, namers and systematisers, compulsive searchers for patterns. We have evolved as this kind of creature. ... It frames the kind of answers we find, and the stories we tell about them. Yet the minute trees are imaged – defined, charted, conserved, logged, sampled, trail-marked – they are, to one degree or another, frozen in time. They are seen with the momentary exactness of a flash photograph. At worst they can become museum exhibits, pinned down like butterflies on a board.¹⁹

The same could be argued of romance; if we try to pin it down, we risk limiting it. Both romance and the non-human are, to use a term I will often return to, “slippery”, in the sense that they remain just out of sight, and resist monologic interpretation. I will return to the ways in which ecocritical approaches navigate this tendency to “pin down” the non-human, but here I want to emphasise how we might open up our definition of romance by considering the trees that are so vital to the genre. In the next section, I will refer to scholars such as Corinne Saunders, whose book, *The Forest of Medieval Romance*, explores the archetypal setting of the forest as integral to the genre.²⁰ Barbara Lee Bolt has even argued for a new “Eco-Theory of Genre”, in which “instead of romance, Breton lai, ballad, and fabliau”, the texts she discusses are “wilderness, forest, and garden poems”.²¹ To build on this hypothesis, this thesis will show that trees themselves should be incorporated into our definitions of romance to allow these definitions to become less restrictive and more inclusive.

¹⁹ Richard Mabey, *The Ash and The Beech: The Drama of Woodland Change* (London: Random House, 2008), 61-62.

²⁰ Corinne Saunders, *The Forest of Medieval Romance : Avernus, Broceliande, Arden* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1993).

²¹ Barbara Lee Bolt, “Of Wilderness, Forest, and Garden: An Eco-Theory of Genre in Middle English Literature” (PhD diss., University of South Carolina, 2015), 2.

The arboreal non-human is a productive point of departure for consideration of romance, alongside elements such as magic, nobility, and *aventure*, among others.

Indeed, even these other elements have associations with trees. In the next section, I will discuss how magic and the supernatural – and especially encounters with the fairy Otherworld – are connected to trees. Likewise, I will explore how Judeo-Christian discourses, which almost always infuse medieval English romance literature in some sense, rely on trees.²² Additionally, the concept of “family trees” is tied to nobility, which is also an essential aspect of most romance protagonists; though genealogies such as those that I will discuss in the next section are not always referenced directly, the importance of status is inherent in the genre.²³

Furthermore, trees are intimately connected with *aventure*, which has been widely acknowledged as essential to romance. For example, in his classic essay on the episodic structure of epic and romance, Morton W. Bloomfield argues that the romance genre is defined by “‘aventure,’ the opening out to the unexpected, the encounter with the unknown”.²⁴ This concept is crystallised by Northrop Frye in his influential book *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance*; he views the archetypal romance trajectory as a journey from the “idyllic” world of security to the “night” world of adventure and pain, and back again.²⁵ The “idyllic” world is one of “happiness, security, and peace; the emphasis is often thrown on

²² For thorough explorations of these themes in romance, see, for example, Corinne Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural in Medieval English Romance* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2010); and Rosalind Field, Phillipa Hardman, and Michael Sweeney, eds., *Christianity and Romance in Medieval England* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2010).

²³ Crane discusses the fact that, “broadly speaking, medieval romances are secular fictions of nobility” (*Insular Romance*, 10).

²⁴ Morton W. Bloomfield, “Episodic Motivation and Marvels in Epic and Romance,” in *Essays and Explorations: Studies in Ideas, Language, and Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), 106; also see Erich Auerbach’s formative essay on the subject, “The Knight Sets Forth”, in *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Thought*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), especially 134-142.

²⁵ Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 53.

childhood or on an 'innocent' or pre-genital period of youth".²⁶ The "night" world, on the other hand, is "a world of exciting adventures, but adventures which involve separation, loneliness, humiliation, pain, and the threat of more pain".²⁷

The references to day and night here can also be thought of in terms of other non-human cycles. The "idyllic" and "night" worlds could be spring and winter, for example, and related to the passage of time and the seasons. Indeed, the often-cyclical nature of romance could also be visualised in terms of trees, with the characters' movements between the "idyllic" to "night" worlds being conceived through the cycle of growth, loss, and regeneration that deciduous trees continually undergo. Furthermore, I want to emphasise again that trees consistently witness the movements and cycles of romance protagonists. The "night" worlds of romance are populated with forests, woods, wildernesses, and even gardens and orchards, within which trees observe the countless acts of chivalric violence and combat, expressions of courtly love, and other episodes that form the basis of this genre. If we attempt to view romance texts from the perspective of these trees, as I will do, the characters that participate in these episodes become embroiled in their eco-subtexts. Though these subtexts are largely hidden – just as the individual trees that form the tree-based settings of romance are largely unseen – they are nevertheless present and powerful.

Trees in Context: Medieval Understandings of the Arboreal

Trees occupied many varied and wide-ranging spaces in the medieval world, both in terms of their physical presence within the environment and in terms of their

²⁶ Frye, *The Secular Scripture*, 53.

²⁷ Frye, *The Secular Scripture*, 53.

symbolic potential. This thesis is situated in a newly-emerging forest of interest in the arboreal in pre-modern England. Della Hooke's *Trees in Anglo-Saxon England* and Vin Nardizzi's *Wooden Os: Shakespeare's Theatres and England's Trees* both acknowledge the multivalence of the arboreal across time and space.²⁸ Robert Pogue Harrison's comprehensive *Forests: The Shadow of Civilisation* charts the importance of this tree-based setting in Western thought from the classical period, to the Middle Ages, and beyond.²⁹ Oliver Rackham's valuable work surveying the history of England's countryside has provided a sound basis for how we can consider the "real" trees of the medieval period.³⁰ As previously mentioned, Corinne Saunders also explores forests, but in a more specific romance context; she discusses the liminality of this setting, as both an extension of the court and a space of alterity and alienation. Returning to trees more specifically, Pippa Salonijs and Andrea Worm's ambitious approach to the tree in medieval art and thought again emphasises how powerful and varied tree symbolism can be, and Manuel Lima's *The Book of Trees: Visualizing Branches of Knowledge* explores arboreal images in diagrams and art, both past and present.³¹

My purpose in listing these works is not to provide an exhaustive overview of previous work on trees in the Middle Ages, but instead to point out how even this brief outline hints at the increasingly recognised roles that trees can be perceived to play in medieval lives and imaginations. It is outside the scope of this generically

²⁸ Della Hooke, *Trees in Anglo-Saxon England* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2010); Vin Nardizzi, *Wooden Os: Shakespeare's Theatres and England's Trees* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013).

²⁹ Robert Pogue Harrison, *Forests: The Shadows of Civilisation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

³⁰ Oliver Rackham's bibliography is extensive, but I am especially indebted to *Trees and Woodland in the British Landscape: The Complete History of Britain's Trees, Woods & Hedgerows*, revised edition (London: Phoenix Press, 2001).

³¹ Pippa Salonijs and Andrea Worm, eds., *The Tree: Symbol, Allegory, and Mnemonic Device in Medieval Art and Thought* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014); Manuel Lima, *The Book of Trees: Visualizing Branches of Knowledge* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2014).

focussed thesis to attempt to catalogue these roles, or analyse their significance in equal depth, but it is necessary to acknowledge some tree associations which are relevant to the Middle English romances that will be explored. The most pertinent arboreal considerations fall into three main themes: folkloric, religious, and genealogical. The arboreal aspects of the supernatural Otherworld, the central role that trees play in Christian iconography and discourse, and the prevalence of tree-like representations of medieval social hierarchies are all points of access into the trees of romance. In this section, I will briefly outline how trees were important in these terms throughout the Middle Ages, and will also provide an overview of some relevant aspects of environmental history. The ways in which trees contributed to the medieval English landscape, and were controlled and cultivated by its inhabitants, are closely related to their symbolic potential.

This potential exists within a continuum of arboreal connotations that transcend both time and space. As Miranda Jane Green notes,

The symbolism of trees is complex; their roots and branches evoked an image of a link between sky and Underworld; their longevity represented continuity and wisdom; the seasonal behaviour of deciduous trees gave rise to cyclical symbolism, an allegory of life, death, and rebirth.³²

Likewise, Manuel Lima notes that trees have been seen as “powerful images of growth, decay, and resurrection” throughout human history, and argues that their “immense significance to humans” is reflected in the fact that “there’s hardly any culture that hasn’t invested them with lofty symbolism and, in many cases, with celestial and religious power”.³³ Many early European traditions feature a “world tree”, such as Yggdrasill from Norse mythology; the legend of this tree emphasises

³² Miranda Jane Green, *Celtic Myths* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), 50.

³³ Lima, *The Book of Trees*, 15-16.

how it is rooted in the Underworld and stretches to the heavens.³⁴ Likewise, Celtic mythology emphasises the links between trees and the Otherworld.³⁵

When considering medieval England, this sense of trees as Other is also apparent. Harrison eloquently argues that “with respect to the medieval social order that was reorganizing itself on the basis of new feudal and religious institutions, the forests were *foris*, ‘outside’”, such that “the relation between forests and civilisation during the Christian era is largely one of impression – what we have also called the law’s shadow”.³⁶ This idea draws on the fact that the Latin word for “forest”, *silva*, referred not only to physical forests, but also, in a philosophical context, to “chaos, disorder or primordial matter”.³⁷ Likewise, in a romance context, Derek Pearsall and Elizabeth Salter define the forest as “a place of mystery, a place of testing, and always potentially evil”.³⁸ Additionally, tree-based settings such as forests often had associations with the supernatural Otherworld; this can be seen to stem from Classical representations of forests as spaces of interaction between gods and mortals, and from other pre-Christian mythology and folklore.³⁹ These associations

³⁴ Hooke, *Trees in Anglo-Saxon England*, 14-17.

³⁵ Hooke, *Trees in Anglo-Saxon England*, 12-14.

³⁶ Harrison, *Forests*, 61 and 103-104.

³⁷ Saunders, *The Forest of Medieval Romance*, 19. This is also the basis of the fact that tree-based settings are often associated with “Wild Man” figures, or with humans driven to “madness”. See, for example, Dorothy Yamamoto, *The Boundaries of the Human in Medieval English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 144-196; Penelope B.R. Doob, *Nebuchadnezzar’s Children: Conventions of Madness in Middle English Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974). Here, as elsewhere in this thesis, I use the word “madness” carefully, and in relation to the ways that it is represented in medieval literature specifically; while “[m]edieval writers were no closer than their modern counterparts to agreeing upon a single, monolithic model of madness”, it is often associated with a blurring of “the distinction between human and animal, or more generally between savagery and civilization” (Sylvia Huot, *Madness in Medieval French Literature: Identities Found and Lost* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 3).

³⁸ Derek Pearsall and Elizabeth Salter, *Landscapes and Seasons of the Medieval World* (London: Elek Books, 1973), 52; also see Bloomfield’s argument that “in romance, nature, especially the woods, is often the source of the strange” (“Episodic Motivation,” 111).

³⁹ Saunders, *The Forest of Medieval Romance*, 35-36, 54-55; Hooke, *Trees in Anglo-Saxon England*, 3-17. Indeed, trees are often sites of supernatural encounters in romance. In Middle English, it is particularly common for fairy kings or knights to abduct, or even explicitly rape, women beneath trees. Examples of texts in which this occurs include *Sir Orfeo*, *Sir Degaré*, and *Sir Gowther*, which will all be discussed in Chapter Four. Men also commonly

continued well after the advent of Christianity, and important rituals – such as those surrounding May Day, which circle around the flowering of the hawthorn tree – endured alongside a belief that certain trees provided a conduit between the human and fairy worlds.⁴⁰

However, Saunders has argued convincingly that there is more to medieval romance forests than straightforward readings of them as mysterious might suggest.⁴¹ She asserts that forests in romance incorporate the idea of an “uncultivated wilderness”, but also exist as courtly and cultivated spaces of aristocratic power, expressed through pursuits such as hunting.⁴² Additionally, of course, trees grow within gardens and orchards, which are spaces of control and enclosure.⁴³ Indeed, far from being universally unknown and frightening, the tree-based landscapes of medieval England were largely sites of human manipulation and management. By the Middle Ages, areas of “wilderness” were few and far between in England. As Muir puts it, “from deeply back in prehistoric times, most

meet with the supernatural beneath trees. In *Sir Launfal*, for example, Launfal is sleeping beneath a tree when he is first approached by Triamour’s fairy maidens; again, see Chapter Four. Lancelot also encounters the supernatural when sleeping beneath a tree in *Le Morte Darthur*; see Chapter One. In these interactions, there is almost always an element of human subjugation in the face of the powerful, supernatural Otherworld.

⁴⁰ Richard Muir, *Ancient Trees, Living Landscapes* (Stroud: Tempus Publishing, 2005), 55-64, especially 58-59.

⁴¹ She asserts that considering forests only in this sense “neglects the variety of themes associated with the forest and its shaping role in romance” (Saunders, *The Forest of Medieval Romance*, x). Bloomfield also emphasises the multiple and opposing meanings of “natural” spaces such as woods (“Episodic Motivation,” 111-112).

⁴² Saunders, *The Forest of Medieval Romance*, 2. Gillian Rudd discusses the definition of “wilderness” and “wildness”, and explores medieval representations of them in her chapter on “Wilds, Wastes and Wilderness” in *Greenery*, 91-128.

⁴³ Pearsall and Salter, *Landscapes and Seasons*, 76-118; Spearing, “Madness and Gender”, 258. Christopher Dyer explores the contents and cultivation of real medieval seigneurial, peasant, and urban gardens, including how they were maintained; see Christopher Dyer, *Everyday Life in Medieval England* (London: Hambledon and London, 2000), 113-131. Of particular relevance is how “[t]he lord’s garden formed part of his outward display of wealth and exclusiveness” (*Everyday Life*, 114) and how these gardens were enclosed (*Everyday Life*, 114). Also see Rudd’s chapter on “Gardens and Fields” in *Greenery*, 165-201.

British woods were subjected to powerful cultural controls”; these processes began as soon as trees began to recolonise post-glacial landscapes.⁴⁴

These controls included managing trees in regulated woodland and forest spaces, as well as tree felling and deforestation. In England, the twelfth and thirteenth centuries were periods of heavy tree felling, and enclosure of the land had begun in earnest by 1300; in terms of tree-based terrain, “by 1200, all the woods in England were owned”.⁴⁵ Boundaries of land, including woodland, usually consisted of ditches alongside fences or hedges; these boundaries were paid “great attention”, and manorial court records document many cases of punishment for unlawful trespass of them.⁴⁶ Royal forests, which were defined more by the animals they contained than by their trees, were particularly heavily policed.⁴⁷ Trees were also often involved in marking boundaries: for example, hazel and willow were woven into hurdles to demarcate property; trees were otherwise used to support hedgerows; and chains of pollards, usually hornbeams, oaks, and elms, also determined borders.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Muir, *Ancient Trees*, 16.

⁴⁵ I.G. Simmons, *An Environmental History of Great Britain: From 10,000 Years Ago to the Present* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), 94. Also see 75-85 and 401: enclosure is “farming practice with fenced, hedged or walled fields ... where the ‘open field’ system was in use enclosure replaced it piecemeal from c. 1300 especially when populations fell”.

⁴⁶ Rackham, *Trees and Woodland*, 63.

⁴⁷ Charles R. Young, *The Royal Forests of Medieval England* (Leicester University Press, 1979), 1-6; N.D.G. James, *A History of English Forestry* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 2-32. Also see Saunders’ definitions (*The Forest of Medieval Romance*, 1-3) and Rudd, *Greenery*, 48: “although today we assume that a forest cannot be a forest without trees, in the Middle Ages the defining element seems to have been deer”. Not only did this allow for the sport of hunting, but it also meant that “forests were all valuable as a source of meat and were exploited for that purpose beyond whatever hunting for pleasure the king might do” (Young, *The Royal Forests*, 58). It should also be noted that “the words ‘forest’ and ‘woodland’ did not mean the same thing, since a forest included some land which was neither wooded nor waste” (James, *A History of English Forestry*, 3).

⁴⁸ Simmons, *An Environmental History*, 75-76 and 94; Muir, *Ancient Trees*, 47-111, especially 52-53 and 71-73; also see Muir’s discussion of “landmark trees” (*Ancient Trees*, 33-47). See below for a definition of pollarding.

Tree-based spaces were also farmed in various senses, for tree products as well as for other agricultural purposes. Oliver Rackham states that “woods producing underwood and timber were differentiated, as in earlier centuries, from the various categories of wood-pasture”, wood-pasture being woods that were used to graze animals.⁴⁹ Population growth during the favourable conditions of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries could account for the fact that tree felling was an important feature of those centuries, as increased demand for food necessitated landform changes; deforestation started up again following demographic recovery after the Black Death.⁵⁰ On the other hand, if the land was not needed for other uses, woods were managed “intensively and conservatively” and “on the basis that whenever a tree was felled it would grow again or another would grow in its place”.⁵¹ Although wood had almost endless uses in the Middle Ages – such as in the construction of buildings, fences, and ships, as fuel for fires, and in the production of most of the accoutrements of everyday life – these practices were sustainable.⁵²

This type of management was maintained through cultivation techniques such as coppicing and pollarding. Coppicing is the practice of cutting back trees to stimulate new growth from their stumps: “the stump sends up shoots, called spring, and becomes a stool from which an indefinite succession of crops of rods, poles, or logs can be cut at intervals of years”.⁵³ This practice was well-established in

⁴⁹ Rackham, *Trees and Woodland*, 62. For definitions of “woodland” versus “wood-pasture”, see 4. Rackham also distinguishes between timber and wood: “Timber ... is big stuff suitable for making planks, beams and gateposts; wood ... is poles, rods etc. suitable for light construction or firewood” (*Trees and Woodland*, 10). Wood consists of “underwood ... the poles produced by cutting coppice stools, pollards or small suckers, or of the branches of trees felled for timber” (*Trees and Woodland*, 10). Again, see below for definitions of coppicing and pollarding. Also see Muir, *Ancient Trees*, 16-18.

⁵⁰ Simmons, *An Environmental History*, 70-85.

⁵¹ Rackham, *Trees and Woodland*, 62.

⁵² Rackham, *Trees and Woodland*, 68-70 and 76-77; Simmons, *An Environmental History*, 94-96.

⁵³ Rackham, *Trees and Woodland*, 8.

England by 1086, and “by 1251 had spread to nearly all woods”.⁵⁴ Pollarding, a similar process, involves leaving behind more of the trunk of a tree, called the bolling, which “sprouts in the same way as a coppice stool, but at a height where animals cannot reach the spring”, so that new growth was more protected.⁵⁵ These processes allowed for the successful maintenance and control of trees and their surroundings.

Another process of cultivation that provided practical advantages throughout the Middle Ages was grafting, which also had great symbolic potential. This practice involves two plants becoming dependent on one another and combining such that “the resulting genetically composite organism functions as a single plant”.⁵⁶ Though grafting can occur as a natural process, it is most often artificial, and the result of a part of one plant, the “scion”, being forcibly inserted into the rootstock of another, in order to form this new organism.⁵⁷ Liz Herbert McAvoy, Patricia Skinner, and Theresa Tyers have explored how grafting imagery in the writings of Mechthild of Hackeborn and Gertrude of Helfta – nuns writing in Helfta, Saxony, in the thirteenth century – are a point of access into the multivalent hermeneutic potential of grafted plants in the Middle Ages.⁵⁸ The grafting process has an erotic potential, since a scion is inserted into a rootstock; these can be conceptualised as masculine and feminine respectively.⁵⁹ Alongside this, some medieval writers embraced the possibilities for imagining grafting as representative of the relationship between God

⁵⁴ Rackham, *Trees and Woodland*, 63; also see Muir, *Ancient Trees*, 18-21.

⁵⁵ Rackham, *Trees and Woodland*, 8; also see Muir, *Ancient Trees*, 22-25.

⁵⁶ Ken Mudge, Jules Janick, Steven Scofield, and Eliezer E. Goldschmidt, “A History of Grafting,” *Horticultural Reviews* 35 (2009): 439.

⁵⁷ Mudge et al., “A History of Grafting,” 439 and 445-449.

⁵⁸ Liz Herbert McAvoy, Patricia Skinner, and Theresa Tyers, “Strange Fruits: Grafting, Foreigners, and the Garden Imaginary in Northern France and Germany, 1250-1350,” *Speculum* 94 (2019): 1-29. I am grateful to Liz Herbert McAvoy for providing me with a draft of this article.

⁵⁹ McAvoy, Skinner, and Tyers, “Strange Fruits,” 3-5.

and humanity, or else as a metaphor for converting non-believers and attaching them to the Christian “rootstock”.⁶⁰

Indeed, trees were essential to medieval Christian iconography, and control of trees and the spaces they inhabited was underpinned by a Christian ideology that encouraged human classification and control of the non-human. Lynn White Junior’s famous argument that our current environmental crisis is a direct result of medieval Western Christian attitudes towards nature is now considered to be too simplistic and generalised, but his emphasis on the importance of Genesis is a good starting point here.⁶¹ When discussing medieval understandings of the natural world, Genesis 1:28 – “fill the earth, and subdue it, and rule over the fishes of the sea, and the fowls of the air, and all living creatures that move upon the earth” – is often referenced.⁶² The common medieval belief in a “natural” hierarchy with God above man, and man above the non-human, stems from these types of discourses.⁶³ This hierarchy was also often conceived of as a tree: “the *scala naturae* (natural ladder), also known as the ‘great chain of being,’ was a popular medieval philosophical concept that saw the world as an immutable tree of perfection”.⁶⁴ This tree-like ladder incorporates hierarchies and binaries that dominated medieval discourses about the position of man.

⁶⁰ McAvoy, Skinner, and Tyers, “Strange Fruits,” 1-29. I will further explore the symbolic potential of grafted trees in my exploration of the *ympe*-tree in *Sir Orfeo*, in Chapter Four.

⁶¹ Lynn White Jr., “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” *Science* 155 (1967): 1203-1207; for his discussion of Genesis specifically see 1205. I will discuss White’s theories in more detail shortly.

⁶² This and all subsequent references to the Bible will be from the *Douay-Rheims Bible*, accessed online at <http://www.drbo.org/>. For an example of a reference to this part of Genesis, see Yamamoto, *The Boundaries of the Human*, 7-8.

⁶³ I will further discuss the implications of this view of nature, which also, of course, also places man above woman, in the next section.

⁶⁴ Lima, *The Book of Trees*, 29. Also see K. Robertson, *Nature Speaks: Medieval Literature and Aristotelian Philosophy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), especially 56-60.

That said, the ways in which trees operated in Christian ideology and iconography were not simply hierarchical or straightforward; the central trees of Christian tradition tend to cross boundaries and occupy liminal spaces. Those of Eden, for example, are notoriously difficult to pin down, as the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil are often conflated. Genesis seems to suggest that there is only one tree that undergoes “a kind of metamorphosis, in which it passes from *arbor vitae* to *arbor cognitionis*, and finally to *arbor mortis*”.⁶⁵ This ambiguity mirrors how these trees also transform allegorically, and sometimes literally, into the Cross of Christ. Iconography of the Crucifixion often connects the cross to these Edenic trees, representing how Christ’s enactment of salvation is linked to the Fall (see Figure One, for example).⁶⁶ In literature, this concept is transmitted in the Legend of the Cross, which relates Seth’s return to Eden; the archangel Michael gifts him with twigs or seeds from the Tree of Life that Seth then plants on Adam’s grave, and these grow into the tree used for the Cross.⁶⁷ Thus, these biblical trees inhabit several spaces at once, transcending earthly concerns, but also firmly rooted in the Christian history of the world.

⁶⁵ Ute Dercks, “Two Trees in Paradise? A Case Study on the Iconography of the Tree of Knowledge and the Tree of Life in Italian Romanesque Sculpture,” in *The Tree: Symbol, Allegory, and Mnemonic Device in Medieval Art and Thought*, ed. Pippa Salonijs and Andrea Worm (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), 144.

⁶⁶ Barbara Baert and Liesbet Kusters, “The Tree as Narrative, Formal, and Allegorical Index in Representations of the *Noli Me Tangere*,” in *The Tree: Symbol, Allegory, and Mnemonic Device in Medieval Art and Thought*, ed. Pippa Salonijs and Andrea Worm (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), 163-166. I have included the example of tree-based iconography overleaf as it is displayed locally, in the National Gallery of Scotland, and because the “two sides” of arboreal Christian iconography are represented strikingly. In this painting, Man sits between Old Testament images of the Tree of Knowledge on the left and New Testament images of the Crucifixion on the right. The tree which Man sits beneath is withered on the left and flourishing on the right, representing the opposing messages of sin and death on the one hand, and salvation and eternal life on the other.

⁶⁷ The most common version of this is from Jacobus de Voragine’s *Legenda Aurea*; see Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, trans. William Granger Ryan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 277. Also see Baert and Kusters, “The Tree As Narrative,” 164-165.



Figure One: Hans Holbein the younger (c.1497–1543), *An Allegory of the Old and New Testaments*, <https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/an-allegory-of-the-old-and-new-testaments-210200>.

Another “immensely popular” tree, also related to Christ, is the Tree of Jesse.⁶⁸ This is a Tree of Consanguinity, or “family tree”, tracing Christ’s ancestry from Jesse of Bethlehem, the father of King David. The Tree of Jesse motif is based on the prophecy of Isaiah: “And there shall come forth a rod out of the root of Jesse, and a flower shall rise up out of his root” (Isaiah 11.1).⁶⁹ Some Tree of Jesse images do not link the figures within them; they might contain separate and unconnected images of Christ’s ancestors, for example.⁷⁰ However, the tradition of linking these figures genealogically through visually tree-like structures grew with the rise of genealogical trees, which will be discussed shortly.⁷¹ The regular placement of Tree of Jesse illuminations at the start of Matthew’s Gospel, which catalogues Christ’s genealogy, strengthens this association.⁷² Jesse himself is often depicted at the foot of a tree or vine-like structure, and this tree or vine is sometimes rooted in him, growing out of his body.⁷³

This entanglement of human and non-human is also a feature of other visualisations of genealogy. Using trees as diagrammatic structures was a well-established practice by the Middle Ages; the oldest known example is the so-called Porphyrian tree, based on the principles of a Greek philosopher, Porphyry, and his analysis of Aristotle’s classification of nature – I have already touched on the resulting *scala naturae*.⁷⁴ The Tree of Porphyry was not “tree-like” until relatively late

⁶⁸ Lima, *The Book of Trees*, 32.

⁶⁹ Pippa Salonijs, “*Arbor Jesse – Lignum Vitae*: The Tree of Jesse, The Tree of Life, and the Mendicants in Late Medieval Orvieto,” in *The Tree: Symbol, Allegory, and Mnemonic Device in Medieval Art and Thought*, ed. Pippa Salonijs and Andrea Worm (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), 218.

⁷⁰ Marie-Pierre Gelin, “*Strips Jesse In Capite Ecclesiae*: Iconographic and Liturgical Readings of the Tree of Jesse in Stained-Glass Windows,” in *The Tree: Symbol, Allegory, and Mnemonic Device in Medieval Art and Thought*, ed. Pippa Salonijs and Andrea Worm (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), 13-33.

⁷¹ Gelin, “*Strips Jesse In Capite Ecclesiae*,” 13-33.

⁷² Gelin, “*Strips Jesse In Capite Ecclesiae*,” 19.

⁷³ Lima, *The Book of Trees*, 32, 36, and 55-57.

⁷⁴ Lima, *The Book of Trees*, 27; Annemieke R. Verboon, “The Medieval Tree of Porphyry: An Organic Structure of Logic,” in *The Tree: Symbol, Allegory, and Mnemonic Device in*

in its history, after Peter of Spain used the word *arbor* to describe it in the thirteenth century.⁷⁵ However, medieval representations of Porphyry's ideas in tree-like structures are common, and his "logical branches became pictorial branches" as it began to be drawn as a tree.⁷⁶ The same is true of one of the "most popular and enduring archetypes" of diagrammatic trees, the genealogical tree, which became widespread in the High Middle Ages.⁷⁷ These Trees of Consanguinity were "by no means always arboreal"; they can be "circular or triangular, and very often they appear as anthropomorphic structures, with the diagram superimposed on a standing human figure".⁷⁸ However, as with the Tree of Jesse and the Tree of Porphyry, there are enough examples of tree-like medieval genealogical trees that the associations between the arboreal and these types of hierarchies are pronounced.⁷⁹

Thus, trees stand on a nexus of cultural meanings that encodes an interaction between their place in the medieval English landscape and their symbolic potential. Trees branch far and wide, entangling elements at the heart of medieval romance, that are central to human experience. They are rooted in issues of Otherness and belonging, and are both connected to and disconnected from human realms of understanding. This section has given a brief overview of how they interact with the supernatural, with religion, and with human narratives of the past. In

Medieval Art and Thought, ed. Pippa Salonijs and Andrea Worm (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), 95-113.

⁷⁵ Verboon, "The Medieval Tree of Porphyry," 102-107.

⁷⁶ Verboon, "The Medieval Tree of Porphyry," 113. It should be noted that these arboreal depictions actually caused tensions within the tradition, as when "scribes attempted to make the trees more tree-like" the diagrams became "logically incoherent" (Verboon, "The Medieval Tree of Porphyry," 113).

⁷⁷ Lima, *The Books of Trees*, 29.

⁷⁸ Andrea Worm, "*Arbor Autem Humanum Genus Significat*: Trees of Genealogy and Sacred History in the Twelfth Century," in *The Tree: Symbol, Allegory, and Mnemonic Device in Medieval Art and Thought*, ed. Pippa Salonijs and Andrea Worm (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), 44.

⁷⁹ See, for example, Lima, *The Book of Trees*, 52-63.

these ways, and others, they consistently represent human concerns. Likewise, trees within the landscape of medieval England were largely cultivated and controlled for human use.

Throughout this thesis, I will explore how these processes are mirrored in medieval romance, as trees are utilised for human purposes within romance texts, and by the authors of those texts, both literally and metaphorically. However, as this section has also shown, trees also branch beyond the human, into spaces of alterity and ambiguity. Furthermore, control of tree-based landscapes, though prevalent, was not without its difficulties in the Middle Ages; as Saunders evocatively puts it, “neglected land was quickly reclaimed by the forest”.⁸⁰ Likewise, as trees continually and often invisibly observe the action of medieval romance, they also come to operate beyond human parameters. Trees can grow in more than one direction; humans may be able to see and control some aspects of their existence, but they also spread their tendrils beneath the ground of our understanding.

The idea that trees can grow both vertically and horizontally, and above and below ground, is one that holds weight on multiple levels. To conclude this section, I will briefly address Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s ideas of the “arborescent” and the “rhizomatic”, in order to provide a basis for the theoretical frameworks I will address in the next sections. In their ground-breaking work, *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari assert that “arborescent” forms are hierarchical and static, as in family “trees” like those I have just discussed.⁸¹ This vertical conceptualisation of trees stands in opposition to their concept of the “rhizomatic”, which encodes more horizontal and interconnected movement:

⁸⁰ Saunders, *The Forest of Medieval Romance*, 3.

⁸¹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Continuum, 1988), 7-8, 12, 16, 18, and 25, for example.

A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*. The tree is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance, uniquely alliance. The tree imposes the verb 'to be' but the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction 'and...and...and...' This conjunction carries enough force to shake and uproot the verb 'to be'.⁸²

Thus, grass is rhizomatic, for example, while trees are arborescent.⁸³ However, I argue that viewing trees as reflective of simple top-down hierarchies does not account for the ways that they grow in multiple directions, both literally and metaphorically. Other scholars have also critiqued Deleuze and Guattari's somewhat reductive classification of trees, but the most relevant is Alfred Kentigern Siewers' interrogation of this theory in a medieval context. He argues that Deleuze and Guattari's condemnation of the arborescent ironically causes them to overlook "the mystery of a real tree, the substance of which they still pursued in spirit in their rhizome".⁸⁴ In contrast, pre-modern Europeans saw trees as both rhizomatic *and* arborescent.⁸⁵

Trees are involved in the hierarchies associated with medieval control over nature, Christian discourses, and the relational structures of genealogies. However, they also branch beyond these associations, to entangle with the supernatural, and with other things – or Other things – in an endless list of 'ands', to use Deleuze and Guattari's definition of the rhizome. Even within hierarchical structures, trees are slippery beings; they are there one moment and gone or transformed the next, and branch and root up and out and down into unexpected places. They are both below

⁸² Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 25.

⁸³ Though Deleuze and Guattari do also acknowledge that "there are knots of arborescence in rhizomes, and rhizomatic offshoots in roots", and "root-tree and canal-rhizome are not two opposed models" (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 20; also see 15).

⁸⁴ Alfred Kentigern Siewers, "Trees," in *Inhuman Nature*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Washington, DC: Oliphant Books, 2014), 111. For examples of some other critiques of this theory, see Michael Marder, *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 84-85 and Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 52-53.

⁸⁵ Though not in those terms, of course; see Siewers, "Trees," 111.

and above ground, visible and invisible, vertical and horizontal. As they do today, trees occupied a “middle” space, “between things” in the Middle Ages; they were both marginal and controlled, but, at the same time, they held power that allowed them to transcend human limits.⁸⁶

The Penis Tree: A Theoretical Model

To exemplify how I will explore the peripheral power of trees, I will now turn to an illustrative example. The Bibliothèque Nationale de France holds a fourteenth-century French manuscript of *Le Roman de la Rose* that contains a particularly striking marginal illumination of a tree. In the bottom left-corner of folio 106v of BnF MS Fr. 25526, there is an image of a nun picking penises from a tree and placing them into a basket she is holding (see Figure Two overleaf). As with most trees in medieval romance, this so-called “penis tree” is on the fringes; it is literally relegated to the margins of this work, growing out of the leafy border of the page. It therefore becomes part of the non-human backdrop of *Le Roman de la Rose*, both in terms of the text’s garden setting, and in terms of the non-human elements that make up this manuscript, including the vellum upon which both text and illumination are inked. Both the trees within this garden-based text and the animals that died to make this manuscript can be seen – like the illustration of the penis tree – to be marginal. However, there is a certain power in this marginality, and this image is in subversive conversation with the central text. Lucy Allen has argued that the illuminator of the manuscript, Jeanne de Montbaston, created the penis tree image in response to the

⁸⁶ Marder discusses the “freedom” of plants in a similar way to this: “Despite their undeniable embeddedness in the environment, plants embody the kind of detachment human beings dream of in their own transcendent aspiration to the other, Beauty, or divinity” (*Plant-Thinking*, 12); also see 118-150. Wampole also discusses this (*Rootedness*, 246-249).

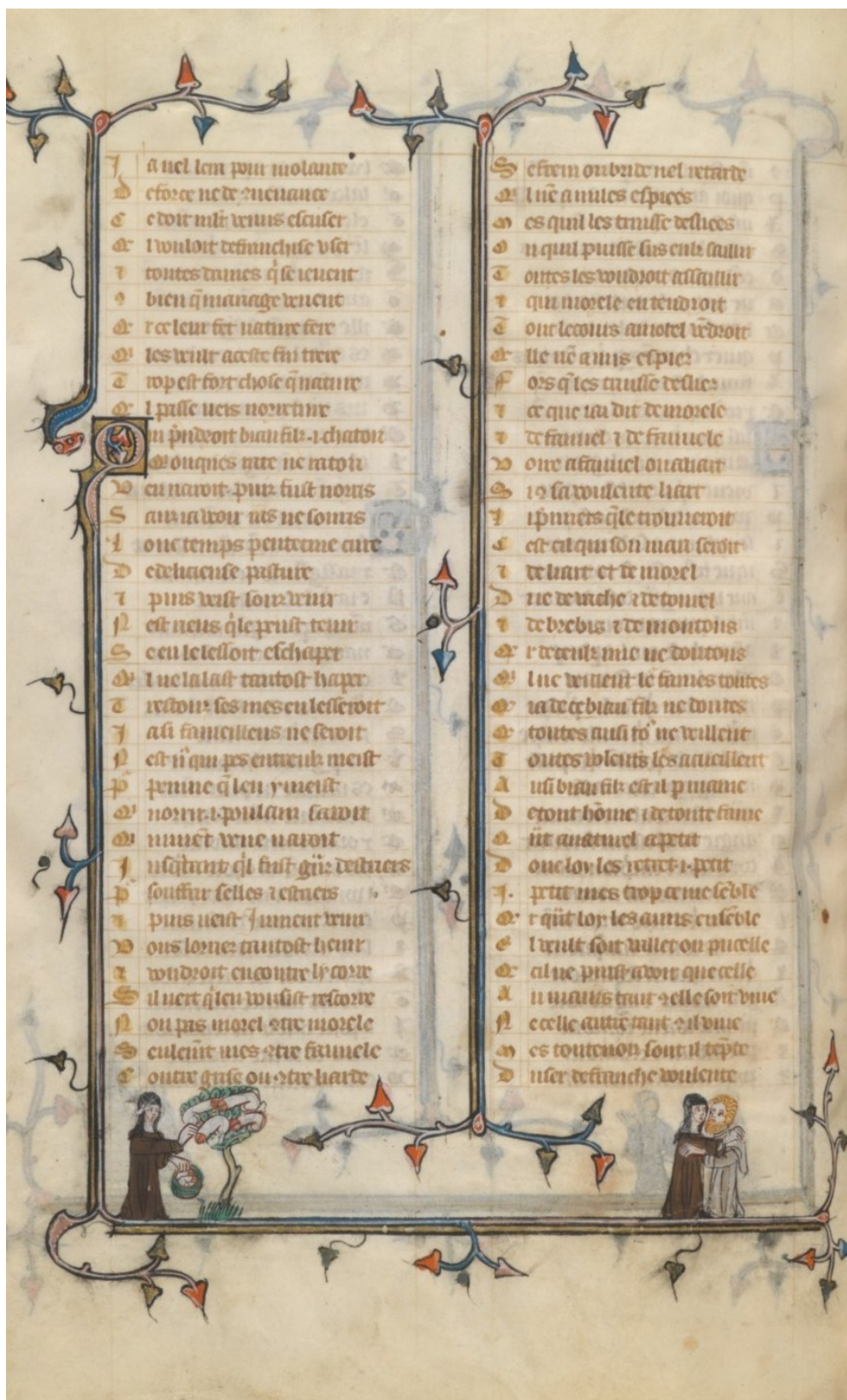


Figure Two: Bibliothèque Nationale de France MS Fr. 25526, folio 106v,
<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b6000369q/f218.item>

section of text, also on f. 106v, which suggests that only men are able to write; they, unlike women, have the “tools” to do so.⁸⁷ Allen asserts, “it’s as if Jeanne’s nun is saying: ‘well, if you have to have a penis to tell a good story ... look how many I have!’”⁸⁸ Michael Camille goes so far as to say that the penis tree is “perhaps the first example we have of a woman artist subverting sexual roles in the depiction of male desire and domination over her sex”.⁸⁹ Here, this subversion is happening literally in the margins, in a way that highlights how things “on the edge” can act outside the bounds of the expected.

Indeed, there is also potential power inherent in occupying marginal space. In terms of manuscript culture specifically, Camille has noted that marginalia in medieval manuscripts often speak to central texts or images in subversive ways. He argues that

The medieval image-world was, like medieval life itself, rigidly structured and hierarchical. For this reason, resisting, ridiculing, overturning and inverting it was not only possible, it was limitless.⁹⁰

If the margins paradoxically offer a potential that is “limitless”, they are also, ironically, spaces of power. Indeed, Peter Stallybrass and Allon White point out that “cultural identity is inseparable from its limits, it is always a boundary phenomenon and its order is always constructed around the figures of its territorial edge”.⁹¹

Though they are here addressing a different context – the creation of post-

⁸⁷ This manuscript was produced by a husband and wife team, Richart and Jeanne de Montbaston; another illumination in BnF MS Fr. 25526 shows them working, Richart on assembling the text and Jeanne on the illuminations. (see f. 77v at <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b6000369q/f159.item>). For Allen’s arguments, see Lucy Allen, “Jeanne de Montbaston – Penis Trees Against the Misogynists?” *Jeanne de Montbaston: Reading Medieval Texts*, October 13, 2013, <https://readingmedievalbooks.wordpress.com/2013/10/13/jeanne-de-montbaston-penis-trees-against-the-misogynists/>.

⁸⁸ Allen, “Jeanne de Montbaston”.

⁸⁹ Michael Camille, *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art* (London: Reaktion Books, 1992), 148-149.

⁹⁰ Camille, *Image on the Edge*, 26; also see Yamamoto, *The Boundaries of the Human*, 5-7.

⁹¹ Stallybrass and White, *Politics and Poetics*, 200.

Renaissance bourgeois culture – these ideas can be applied to the Middle Ages.⁹² In particular, I will argue, the trees of medieval romance occupy the genre’s “margins”, but also have the power to influence that which inhabits its “centre”.

The marginal image of the penis tree therefore becomes an appropriate lens through which to exemplify how I will apply ecocritical theory throughout this thesis. This is an image of the non-human that holds peripheral and subversive power, and focussing on the fact that it depicts a living natural thing adds another dimension to this power. However, this tree is also indelibly connected to the human; this image has been painted by human hands, onto the skin of an animal re-purposed for human use. On another level, this tree also embodies the human, in the sense that it “grows” human body parts, which are, in turn, harvested by the nun, presumably also as objects for her to use. Moreover, these body parts are gendered, as is the potentially subversive message of the tree, which encodes the possibility that the nun will use these penis “fruits” to access those parts of medieval society usually inhabited by men. Finally, then, the ways in which this tree depicts human/non-human enmeshment offers a point of access into considerations of materiality, and especially the importance of material non-human things. This tree produces other objects, and is itself inked onto a material object made up of other non-human components. Thus, this tree illustrates how the arboreal can be implicated in multiple layers of meaning, just as ink itself has been layered on the animal skins bound together to produce the manuscript it inhabits.

This brief analysis is intended to demonstrate how my analysis of *Le Morte Darthur*, *Ywain and Gawain*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the Middle English Breton Lays, and *Sir Tristrem* will draw on the theoretical frameworks of

⁹² Yamamoto also applies Stallybrass and White’s argument to a medieval context (*The Boundaries of the Human*, 5-7).

ecocriticism, ecofeminism, and materiality that I will address in the following sections. Throughout this thesis, I will draw attention to the marginal power of trees, viewing them as representative of an eco-subtext that exists underneath human narratives, just as animal skin exists beneath the ink those narratives are written in. My approach is ecocritical in the sense that it therefore reveals the presence of the non-human, even though it is usually buried beneath anthropocentrism. Through these considerations, I will also uncover how human and non-human are entangled, and how human/non-human and masculine/feminine boundaries are blurred by the trees I will focus on. Like the penis tree, these trees embody the human in ways that open spaces for alternative structures of power, and more inclusive and hybrid identity constructions. In this way, I will interrogate the dualisms that ecocritics and ecofeminists have identified as problematic. Thus, I will consider how arboreal non-human things – both living trees and wooden objects – come to participate in the narratives of romance, just as the layers of objects associated with the penis tree image communicate from the margins of BnF MS Fr. 25526.

Ecocriticism

In simplest terms, the field of ecocriticism aims to draw attention to the non-human “margins” of literature. Since the term was first used by William Rueckert in 1987, “ecocriticism” has meant many things.⁹³ Glen A. Love provides a way into defining this field, when he states that “ecocriticism, unlike all other forms of literary enquiry, encompasses nonhuman as well as human contexts and considerations”.⁹⁴

⁹³ William Rueckert, “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism,” in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ed. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 105-123.

⁹⁴ Glen A. Love, *Practical Ecocriticism: Literature, Biology, and the Environment* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002), 1.

Gillian Rudd similarly argues that “ecocriticism strives to move away from the anthropocentrism which creates and operates a value-system in which the only things that are seen, let alone valued, are those that serve some kind of purpose in human terms”.⁹⁵ A more specific definition by Rebecca M. Douglass highlights a motive for this type of criticism: “ecocriticism is reading with attention to treatments of nature, land, and place, informed by a desire to understand past and present connections between literature and human attitudes regarding the earth”.⁹⁶ Other scholars, such as Simon C. Estok, have emphasised the activist element of these approaches; for example, he argues that ecocriticism “is not simply the study of Nature or natural things in literature; rather, it is any theory that is committed to effecting change by analyzing the function ... of the natural environment”.⁹⁷

Lawrence Buell highlights the relevance of ecocriticism in these terms, since sustainability will probably be “the twenty-first century’s most pressing problem”.⁹⁸ In other words, as we become more aware of how we inhabit what has been termed the Anthropocene, a geological phase defined by the impact of humans upon the earth, some ecocritics extend the role of ecocriticism to address our current environmental crisis through literary analysis that focuses on past and present human attitudes towards the non-human.⁹⁹

⁹⁵ Rudd, *Greenery*, 5-6.

⁹⁶ Rebecca M. Douglass, “Ecocriticism and Middle English Literature,” in *Studies in Medievalism X: Medievalism and the Academy II, Cultural Studies*, ed. David Metzger (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1998), 138.

⁹⁷ Simon C. Estok, “Shakespeare and Ecocriticism: An Analysis of ‘Home’ and ‘Power’ in *King Lear*,” *Journal of the Australasian University of Modern Language Association* 103 (2005): 16.

⁹⁸ Lawrence Buell, “The Ecocritical Insurgency,” *New Literary History* 30, no. 3 (1999): 699.

⁹⁹ For a definition of the Anthropocene, see the article that coined the term: Paul J. Crutzen, “Geology of Mankind: The Anthropocene,” *Nature* 415, no. 6867 (2002): 23. For further discussion of the ways in which ecocriticism is a “field of ferment and experimentation” that is producing a “multiplicity of approaches and subjects” (Love, *Practical Ecocriticism*, 5), see Buell, “The Ecocritical Insurgency,” 702; he warns that this ability for ecocriticism to be “infinitely ductile” also brings with it the danger that it will become “so porous as to amount to nothing more than an empty signifier”.

Medievalists have enthusiastically embraced the challenges of applying these types of approaches to medieval literature. In what is considered to be one of the defining works of early ecocriticism, Lynn White Junior argues that medieval Western Christianity is to blame for our current environmental crisis, as it encouraged human exploitation of nature.¹⁰⁰ Although this work is now somewhat outdated, White's instinct to look further back than the Industrial Revolution to understand our current relationships with the non-human is sound.¹⁰¹ Since then, medievalists using a variety of approaches have supplied a more nuanced view of medieval understandings and representations of the non-human.¹⁰² There has certainly been no dearth of scholars willing to undertake what Estok terms the "hard

¹⁰⁰ This was mentioned previously; White, "Historical Roots," 1203-1207.

¹⁰¹ For some analyses of this work, and summaries of other criticism surrounding it, see David N. Livingstone, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis: A Reassessment," *Fides et Historia* 26, no. 1 (1994): 38-55 and Thomas J. Sauer and Michael P. Nelson, "Science, Ethics, and the Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis: Was White Right?" in *Sustaining Soil Productivity in Response to Global Climate Change: Science, Policy, and Ethics*, ed. Thomas J. Sauer, John M. Norman, and Mannava V. K. Sivakumar (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2011), 3-16. Also note that David Salter provides a much more nuanced and solid interpretation of Saint Francis, who White suggests provides an alternative, more "democratic" model of human relations with nature (White, "Historical Roots," 1206-1207; David Salter, *Holy and Noble Beasts: Encounters With Animals in Medieval Literature* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2001), 25-52). On the other hand, it should also be noted that some of White's later work does also provide a more nuanced view of some of his arguments. His assertion that "the man-nature dualism is deep-rooted in us", though androcentric, is suggestive of an awareness that certain hierarchies need to be altered to enact "fundamental changes in our attitudes and actions affecting ecology" (Lyn White Jr., "Continuing the Conversation," in *Western Man and Environmental Ethics: Attitudes Toward Nature and Technology*, ed. Ian G. Barbour (Reading: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1973, 62); I will shortly explore these ideas in more depth. Thomas J. Sauer and Michael P. Nelson also discuss White's stance on this ("Science, Ethics," 9).

¹⁰² Some notable examples that address Middle English literature specifically are Douglass' "Ecocriticism and Middle English Literature", Rudd's *Greenery*, and Yamamoto's *The Boundaries of the Human*, all of which have been referenced above. Another example is Carolyn Dinshaw's ecocritical contribution to *A Handbook of Middle English Studies*; Carolyn Dinshaw, "Ecology," in *A Handbook of Middle English Studies*, ed. Marion Turner (Malden: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 347-362. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's work has explored materiality and human relationships with the non-human from a medieval perspective; Cohen's bibliography is extensive and impressive, but I am particularly indebted to his *Medieval Identity Machines* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003). Two important essay collections, Joyce E. Salisbury's *The Medieval World of Nature: A Book of Essays* (London: Garland Publishing, 1993), and Barbara A. Hanawalt and Lisa J. Kiser's *Engaging With Nature: Essays on the Natural World in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008) are also essential contributions to the field, though they engage less explicitly with ecocriticism.

work” of ecocriticism in a pre-modern context.¹⁰³ The difficulties of this work begin on a lexical level; while every ecocritic should be careful about certain terms we “take for granted”, such as the loaded term “nature”, these difficulties are “magnified” when considering Middle English vocabulary.¹⁰⁴ Douglas discusses how Middle English definitions, or lack thereof, for several key ecocritical terms – culture, ecology, landscape, nature, wildness, wilderness, forest, and desert – differ from modern ones.¹⁰⁵ This suggests a potential for anachronism, which needs to be addressed by those who attempt ecocritical analysis of medieval literature. However, as with the application of feminist or queer theory to the medieval, this does not rule out ecocriticism. As Rudd states, “neither [feminists nor ecocritics] necessarily seeks to claim that the text, far less the author, shares their outlook”.¹⁰⁶ *Greenery*, she acknowledges, is not “an attempt to present a ‘typical’ medieval view of the non-human organic world”, not least, she points out, because it would be reductive to attempt this.¹⁰⁷ As David Salter argues, “the culture of the late Middle Ages was capable of speaking with more than one voice when it came to debating humanity’s place within the wider world of nature”.¹⁰⁸ This ability means that ecocritics may dialogically add their own voices to those of the Middle Ages, while seeking to give voice to the non-human.¹⁰⁹

A central difficulty faced by ecocritics involves the irony that, in attempting to do this, we once again bury the non-human within human discourses. As Gillian Rudd succinctly puts it,

¹⁰³ Estok, “Shakespeare and Ecocriticism,” 17.

¹⁰⁴ Douglass, “Ecocriticism and Middle English Literature,” 142. I will discuss “nature” further below.

¹⁰⁵ Douglass, “Ecocriticism and Middle English Literature,” 143-150.

¹⁰⁶ Rudd, *Greenery*, 12.

¹⁰⁷ Rudd, *Greenery*, 16.

¹⁰⁸ Salter, *Holy and Noble Beasts*, 147.

¹⁰⁹ I have previously referenced Bakhtin’s concept of dialogism; Douglass also mentions dialogism in relation to ecocriticism (“Ecocriticism and Middle English Literature,” 141).

Clearly to speak for it [the non-human Other] risks abrogating it into the human, the very thing that ecological theory urges us to avoid, yet not to speak for it seems to relegate it into the realm of silence and thus render it invisible, again, a position greens seek to avoid.¹¹⁰

This paradox reflects, as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen articulates, “the difficulties of speaking of that which is not us within narratives we fashion”.¹¹¹ Ecocritics have risen to the challenge offered by this problematic and, to an extent, unavoidable anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism by situating the human *within* the non-human. Since Douglass pointed out that ecocritics should consider whether “humans themselves should be included in ‘nature’”, most of the more recent ecocritical scholarship has answered with a resounding *yes*.¹¹² Carolyn Dinshaw, for example, has argued that the human is “fundamentally enmeshed” with the non-human, and is “interdependent with other elements of the world”.¹¹³ Timothy Morton’s concept of Queer Ecology also relies on the idea that the boundary between human and non-human is permeable, and he proposes the idea that “life-forms constitute a *mesh*, a nontotalizable, open-ended concatenation of interrelations that blur and confound boundaries at practically any level”.¹¹⁴

This “queering” of human identity in terms of the material non-human has been a productive site of ecological scholarly enquiry. In her ground-breaking work on Queer Theory, Eve Sedgwick defines “queer” as “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or *can’t be* made) to signify monolithically”.¹¹⁵ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen picks up

¹¹⁰ Rudd, *Greenery*, 6.

¹¹¹ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Introduction: Ecostitial,” in *Inhuman Nature*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Washington, DC: Oliphaunt Books, 2014), ii.

¹¹² Douglass, “Ecocriticism and Middle English Literature,” 147.

¹¹³ Dinshaw, “Ecology,” 354.

¹¹⁴ Timothy Morton, “Queer Ecology”, *PMLA* 125, no. 2 (2010): 275 and 278 respectively.

¹¹⁵ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 8.

on this to ask the questions “Why should the queer stop at the boundaries of the human?” and “What if the body is more than its limbs, organs, and flesh as traced by an anatomical chart, as united into a finite whole? ... What if the body were conceived in other disciplines as likewise open and permeable?”¹¹⁶ If human identity is conceived in this way, it becomes “unstable, contingent, hybrid, discontinuous”.¹¹⁷ Furthermore, aspects of this identity, such as “gender, race, sexuality, and nation are essential but not sufficiently definitive components”.¹¹⁸ Similarly, Stacy Alaimo’s theory of trans-corporeality suggests that “the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world”.¹¹⁹ Dinshaw’s assertion that ecocriticism would benefit by attempting to bring about “the end of the ‘human’ altogether”, and should instead embrace “concepts of assemblages, networks, cyborgs, parasites, and so on”, provides another ontological system that incorporates the non-human.¹²⁰ These approaches build on Deleuze and Guattari’s assemblage theory of social complexity, in which “assemblages” of different types are made up of component parts that are not fixed.¹²¹ Defining human identity in this way re-situates the non-

¹¹⁶ Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines*, 71 and xii respectively.

¹¹⁷ Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines*, xxiii.

¹¹⁸ Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines*, xxiii. This type of identity theory is dependent on the understanding that our bodies are culturally assembled. Most famously, Judith Butler has explored how sex and gender are culturally constructed: “gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which ‘sexed nature’ or ‘a natural sex’ is produced and established as ‘prediscursive,’ prior to culture, a politically neutral service on which culture acts” (Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990), 7). In other words, these theories suggest that “there is no ‘neutral’ body, shorn of cultural meaning” (Yamamoto, *The Boundaries of the Human*, 1). Queer theory has also extended these concepts by emphasising, “the contingency of identities that have so far successfully passed as solid, monolithic, timeless” (Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines*, 38).

¹¹⁹ Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Indiana University Press, 2010), 2.

¹²⁰ Dinshaw, “Ecology,” 354.

¹²¹ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*; Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 23-24 provides a good definition of assemblage theory. See Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines*, xiii-xvi and Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, 7 for their discussions of this theory.

human as a component of human identity that also goes beyond it, so that human and non-human exist together in an alternative framework of power.

Alternative identity constructions such as these can be glimpsed in the Middle Ages. Carolyn Dinshaw and Dawn Keetley both discuss the importance of so-called “Green Man” sculptures in these terms.¹²² These sculptures, which were popular in medieval architecture, are human-like faces that are also vegetal, such that they are “*both and neither man and plant*”.¹²³ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen has also convincingly argued that knights can be seen as assemblages that rely on an incorporation of human and non-human; he discusses chivalry as a “medieval technology of the self [that] relies upon a complex assemblage capable of catching up human, animal, objects, and intensities into what might also be called a nonhuman body”.¹²⁴ In these terms, a knight’s horse, arms, and armour are essential but unfixed components of his identity. Scholars have long recognised the symbolic importance of these non-human aspects of chivalric identities, which stem from the practical real-world significance of them in a martial context.¹²⁵ However, viewing chivalric bodies as assemblages goes one step further, integrating the acknowledgement that “a body is not a singular, essential thing but an inhuman circuit full of unrealized possibility for rethinking identity”.¹²⁶ In this there is strength,

¹²² Dinshaw, “Ecology,” 347-354; Dawn Keetley, “Introduction: Six Theses on Plant Horror; or, Why Are Plants Horrifying?” in *Plant Horror: Approaches to the Monstrous Vegetal in Fiction and Film*, ed. Dawn Keetley and Angela Tenga (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 2-5.

¹²³ Dinshaw, “Ecology,” 350. For more information about this archetype, see William Anderson, *Green Man: The Archetype of Our Oneness with the Earth* (London: Harper Collins, 1990). Cohen’s ground-breaking contribution to Monster Theory is also relevant; see Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 3-25.

¹²⁴ Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines*, 46; also see 35-77.

¹²⁵ For the importance of these elements of knightly identity, including the definition of knights as horsemen, see, for example, Nigel Saul, *Chivalry in Medieval England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 14-20.

¹²⁶ Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines*, 76.

but also vulnerability. As Richard H. Godden puts it in his exploration of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, relying on the non-human in this way means “there is always there the possibility of failure and dissolution ... the most consistent lesson afforded the reader is that that we are all shaped by our dependence on objects, that we are all incomplete”.¹²⁷ Thus, chivalric bodies incorporate the non-human in ways that both define and destabilise the human.

This instability is, fundamentally, a source of discomfort, and even horror. Alaimo emphasises that our “considerations and practices must emerge from a more uncomfortable and perplexing place where the ‘human’ is always already part of an active, often unpredictable material world”.¹²⁸ Likewise, in her aforementioned discussion of medieval Green Man sculptures, Dinshaw notes that these “eerie mixtures” reflect a “haunting interconnectedness” between human and non-human, and highlights their “unsettling dynamism”.¹²⁹ Here, theories of the “inhuman” are relevant: “the inhuman is both subhuman and superhuman all at once. It names a friction point between these two poles, where the metaphorical gears of things grind as they mesh”.¹³⁰ In her introduction to *Plant Horror*, Dawn Keetley sets out six theses for why plants are horrifying.¹³¹ The most relevant among these are the first – that plants are “utterably and ineffably strange, embodying an *absolute alterity*” – and the fourth – that, despite this alterity, we are also “*like plants*”; we are connected to them in an uncanny way that “unsettles familiar notions of what is ‘human’”.¹³²

¹²⁷ Richard H. Godden, “Prosthetic Ecologies: Vulnerable Bodies and the Dismodern Subject in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.” *Textual Practice* 30, no. 7 (2016): 1286. I will discuss this in more depth in Chapter Three.

¹²⁸ Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, 17.

¹²⁹ Dinshaw, “Ecology,” 349 and 351.

¹³⁰ Ian Bogost, “Inhuman,” in *Inhuman Nature*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Washington: Oliphaunt Books, 2014), 134

¹³¹ Keetley, “Introduction: Six Theses on Plant Horror,” 6-25.

¹³² Keetley, “Introduction”, 6, 16, and 17 respectively.

These approaches highlight how focussing on the non-human and the ways in which it is intermeshed with the human can be a source of disquiet.¹³³

However, this uncanniness is not always unsettling in a negative sense. In her justification for applying ecocriticism to Middle English literature, Rudd insightfully states “I take being disconcerted as a good thing, as it makes us aware of conflict between first reactions and subsequent interpretations through drawing attention to details that don’t quite fit”.¹³⁴ Ecocriticism is well placed to be “disconcerting” in this sense, as it questions what it means to be human, while drawing our focus to the non-human. In the conclusion to her discussion of the Green Man, Dinshaw states:

I don’t mean to imply that the Middle Ages can offer a direct solution to our current ecological dilemmas. But they can show us that considerations of the human/nonhuman border have not always been the same, and furthermore, they offer artefacts that have enduring power to prompt our thinking in different directions and to move us affectively.¹³⁵

In the next two sections on ecofeminism and materiality, I will further explore the ways in which medieval representations and artefacts can be seen to cross boundaries, before turning to how trees in medieval romance exhibit this “enduring” power.

Ecofeminism

Ecofeminists have also picked up on the importance of dismantling the dualism between human and non-human. As with ecocriticism, “there remains no singular and agreed upon definition of ecofeminism” and there are also many varied

¹³³ I will also explore this disquiet through an EcoGothic framework, which embraces human anxieties about the non-human world, in Chapter Three.

¹³⁴ Rudd, *Greenery*, 17.

¹³⁵ Dinshaw, “Ecology,” 355.

approaches within this field.¹³⁶ However, put simply, ecofeminism interrogates the link between the non-human and the feminine, in the sense that both have been systematically subjugated by those patriarchal structures that have been so dominant in Western societies. This type of analysis is usually framed in terms of the nature/culture dichotomy:

‘Women are to nature as men are to culture.’ Behind this familiar adage lurks a complex ideology that has shaped scientific and social presumptions and the development of Western institutional structures over the last several hundred years.¹³⁷

Early ecofeminism tended to fall on one side or the other of this dichotomy, either purporting a type of Great Mother essentialism that endorsed the link between the feminine and the non-human, or else suggesting that women should be recuperated from the realm of nature, to take their place beside men in the cultural sphere.¹³⁸ While both of these approaches have their place, they have also long been acknowledged as problematic. Val Plumwood has covered these issues in her 1993 book, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, in which she first critiques approaches that “endorsed the association between women and nature without critically examining how the association is produced by exclusion”.¹³⁹ While it is true that this association can sometimes be seen as positive, Plumwood points out that it is usually limiting.¹⁴⁰ However, uncritically supporting “women’s ascent from the sphere of nature” is similarly problematic, as it re-establishes a hierarchy of power that places the human above the non-human.¹⁴¹ That is, “behind the view that there is

¹³⁶ Lara Stevens, Peta Tait, and Denise Varney, “Introduction: ‘Street-Fighters and Philosophers’: Traversing Ecofeminisms,” in *Feminist Ecologies: Changing Environments in the Anthropocene*, ed. Lars Stevens, Peta Tait, and Denise Varney (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 3.

¹³⁷ Joni Seager, *Earth Follies: Coming to Feminist Terms with the Global Environmental Crisis* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 240-241.

¹³⁸ For a good overview of these trends, see Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993), 19-27.

¹³⁹ Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 20.

¹⁴⁰ Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 20.

¹⁴¹ Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 20. Also see 26-29.

something insulting or degrading about linking women and nature stands an unstated set of assumptions about the inferior status of the non-human world".¹⁴²

Thus, ecofeminism has been plagued by the same sorts of problems as ecocriticism and feminism, in the sense that it is difficult to dismantle structures of power while operating within those structures.¹⁴³

In a medieval context, these difficulties are particularly pronounced, due to the ways in which the nature/culture dichotomy underpinned certain medieval understandings of gender. While our word "nature" has links to the natural non-human world, this word had different connotations in the Middle Ages: "nature" primarily meant 'character' – it referred to the quality of people and things.¹⁴⁴ As mentioned previously in relation to the tree-like formation of the *scala naturae*, medieval conceptualisations of the "nature" of the world were primarily hierarchical. God and celestial beings occupied the top of these hierarchies, and men were placed above women. The feminine was considered to be more carnal, less spiritually capable than the masculine, and therefore more associated with what we might now term nature – that is, the non-human. These ideas of feminine "nature" arose from multiple sources, but Eve is one of the most relevant considerations; her responsibility for the Fall was transferred to medieval women more generally.¹⁴⁵ Medieval medical beliefs strengthened the resulting convictions about feminine inferiority; menstrual blood, for example, was considered poisonous, in part because

¹⁴² Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 26.

¹⁴³ I have already acknowledged the difficulties of escaping anthropocentrism, and feminists are familiar with the difficulties associated with discussing gender using terms that are rooted in patriarchal discourse. Luce Irigaray, for example, has argued that "there are not really two sexes, but only one," because "*the feminine occurs only within models and laws devised by male subjects*" (Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 86; emphasis in original).

¹⁴⁴ Douglass, "Ecocriticism and Middle English Literature," 146.

¹⁴⁵ See, for example, Joyce E. Salisbury, "Gendered Sexuality," in *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, ed. Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage (New York: Routledge, 2010), 86-88.

of its association with Eve's Original Sin, and the transference of it, as well as because it was believed to be an emission of substances that women, unlike men, were too cold and moist to burn off.¹⁴⁶ The latter belief is the basis of Galen's "one-sex" model, which purported that "the female is less perfect than the male ... because she is colder" and therefore "the parts are within [the body], whereas in men they are outside".¹⁴⁷ Women were thus considered to be deformed men, and inferior: "as an inverted man, woman was less perfect and therefore subordinate".¹⁴⁸ These biological understandings of female "nature" informed medieval patriarchal structures, within which the nature/culture binary dictated that the feminine was closer to the natural world of plants and animals than the masculine.

Bringing ecofeminist approaches to these contexts, though, involves acknowledging the ways in which these structures and binaries can be dismantled if we view masculine, feminine, and non-human as interconnected and equal. In this way, ecofeminists have developed strategies to deal with the difficulties inherent in re-focussing our perspective on feminine relationships with the non-human.

Plumwood suggests that:

Women must be treated as just as fully part of human culture as men. But both men and women must challenge the dualised conception of human identity, and develop an alternative culture which fully recognises *human* identity as continuous with, not alien from, nature.¹⁴⁹

This re-definition of human and non-human as being inseparably intertwined has allowed for different types of ecocritical analysis, as outlined above. Here, I want to

¹⁴⁶ Peggy McCracken, *The Curse of Eve, The Wound of the Hero: Blood, Gender, and Medieval Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 6-8; Salisbury, "Gendered Sexuality," 89-90.

¹⁴⁷ Galen, *On the Usefulness of Parts of the Body*, trans. Margaret Tallmadge May (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968), 2:628; also see 2:629-631.

¹⁴⁸ Salisbury, "Gendered Sexuality," 127.

¹⁴⁹ Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 36; also see 26-29. For her discussion of how Derrida's concept of dualism, "as a way of construing difference in terms of the logic of hierarchy", can be applied to this argument, see *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 32.

highlight that ecofeminism is particularly well-placed to consider this entanglement, given “the capacity of feminist ecologies to reveal the interconnectedness of environmental and social injustices”.¹⁵⁰ There is work still to be done on ensuring that the field of ecofeminism avoids ethnocentrism; this field has been plagued by the assumption that “western culture is human culture”.¹⁵¹ However, new ecocritical approaches based in feminist criticism and Queer Theory are successfully highlighting issues within our conceptualisation of human identity.¹⁵² As these issues are redressed to form new, unbounded human/non-human identities, other boundaries can be crossed, and gender relations can become less hierarchical.

Materiality

Considering materiality, in terms of both bodies and objects, can add another dimension to this intermingling of human and non-human. As Alaimo puts it, “if nature is to matter, we need more potent, more complex understandings of materiality”.¹⁵³ Anne E. Lester and Katherine C. Little broadly define materiality as “a term that can refer to objects, networks, actants, vital materialism, matter, and thing theory, as well as ideas about materialism (including historical materialism), and material culture”.¹⁵⁴ As discussed in the last sections, ecocritical and ecofeminist approaches have endorsed a new understanding of human identity as enmeshed with the non-human, which can involve new conceptualisations of human bodies.

¹⁵⁰ Lara Stevens et al., “Introduction: ‘Street-Fighters and Philosophers’”, 1.

¹⁵¹ Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 11.

¹⁵² Additionally, works such as *Feminist Ecologies* are working to address ethnocentrism, by re-framing ecofeminism as a critique of “global capitalism, because of its accompanying exploitation of the ‘others’: women, the poor, the colonized and the non-human” (Lara Stevens et al., “Introduction: ‘Street-Fighters and Philosophers,’” 2).

¹⁵³ Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, 2.

¹⁵⁴ Anne E. Lester and Katherine C. Little, “Introduction: Medieval Materiality,” *English Language Notes* 53, no. 2 (2015): 1.

For example, Godden's aforementioned analysis of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* classifies certain objects, such as Gawain's armour and the green girdle, as prosthetic, using Disability Studies to define prostheses not only as simple non-human extensions of human bodies, but also as integrated parts of those bodies.¹⁵⁵ This allows for an exploration of "the tension between bodies and objects, and between wholeness and fragmentation".¹⁵⁶ His ensuing discussion emphasises how objects, "though designed by human hands for human purposes ... often exceed the signification intended by their creators", and discusses how Gawain's prosthetics "create moments of slippage, of non-identity where his identity is unstable or in conflict with itself".¹⁵⁷ This section will explore the power of objects in this sense, using Thing Theory to consider how objects become actants, and, thus, how trees and wood might be viewed as participants within romance narratives.

In the introduction to his volume on this subject, *Things*, Bill Brown explores the process of objects becoming "things". In anthropocentric terms, humans tend to view non-human objects in relation to ourselves; Brown points out that we "look *through* objects" to see "above all, what they disclose about *us*".¹⁵⁸ However, if we again attempt to shift our focus outside of the human, objects can become more than this: "you could imagine things ... as what is excessive in objects, as what exceeds their mere materialization as objects or their mere utilization as objects".¹⁵⁹ This is important in ecocritical terms, as it allows us to view the non-human world as active in a new way. For example, Jane Bennett discusses a resulting "thing-power"; in acknowledging the power of things we aim "to attend to the it as an actant".¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁵ Godden, "Prosthetic Ecologies," 1274.

¹⁵⁶ Godden, "Prosthetic Ecologies," 1274.

¹⁵⁷ Godden, "Prosthetic Ecologies," 1283.

¹⁵⁸ Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," in *Things*, ed. Bill Brown (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 4.

¹⁵⁹ Brown, "Thing Theory," 5.

¹⁶⁰ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 3.

When this thing-power is exhibited, things issue “a call”, even if we do “not quite understand” it.¹⁶¹

This type of analysis, sometimes termed Object-oriented Ontology, brings with it the danger of reductive anthropomorphism. Once again, it is necessary to navigate the difficulties of assigning “human” properties to the non-human. However, as Bennett argues,

Maybe it is worth the risks associated with anthropomorphizing ... because it, oddly enough, works against anthropocentrism: a chord is struck between person and thing, and I am no longer above or outside a nonhuman ‘environment’.¹⁶²

Therefore, the type of intermeshed human/non-human embodiment that I have previously discussed can be extended through a consideration of thing-power. Bennett states that the “story” of thing-power “will highlight the extent to which human being and thinghood overlap” and that “one moral of the story is that we are also nonhuman and that things, too, are vital players in the world”.¹⁶³ Focussing on the ways that humans interact with things, and vice versa, can reveal how they are interconnected.

In a medieval context, there is great potential for objects, including plant-based material presences, to be re-imagined as “things”.¹⁶⁴ Medievalists have always had to consider artefacts and culturally expressive material entities to access the Middle Ages; we have “always been interested in objects”.¹⁶⁵ Furthermore, new materialist thinkers are more and more emphasising “the intersection of words and

¹⁶¹ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 4.

¹⁶² Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 120.

¹⁶³ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 4.

¹⁶⁴ Anne F. Harris and Alan Montroso both provide a good starting points for Object-oriented Ontology in a medieval context; see Anne F. Harris, “Hewn,” in *Inhuman Nature*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Washington: Oliphaunt Books, 2014), 17-38 and Alan Montroso, “Human,” in *Inhuman Nature*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Washington: Oliphaunt Books, 2014), 39-59.

¹⁶⁵ Lester and Little, “Medieval Materiality,” 3.

things” when studying the past, since “many of the objects that interest medievalists and that remain available to us exist only as (or in) texts: as descriptions, ekphrasis, referents, signs, and symbols”.¹⁶⁶ While manuscript culture provides medievalists with a rich starting point from which to consider medieval literature from the perspective of the material, medieval romance itself is also full of objects that can be seen to act as things. In the introduction to his collection on this subject, Nicholas Perkins points out that:

The significant objects, places, bodies and books in romance stories become not only symbols of identity formation which wrap themselves around the selfhood of their leading protagonists, but actants that overlap with those protagonists and have their own narrative trajectories.¹⁶⁷

Reading romance in this way provides a new perspective on the non-human. The “things” in medieval romance – such as the arms and armour that construct chivalric identities – become non-human “prostheses” that act to define the human in new ways.

Furthermore, I will argue that the trees of romance encode this active potential. Through a consideration of Thing Theory, trees and their products can become “things” that act outside human parameters, and we can begin to hear their “call”. Considering this tree-vocality reveals how they can possess agency and participate in human narratives as more than just background wood. Viewing trees as “things” can be given another dimension if we consider how they are already living beings, enacting their own processes of growth and change. Even wood products are “living material which – particularly if unseasoned – will continue to

¹⁶⁶ Lester and Little, “Medieval Materiality,” 3.

¹⁶⁷ Nicolas Perkins, “Introduction: The Materiality of Medieval Romance and the Erle of Tolous,” in *Medieval Romance and Material Culture*, ed. Nicholas Perkins (Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer, 2015), 7.

warp and shape itself long after it has been made into a ‘finished’ object”.¹⁶⁸ Not only does this raise “the question of where the natural world ends and the artificial world of material culture begins”, it also provides a way to view all kinds of arboreal elements as powerful and active, in ways that go beyond their classification as objects.¹⁶⁹

Thus, when trees become “things” that act in and around the human, the boundary between human and non-human is further dissolved. Although it may seem reductive to anthropomorphise trees – to attribute them agency within human narratives – this also productively entangles the human with the non-human. Furthermore, this necessitates a re-framing of our understanding of the arboreal non-human; trees become active, communicative, and dynamic – and no longer fade into the background. The ways in which my approach is ecocritical and ecofeminist are bound up with these considerations of materiality, as this re-framing also constitutes a movement away from anthropocentrism and androcentrism.

My approach to the penis tree in BnF MS Fr. 25526 models how these theoretical frameworks will form the “ground” for my tree-based readings of the Middle English romance texts I have chosen to address. This image represents a subversive arboreal presence that is meshed with the human, and it is therefore a visual embodiment of the dissolution of human/non-human dualism that scholars such as Plumwood have advocated. Within this image, masculine, feminine, and non-human exist together, and in subversive conversation with dominant patriarchal narratives. Furthermore, the penis tree exhibits several layers of “thing-power” as a material participant in this subversion: the tree itself, and its phallic products, are

¹⁶⁸ Michael D. J. Bintley and Michael G. Shapland, “An Introduction to Trees and Timber in the Anglo-Saxon World,” in *Trees and Timber in the Anglo-Saxon World*, ed. Michael D. J. Bintley and Michael G. Shapland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 5.

¹⁶⁹ Bintley and Shapland, “An Introduction,” 6.

implicated in this, as are the materials that produced it, both ink and vellum. Throughout this thesis, I will continue to explore the ways in which romance narratives contain similarly marginal and powerful trees.

Mighty Oaks: Methodologies and Directions

Le Morte Darthur, *Ywain and Gawain*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the Middle English Breton Lays, and *Sir Tristrem* were chosen to display a breadth of arboreal imagery with multifaceted implications. Some of these texts – especially *Le Morte Darthur*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and lays such as *Sir Orfeo* – have been selected due to their status as prominent and celebrated paragons of Middle English literature. My exploration of their trees therefore demonstrates how the tree-readings that I advocate can open up our understanding of these works. This is not intended to be a destructive process; as Rudd points out, “reading as it were through green lenses, will bring out new facets of the text and allow us to refocus our views accordingly, but this is done with the aim of adding to our appreciation, not of replacing more established readings wholesale”.¹⁷⁰ I also aim to open arboreal spaces within other texts that are traditionally less appreciated, such as *Ywain and Gawain* and *Sir Tristrem*. These poems have often been unfavourably compared to their French antecedents, but scholars are starting to give them the attention they deserve in their own right. My consideration of their trees will reveal the intricacy of human/non-human interactions within them, which highlights their valuable and complex contributions to the corpus of Middle English romance.

¹⁷⁰ Rudd, *Greenery*, 11-12.

Broadly, I will connect these texts by means of their trees and wooden objects, which I will read as material “things” that hold the power to interact with the human. The knights I will consider – Lancelot, Ywain, Gawain, and Tristrem, among others – represent chivalric assemblages that are constructed in part through the arboreal, in the sense that they rely on tree-based settings for *aventure*, and through the ways that these knights are intimately connected to individual trees. Focussing on trees in my chosen texts therefore continually opens up spaces for power outwith patriarchal structures, and beyond normative chivalric parameters. I will also consider how other human and supernatural figures are connected to the arboreal, demonstrating how the spaces in which trees operate provide the potential for both the feminine and the non-human to hold marginal power. Paying attention to trees therefore provides glimpses of overlapping feminine and eco-subtexts. These subtexts only occasionally visibly influence the human, masculine narratives that so dominate romance, but they are pervasive even when they are unseen.

In Chapter One, I will frame my discussion of these subtexts according to frequently absent, but consistently powerful, arboreal presences that infuse Malory’s Arthurian masterwork. *Le Morte Darthur* exhibits some of the most quintessential elements of medieval romance. One of these elements, I will argue, is the omnipresence of trees, which become visible at certain important points in the narrative. In the first half of this chapter, I will focus on the ways in which Lancelot is entwined with trees, especially fruit trees, in ways that open up his characterisation. An episode in which Morgan le Fey abducts Lancelot while he is sleeping beneath an apple tree is central to his arboreal identity, but he also interacts with other fruit trees, as well as an elm, even becoming a fig tree through metaphor in the “Tale of the Sangreal”. These interactions always involve some threat towards Lancelot, framing his entanglement with the arboreal in terms of his vulnerability, and opening

up spaces for frameworks of power outwith traditional masculine discourses. The second half of this chapter will further explore these spaces, by focussing on an episode in Malory's Sangreal tale, in which Perceval's sister recounts the story of Eve's cultivation of an Edenic tree after the Fall. An ecofeminist reading of this story and its implications re-frames it in ways that allow this tree and its products to become material actants in the narrative, alongside the marginal but essential feminine presence in this episode. In this way, I examine the periodic visibility and invisibility of trees in this text as a function of their potential power.

In Chapter Two, I explore this potential power in terms of the presence and absence of a central tree in *Ywain and Gawain*, the Middle English version of Chrétien de Troyes' *Le Chevalier au Lion*. Like Lancelot, Ywain's narrative trajectory is entangled with that of this tree, which continually witnesses his vulnerability. While the tree is vital to masculine experiences in this text, it is absent from the feminine discourses voiced by Ywain's wife, Alundyne, again opening up a space for subversive power, even if only briefly. Ywain's relationships with the lion and the land will be considered alongside his relationships with Alundyne and the tree to interrogate how his identity incorporates these elements in unsettling and productive ways.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight also exhibits a disturbing entanglement of human and non-human, which is implicated in the ways that the text unfastens the restrictive knots of chivalric, masculine identities. The non-human aspects of Gawain's identity are a source of both strength and vulnerability, and the arboreal presence in the text is both threatening and supportive. The figure of the Green Knight also incorporates oppositions that imply control over and intimacy with the vegetative non-human. These two figures represent different ways in which human identities interact with trees, encoding and eliding dichotomies and boundaries.

Gawain's connections with trees throughout the text culminate in the way he becomes a tree stump through metaphor at the Green Chapel, representing how chivalric identities are dependent on and strengthened by the arboreal, but can also be "cut down" through the association.

In Chapter Four, which examines the Middle English Breton Lays, I will explore how Orfeo likewise becomes a tree, as part of my codification of this genre according to trees. In this chapter, I will examine the eight texts in Middle English that are based on, or claim to be, Breton Lays – *Sir Orfeo*, *Sir Degaré*, *Lay le Freine*, *The Erle of Tolous*, *Emaré*, *Sir Gowther*, *Sir Launfal*, and *The Franklin's Tale* – as well as *Sir Cleges*, which perhaps should be classified as one. The occasional importance of trees in these texts – except *The Franklin's Tale*, which also lacks other features usually associated with lays – suggests that trees are an essential component of the lay genre. Within this overarching argument, I will consider two of the lays – *Sir Orfeo* and *Lay le Freine* – in depth, again using trees as a starting point from which to consider the ways that human identities are constructed within them. In Orfeo's case, this once again opens space for an alternative identity construction outside of conventional medieval masculine discourses, and which incorporates both the feminine and the arboreal. This construction includes both living trees and his wooden harp, which become material things that participate in the narrative. In counterpoint, Freine's association with the ash tree for which she is named is more static, and the boundaries between human and non-human remain more intact in *Lay le Freine*.

Chapter Five will consider the Middle English *Sir Tristrem*, again using its trees as a lens through which to view its action. Trees are implicated in this poem's humorous and violent elements, and also act as participants in the narrative at several points, again both as living things and as wooden objects. *Tristrem*, like

Orfeo, uses a harp. Elsewhere, he uses other tree products to communicate with Ysonde, and to tell their story through the construction of a monument to their love. Living trees are visible at moments of heightened narrative tension, such as when Tristrem is fighting the dragon, and when Mark hides in a tree to observe the lovers. Trees in *Sir Tristrem* witness Tristrem's vulnerability, but are also associated with love and communication, participating in the hidden messages of the narrative and again highlighting how trees hold power in the margins.

My conclusion will return full circle – as day returns to night, as the seasons cycle, and as trees return to life – to Malory, and his contribution to the Tristan legend, “The Tale of Sir Tristram de Lyones”. I will consider one episode of this tale, in which Isolde attempts to commit suicide by means of a plum tree, as a framework to bring together the multifaceted and mighty potential of trees in Middle English romance. Though they remain marginal, representations of trees within this corpus hold a disconcerting power that unsettles binaries and boundaries. Despite the fact that trees are often invisible in these texts, they are also everywhere. The little acorns of their presence can grow to cast a mighty shadow over the genre, if they are given the space to do so.

Chapter One: Arboreal Presence and Absence in Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*

Now more of the deth of kynge Arthur coude I never fynde, but that thes ladyes brought hym to hys grave, and such one was entyred there whych [the] ermyte bare wytnes that sometyme was Byssshop of Caunturbyry. But yet the ermyte knew nat in sertayne that he was veryly the body of [kyn]ge Arthur ... som men say in many p[art]ys of Inglonde that kynge Arthure ys nat dede ... and men say the he shall com agayne ... And many men say that there ys wrytten uppon the tumber theys: HIC IACET ARTHURUS, REX QUONDAM REXQUE FUTURUS¹⁷¹

Malory's retelling of the story of the Once and Future King is full of ambiguity and absence. As an attempt to present the whole of the Arthurian story, *Le Morte Darthur* redacts and reduces the narratives of the Old French Vulgate cycle upon which it is based, forming a delicately interlaced creation that is both complete and incomplete. This paradox underpins Arthur's position in the text, which – as in many Arthurian romances – is largely in the background. He is, as Elizabeth Scala puts it, “a centrally *dislocated* figure”, an “empty center” around which the narrative is structured.¹⁷² His story is therefore chiefly what Scala terms an “absent narrative”: “just as manuscript texts are copied from exemplars, and thus dependent on ‘other’ texts, and just as medieval authors habitually reference ‘other’ texts as sources of authority, so are medieval narratives dependent on ‘other,’ necessarily absent, stories”.¹⁷³ The quotation that prefaces this chapter shows how the story of Arthur's

¹⁷¹ Eugène Vinaver, ed., *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, 2nd ed., 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 3:1242.15-29. The titles of the tales, and all subsequent references to *Le Morte Darthur*, are from this edition.

¹⁷² Elizabeth Scala, *Absent Narratives*, 170 and 198.

¹⁷³ Scala, *Absent Narratives*, 202. Likewise, Morton W. Bloomfield discusses the prevalence of “unmotivated” episodes in romance: “the differentiating quality of romance episode, however, is just the absence of rationality and its replacement by irrational or unmotivated episodes” (Bloomfield, “Episodic Motivation,” 106). This type of “absence”, that is, the absence of certain narratives explaining the action, is also relevant.

death can be seen as one of these absent narratives; it emphasises the uncertainty and mystery of his passing and the indistinct but essential feminine presence surrounding it. It also introduces the idea that Arthur is not fully dead, but instead lies in wait for his return, just as he continually waits for his knights to return throughout the interlacing narratives of the *Morte*.

In this chapter, I will interrogate how the trees of the *Morte*, like Arthur, occupy liminal spaces in which they are essential, but also, paradoxically, largely absent. Both Corinne Saunders and Gillian Rudd have explored the forest settings of this text. Within these explorations, both have noted various individual trees that have symbolic importance and allow us to glimpse the real trees which occupy the forest settings that so dominate Malory's writing.¹⁷⁴ At the same time, Saunders and Rudd also acknowledge how Malory's forests are mysterious spaces, both because of their connection to faery and the Otherworld and because of their position of alterity outwith Arthur's court.¹⁷⁵ Furthermore, they are barely described: "given the predominance of forests in our mental image of Malory's literary world, it is remarkable how little he has to say about them".¹⁷⁶ However, as Rudd also notes, "that is not to say that Malory ignores the possible roles played by woods or forests in human affairs, actual as well as imagined".¹⁷⁷

I will build on these approaches by considering how human and non-human are entangled within and by means of the *Morte*'s tree imagery, with a focus on how trees are both absent *and* present within the human narratives of the text. Rudd notes that "individual trees, whether identified by species or not, seem to signal that

¹⁷⁴ Saunders, *The Forest of Medieval Romance*, 163-185; Rudd, *Greenery*, 74-87.

¹⁷⁵ See Rudd, *Greenery*, 81-83 and Saunders, *The Forest of Medieval Romance*, 163-185, for example 167: "the forest is presented as a landscape possessed of its own potentially sinister order, one which need not serve the questing knight, and which, indeed, opposes the order of chivalry". Also see the discussion of these themes in my introduction.

¹⁷⁶ Rudd, *Greenery*, 80.

¹⁷⁷ Rudd, *Greenery*, 80.

we are in some kind of human world".¹⁷⁸ To explore how these trees consequently come to participate in the human discourses of the *Morte* in ways that also go beyond the human, I will focus on how certain moments of narrative tension involving trees signal the existence of an eco-subtext beneath these discourses. In this way, I will read the trees in this text as neither fully human, nor fully non-human. When discussing the supernatural inhabitants of Malory's forests, Saunders argues that the forest is "a landscape poised between romance and reality, never notably employing the denizens of the real forest, but never fully opening onto an otherworld of faery".¹⁷⁹ Likewise, I will argue that the text's trees exist in these "between" spaces, as they are neither wholly here nor there, but occupy multiple and liminal positions, both symbolic and realistic, real and imagined, rooted in both the human and the non-human, and eliding the boundaries between them.

These trees, then, reflect how *Le Morte Darthur* forms a network of contradictions and ambiguity. Malory's text is a fifteenth-century Middle English adaptation of the Old French Vulgate, or Lancelot-Grail, Cycle, which brings together texts documenting the rise and fall of Arthur's kingdom. It is commonly considered to be "the fountain-head of Arthurian fiction", as Scofield states in his classic book on chivalry in English literature, and "the classic English-language version of an Arthurian legend", as Andrew Lynch has argued more recently.¹⁸⁰ Although there are two earlier Middle English Arthurian texts, the *Stanzaic Morte Arthur* and the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, which Malory most likely used as source

¹⁷⁸ Rudd, *Greenery*, 80.

¹⁷⁹ Saunders, *The Forest of Medieval Romance*, 171.

¹⁸⁰ William Henry Schofield, *Chivalry in English Literature: Chaucer, Malory, Spenser, and Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1912), 78; Andrew Lynch, "Malory's *Morte Darthur* and History", in *A Companion to Arthurian Literature*, ed. Helen Fulton (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 297. Also see K.S. Whetter, *The Manuscript and Meaning of Malory's Morte Darthur: Rubrication, Commemoration, Memorialization* (Cambridge, D.S. Brewer, 2017), 2.

texts alongside the Old French tradition, the *Morte* is the most complete version of this legend in English.¹⁸¹ Despite this, the *Morte* is also inherently incomplete; as Elizabeth Edwards argues, it is “an attempt to present the whole Arthurian story, but, given the vast bulk of source material, this impetus towards entirety is circumscribed by the necessity of abridging and shortening”.¹⁸² Scala’s consequent argument that the *Morte* is therefore “a story more absent than present” emphasises the irony of viewing this text as “complete”.¹⁸³

This brings us to one of the most enduring questions faced by Malorian scholars: whether or not Malory intended for the tales to be read together as one complete work. This so-called “hoole book” debate, sometimes called the Unity Debate, was brought about by the discovery of the Winchester manuscript in 1934; before that, the *Morte* was preserved only in Caxton’s 1485 print edition, of which we have two copies.¹⁸⁴ After the discovery of the Winchester manuscript, Eugène Vinaver published an edition of the *Morte* in which he argued that its tales may not have been intended to be read as a whole – as Caxton’s editorial interventions suggest – but are, in fact, separate texts.¹⁸⁵ In short, Vinaver’s argument suggests that Caxton seems to have “suppressed” *explicit*s that indicate the beginning and end of tales.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸¹ Whetter, *Manuscript and Meaning*, 3; Larry D. Benson and Edward E. Foster, *King Arthur’s Death: The Middle English Stanzaic Morte Arthur and Alliterative Morte Arthure* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1994), 1-2.

¹⁸² Elizabeth Edwards, “Amnesia and Remembrance in Malory’s *Morte Darthur*,” *Paragraph* 13, no. 2 (1990): 142.

¹⁸³ Scala, *Absent Narratives*, 170.

¹⁸⁴ This debate is well documented, for example by Carol M. Meale in “The Hoole Book’: Editing and the Creation of Meaning in Malory’s Text”, in *A Companion to Malory*, ed. Elizabeth Archibald and A.S.G. Edwards, 3-18 (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1996); Whetter, *Manuscript and Meaning*, 5-22; and Scala, *Absent Narratives*, 167-170.

¹⁸⁵ Vinaver, *The Works*, xxix-xxxv.

¹⁸⁶ Robert H. Wilson, “How Many Books Did Malory Write?” *The University of Texas Studies in English* 30 (1951), 1. Whetter also discusses the Winchester’s *explicit*s (*Manuscript and Meaning*, 10-15).

Although it is outside the scope of this thesis to engage in the Unity Debate with any depth, it is significant that tree imagery changes drastically, both quantitatively and qualitatively, between the tales, though this imagery also connects the tales as well. Those tales that principally focus on Arthur have very few trees, while “The Noble Tale of Sir Launcelot du Lake” has the second highest number of trees in the second shortest tale. The highest number occurs in “The Tale of the Sankgreal”, which has twenty-three trees, while the longest tale, “The Book of Sir Tristram de Lyones”, has only twelve. The tree references in the *Morte*, therefore, are not – as we may expect – necessarily more common in the longer tales. Additionally, references to trees differ qualitatively across the tales, as they are sometimes defined by a certain type of tree, if tree species are mentioned. In “The Tale of Sir Gareth of Orkney”, for example, there are three significant mentions of hawthorn trees, which do not appear elsewhere in the *Morte*.¹⁸⁷ On the other hand, where species of trees are found in more than one tale, they are often linked. For example, only knights of Arthur’s court are found beneath oak trees, and apple trees are always associated with Lancelot; I will discuss both species in more depth later in this chapter. Examples such as these allow for a thread to be drawn through the narrative of the *Morte*, which thematically and structurally interlaces the tales according to their trees.

The episodic and interlaced structure of the *Morte* also complicates the Unity Debate, as its tales are made up of episodes that are both disconnected and related. This reflects how Arthurian romances were intertextual enough to make it

¹⁸⁷ This tale is the only one for which scholars have not found a “definitive source”, leading some scholars to suggest that it is an original contribution by Malory; see Karen Cherewatuk, “Pledging Troth in Malory’s ‘Tale of Sir Gareth,’” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 101, no. 1 (2002): 20. Although I cannot here argue that trees offer a conclusive answer to this question, it is significant that the only tale that is potentially “original” is also the only one that features hawthorns, especially as they are common in other Middle English romances, but not in French sources; I will discuss hawthorns in Chapter Two.

difficult to consider them as completely “separate” from each other. As Vinaver himself puts it, “the builders of the great thirteenth-century cycles of romances sought a certain sense of *relationship* between the work and the accompanying or the preceding tradition. Any Arthurian romance was in this sense part of a series”.¹⁸⁸ Although he goes on to argue that Malory “is trying his hand at something different – at reducing the entire narrative to relatively small self-contained units”, he also acknowledges that the intertextual nature of romance means that “this process cannot be carried to the point at which *all* connexions between the different parts of the cycle disappear”.¹⁸⁹ That is, whether or not the tales were intended to be separate texts, they are linked by a backdrop of Arthurian tradition that remains intact regardless.

Moreover, the tales of the *Morte* are not so dissimilar from their cyclic, episodic French predecessors, and embrace some of the inconsistency and complexity that accompanies intertextuality. Although Vinaver suggests that some aspects of Malory’s writing display a “reluctance to follow the profound and indispensable complexities of the cyclic model”, he also points out that Malory has a “characteristic method of alluding to past and future events”.¹⁹⁰ Moreover, the episodes that make up the *Morte* are interlaced neatly, such that several narratives often occur at the same time, even if only one is the immediate object of narrative attention. Shifts of perspective between these concurrent narratives are signalled with conventional phrases, such as “now turn we unto” or “now leve we [this knight], and speke we of [another]” (see, for example 1:256.17-18). These stock phrases are part of the ways that the text is made up of what Edwards terms “short semiotic

¹⁸⁸ Vinaver, *The Works*, xlv.

¹⁸⁹ Vinaver, *The Works*, xlv. Also see Wilson, “How Many Books,” 2-23.

¹⁹⁰ Vinaver, *The Works*, xlvii.

configurations of a conventional and conservative typology”.¹⁹¹ However, this traditional approach at the same time resists a simple, monologic reading: “Recognizable techniques of foregrounding, amplifying and discoursing on, are absent or in short supply; this is an unstressed semiotics”, and as such, “it is difficult to determine if it is the local or long-distance that matters”.¹⁹² Consequently, as Wilson argues, “Malory had not abandoned the general tradition of a complex narrative in which separate and often entirely episodic accounts are yet, in a way, parts of a larger whole”.¹⁹³ The *Morte*, and its tales and episodes, are therefore both fragmentary and whole, and narratives are both visible and invisible in turn – though even when a tradition or narrative is not directly in focus, it does not disappear completely.

If we consider the non-human, and trees in particular, as participating in their own narrative, also interlaced with the more dominant human narratives of the *Morte*, we can see how frequent invisibility holds potential. That is, “absent” non-human narratives can re-surface unexpectedly and powerfully. In her work on memory in *Le Morte Darthur*, and specifically in a section on some inconsistencies in the “Book of Sir Tristram”, Edwards argues that “Palomydes’s amnesia is like a pain in a phantom limb, an adjustment provided by Malory when a portion of the repressed text, in this case a trace memory of Palomydes as a hero, is about to surface.”¹⁹⁴ This chapter is concerned with some other “phantom limbs”, namely those of the trees that populate the *Morte*, which are, for the most part, overlooked,

¹⁹¹ Edwards, “Amnesia and Remembrance,” 137.

¹⁹² Edwards “Amnesia and Remembrance,” 138; also see 139. Whetter similarly states that “Malory’s narrative style throughout the *Morte Darthur* is largely unobtrusive”, but argues instead that “the audience’s or reader’s focus is drawn all the more to those voices we do hear: the characters themselves” (Whetter, *Manuscript and Meaning*, 54).

¹⁹³ Wilson, “How Many Books,” 7. Also see Whetter, *Manuscript and Meaning*, 14-15.

¹⁹⁴ Edwards, “Amnesia and Remembrance,” 134; Edwards is here referencing the fact that there is a “ghost text” present behind Malory’s depiction of Palomides, the *Roman de Palamède*, in which he is the hero.

though this does not preclude their surfacing at certain points in the narrative. In this way, the trees of the *Morte* are both present and absent, in the sense that there is a non-human subtext, what I will call an eco-subtext, that always sits below the main narrative, even if it only occasionally intrudes into it. The dominance of the forest setting rarely gives way to any more focussed consideration of trees in this text, but there are instances in which individual trees come to the foreground. Even when trees remain in the background, they continue to hold some power; the “absent narrative” of the text’s trees waits just below the surface.

To introduce how this operates in the *Morte*, I will first discuss *The Awntyrs of Arthure*, and especially its interaction with the events leading to Arthur’s death, from the perspective of the trees involved. When I turn to the *Morte* itself, I will first discuss the figure of Lancelot and his intimacy with trees throughout the tales, before moving to focus on tree imagery in the Sangreal tale. In these explorations, I will focus on how trees participate in the interlacing narratives of this text, tying together human and non-human, masculine and feminine, and margin and centre in powerful ways that are reliant on the fact that their own narratives are largely absent, but occasionally visible.

Phantom Limbs: Trees in *The Awntyrs of Arthure*

Before turning to the phantom limbs of the *Morte*’s trees, I will first consider a phantom in *The Awntyrs of Arthure* as an illustrative example of the ways that trees can be seen to participate in the underlying narratives of Arthurian romance. This fourteenth-century poem exemplifies the type of intertextuality that links Arthurian texts and displays different types of absent narratives. It is divided into two parts, the

first containing an episode in which Arthur and his knights go hunting, while Guenivere is visited by the ghost of her mother, and the second containing the plight of a knight, Galeron, and his land dispute with Gawain. In the former, Guenivere's mother speaks of a prophecy that alludes to Arthur's death and the fall of his kingdom, events which do not come to pass in this poem. This intertextuality therefore reveals how subtext is essential. Furthermore, in considering this alongside a focus on the natural and supernatural non-human presences in this poem, it is possible to glimpse an eco-subtext at work here. In particular, I will consider how trees participate in this eco-subtext, even when they are largely invisible.

When Guenivere is visited by the ghost of her mother, who warns her against the sins of lust and pride (159-260), the ghost also addresses Gawain, who is guarding Guenivere, and prophesies the tragic end to the Arthurian legend.¹⁹⁵ She warns Gawain that he will die (298), that Arthur will fall (303), and that "Ther shal the Rounde Table lese the renounce" (293), unless Guenivere thinks on her warnings, feeds the poor, and remembers her mother "with matens and Mass" (320). These warnings directly reference the events at the end of Arthur's story, whereby Lancelot and Guenivere's adulterous love catalyses a fissure in Arthur's court that involves, and eventually kills, Gawain, and ultimately leads to Arthur's death, as well as the collapse of his kingdom.¹⁹⁶ These events are documented in Middle English in texts such as the *Stanzaic Morte Arthur*, the *Alliterative Morte*

¹⁹⁵ These and all subsequent line references are to Thomas Hahn's edition, "The Awntyrs Off Arthur," in *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995).

¹⁹⁶ I agree with Spearing that this is therefore "the most poignant moment in the poem"; he specifically mentions the indirect reference to Mordred, now just a "barne" (310), arguing "at this point of equilibrium, Mordred is only a child, playing harmlessly and innocently in Arthur's court, yet he is Mordred all the same, and must play the terrible part we know in the coming destruction" (A.C. Spearing, "The Awntyrs of Arthure," in *The Alliterative Tradition in the Fourteenth Century*, ed. by Bernard S. Levy and Paul E. Szarmach (Kent: The Kent State University Press, 1981), 196).

Arthure, and – later – Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur*. However, In the *Awntyrs of Arthure*, they do not come to pass; subsequently, the only other reference to this prophecy seems to be that Guenivere orders “al the religious to rede and to singe ... With a mylion of Masses to make the mynnynge” (704-706) at the end of the text, presumably to satisfy her mother’s ghost. This is the last stanza of the poem, so we are left unsure whether this is enough to avert the fate that befalls Arthur in these other texts.¹⁹⁷ This poem therefore features plot points that are both present and absent, as future events in the Arthurian legend are alluded to, but do not materialise; Arthur is both doomed and potentially saved. Furthermore, the emphasis on the fact that “belles the burde [Guenevere] gared ryngge” at the end of the text suggests that the warnings of Guenivere’s mother remain important, even if the narrative does not focus on them. This last stanza therefore implies that while the main narrative moves on to the fight between Gawain and Galeron, Guenivere is active in the background, working to address her mother’s prophecy. The ghost and its warnings still hold power on some level, even if they all but disappear from the story.

To begin to explore how this is tied to the non-human presence in the tale, it is first necessary to examine the nature of the ghost that visits Guenivere. This figure is connected to the natural world, and is also emphatically supernatural. For example, it emerges from a lake, a natural body of water, but only as fire unnaturally appears on this water: “There come a lowe one the loughe” (83). Furthermore, although the figure is described in great detail, it is unclear how it looks exactly; it is “in the lyknes of Lucyfere” (84), “Bare ... and blak to the bone” (105), “Al biclagged in

¹⁹⁷ It is also important to note, as Hahn does, that “the last lines of *Awntyrs* repeat the first line, linking these two stanzas and thereby imposing a circular, iterative structure on the entire poem” (Introduction to “The *Awntyrs Off Arthur*,” 2), suggesting that the narrative is stuck in a loop that never moves to this conclusion.

clay" (106), covered with snakes and toads (115 and 120-121), with sunken, glowing eyes (116-117), and "Umbeclipped in a cloude of clethyng unclere" (119).¹⁹⁸ It is repeatedly referred to as "the body" (105, 122, and 158), perhaps suggesting it is a corporeal corpse – or skeleton, as the reference to its bones in line 105 and Guenevere's exclamation "thi bones arn so blake!" (212) suggest – but elsewhere it is "the goste" (118 and 325). Furthermore, although the ghost identifies itself as Guenivere's mother when it speaks to her, it emphasises "how delful deth has thi dame dight" (160), and seems to have been stripped of its human nature. Indeed, when the ghost is introduced, it is said to be "wayment as a woman" (107), and is once referred to as "ho" (she, 118), but it is elsewhere emphatically no longer female: it is repeatedly referred to as "hit" (109-110, for example) and emphasises that it used to be "of figure and face fairest of alle" (137; also see 144-149), but is now "caught and couched in clay" (152). Even from this brief summary of the ghost's description, which takes up a fairly large proportion of this short 700-line poem, it is clear that it is non-human in more than one sense, in that it is connected to the natural world and is frighteningly Otherworldly.¹⁹⁹

These aspects of the ghost are prefigured by the existence of certain trees, connecting it to the arboreal presence in this poem. While Arthur is hunting, Guenivere and her guard, Gawain, go for a ride and "Under a lorre [laurel] they light" (32). After an interlude describing the hunt, the narrative returns to Guenivere and Gawain, and introduces the episode in which the ghost appears, by referencing this tree again: "By a lorer [laurel] ho was light, undur a lefesale / Of box and of berber bigged ful bene" (70-71). Although the laurel tree is not mentioned when Gawain

¹⁹⁸ This last description is particularly opaque, especially as previously we are told "on hide ne on huwe no heling hit hadde" (108), though this could refer to the fact that the figure has no flesh.

¹⁹⁹ The ghost appears on line 83 and leaves on line 325; it is described in detail in lines 105-130.

brings the ghost to Guenivere, the fact that Guenivere is sitting underneath a tree here foreshadows a supernatural encounter.²⁰⁰ The symbolic meanings of the laurel tree also connect it to Guenivere's interaction with her mother's ghost, as the ghost's warnings against lust and pride are echoed by the fact that the laurel tree is associated with eternity and chastity, especially in a Christian sense; St. Paul compares the classical tradition of crowning victors with laurel wreaths with the "imperishable wreath with which the victorious Christian is crowned (I Corinthians 9: 24-27)".²⁰¹ The laurel tree can therefore be seen to compound the ghost's message that Guenivere should remain chaste to avoid eternal damnation and secure eternal life, even though it disappears from the narrative after these two mentions. Coupled with the uncanny link this tree seems to have to the Otherworld, this displays how trees can participate in the narrative even when they are only briefly visible.

There are other, similar instances of arboreal significance in this poem, which involve the previously-mentioned box trees and barberry bushes in line 71, as well as some conspicuous oak trees. After she situates herself beneath the laurel tree, Guenivere is further described as sitting under "lefesale / Of box and of berber bigged ful bene" (70-71). The word "lefesale" means a "bower of leaves" or "shelter of foliage", though Hahn glosses it an "arbor"; the human-cultivated implications of that word are also emphasised by the fact that these shrubs are "bigged ful bene" (71), if "bigged" is read as "built".²⁰² That Guenivere is sitting beneath a partially

²⁰⁰ See the discussion of this trope in my introduction.

²⁰¹ George Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art* (London: A. Zwemmer, 1955), 40. Ferguson also notes that the laurel is evergreen, and was associated with the Vestal Virgins; also see Maria Leach and Jerome Fried, eds., *Funk and Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1949-1950), 2:609.

²⁰² See the entries for "lēf" and "biggen" in the *Middle English Dictionary*, accessed online through Frances McSparran, ed., *Middle English Compendium* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Library, 2000-2018), https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED24974/track?counter=7&search_id=1244776 and https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED4454/track?counter=10&search_id=1244776 respectively. All subsequent referenced to the Middle English Dictionary will be shortened to *MED*.

man-made structure like this parallels the fact that Arthur and his knights seem to be hunting in a forest maintained for the purposes of hunting. The hunt is aiming to “fall of the femailes [the does] in forest were frydde, / Fayre by the fermesones in frithes and felles” (7-8). The words “frydde” and “frith” suggest enclosure and royal forests specifically, and “fermesones” is related to “ferme”, which also refers to land ownership.²⁰³ This emphasises that the setting of the hunt, this forest “By the Turne Wathelan” (2), is royal land cultivated for the king.²⁰⁴ As discussed in my introduction, royal forests were heavily policed and intensely maintained as enclosed spaces in the Middle Ages, in order to preserve them as sites of leisure and production of meat and wood. Furthermore, here Arthur’s forest is acting as a space especially maintained to allow for hunting, which was integral to aristocratic identity.²⁰⁵

Indeed, while this forest is populated by the deer necessary for the hunt, the poem also refers to some trees that grow within it. When Arthur and his knights begin the hunt, “Eche lorde withouten lette / To an oke he hem sette, / With bowe and with barselette, / Under the bowes” (36-39). There is a certain verisimilitude in this, as oak trees were a staple in most medieval English forests, and were particularly valued in royal forests.²⁰⁶ Additionally, like laurel trees, oak trees are attached to various symbolic meanings; they are associated with power, royalty – or at least nobility – strength, and endurance, for example, and have been “most widely

²⁰³ See the *MED* entries for “frith” and “ferme” at https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED17775/track?counter=3&search_id=1244776 and https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED15706/track?counter=2&search_id=1244776 respectively.

²⁰⁴ Hahn notes that this small lake was “renowned out of all proportion to its size as a site for Arthurian adventure” and is probably in Inglewood Forest, which the text references in its last stanza (line 709); see Hahn’s footnote to line 2.

²⁰⁵ See Susan Crane, “Ritual Aspects of the Hunt à Force,” in *Engaging with Nature: Essays on the Natural World in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Barbara A. Hanawalt and Lisa J. Kiser (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 63-64 for the “cultural performance” of the hunt.

²⁰⁶ Rackham, *Trees and Woodland*, 67-71, and 172.

worshipped of all trees”.²⁰⁷ Arthur’s knights undergo the rituals of the hunt beneath oak trees and within an enclosed royal forest. The ability to hunt in these forests represents regal and courtly might and entitlement, which is further highlighted by the oak trees beneath which Arthur’s lords position themselves to enact their power over the non-human world.

It must also be noted that this enactment of power is specifically masculine. Guenivere does not participate in the hunt, while all the men of Arthur’s court do – “al but Sir Gawayn” (68), who stays with Guenivere beneath the laurel. The only other female presences in the hunting sequence are the deer, which are specifically and repeatedly does: the hunt is aiming to “fall of the femailes” (7) and they do indeed “fel of the femayles ful thikfolde” (46). Although addressing modern hunting, Marti Kheel’s arguments are relevant here; she suggests that hunting allows men to construct their masculinity by enacting dominance over the non-human world.²⁰⁸ In a more medieval context, Susan Crane argues that hunting in the Middle Ages was an “assertion of aristocratic superiority”.²⁰⁹ This idea can be extended when considering the *Awntyrs of Arthure*, which contains the added dimension that Arthur and the members of his court are enacting this dominance over the *feminine* non-human.

²⁰⁷ Leach and Fried, *Dictionary of Folklore*, 2: 806; also see 807 and Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols*, 43 and the entry for “oak” in Jacqueline Simpson and Steve Roud, *A Dictionary of English Folklore* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), <https://www-oxfordreference-com.ezproxy.is.ed.ac.uk/view/10.1093/acref/9780198607663.001.0001/acref-9780198607663-e-751>. Additionally, see Rudd’s discussion of “our latter-day, anachronistic concept of ‘the Royal Oak’” (*Greenery*, 70; also see 90, n. 23). Though the latter refers specifically to the oak tree associated with Charles II, oak trees were important symbols of status (again, see Leach and Fried, *Dictionary of Folklore*, 2:806-807), and their prevalence in medieval royal forests, referenced above, cements their corresponding practical importance to the king.

²⁰⁸ She argues that this mirrors how feminist critics have understood sexual violence as an act of dominance; Marti Kheel, “The Killing Game: An Ecofeminist Critique of Hunting,” *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 23 (1996): 30-44, see especially 39.

²⁰⁹ Crane, “Ritual Aspects of the Hunt à Force,” 63.

However, the intrusion of the ghost of Guenivere's mother hints at the unsteady nature of the power that these men are enacting, and the emphasis on artifice in the second half of the poem indicates how this unsteadiness is covered up, but not overcome. While the first half of the poem is rooted in the natural world, the strong non-human aspects of the ghostly apparition are juxtaposed with the more artificial imagery that defines the second half of the poem, which features the fight between Galeron and Gawain.²¹⁰ Although the oaks, laurel, box trees, and barberry bushes are to some extent cultivated, or at least maintained and used, by humans, the start of this second episode is full of more obviously artificial reproductions of the natural non-human, emphasised through repeated ekphrasis. For example, the setting of this episode is defined by a pavilion embroidered with birds:

The King to souper is set, served in sale,
Under a siller of silke dayntly dight
With al worshipp and wele, innewith the walle,
Briddes brauden and brad in bankers bright (339-342)

This pavilion can be seen to act as a tree replacement, as it provides shade for Arthur and his knights, just like the trees in the forest; it acts like the more natural "lefsale" that provides shade for Guenivere. It also becomes a roost for the embroidered birds, which adds another layer of artifice. When Galeron's lady is introduced soon after, her clothing adds to this sense that the non-human is being

²¹⁰ The differences and similarities between the two halves of this poem have provided the basis of much of the critical analysis of this poem (see Hahn, Introduction to "The Awntyrs off Arthur", 1). The following reading relies on Hahn's interpretation – "Though each part of *Awntyrs* presents a self-contained episode, they can be read not as autonomous, unconnected units, artificially or arbitrarily joined, but as narrative elements thematically linked by contrast and complementarity" – and Spearing's classification of the poem as a kind of "diptych", a medieval art form in which two separate works are joined, usually by a hinge. Spearing argues that, in these artworks, "the juxtaposition is genuinely creative: the medieval artist is in no way limited by his habit of composing a work in self-contained, discontinuous sections: it is precisely the discontinuity that makes possible a creative gesture in which the spectator or reader himself participates. Sparks leap across the gap between the two parts, and the on-looker's mind is set alight by them" (Spearing, "*The Awntyrs off Arthire*," 186, also see 187).

replaced by human-made objects, as once again they are embroidered with the non-human: “Here gide was glorious and gay, of a gresse grene. / Here belle was of blunket, with birdes ful bolde” (366-367). This is followed by another reference to a pavilion embroidered with birds, when Gawain shows Galeron to the pavilion he is to stay in: “Pight was it prodly with purpour and palle, / Birdes brauden above, in brend gold bright” (444).²¹¹ The presence of the birds in each of these images can be seen to suggest that the pavilions are acting like the trees in the first half of the narrative; they are man-made “trees” that provide shelter.

These layers of artifice embroider the narrative with a subtle comment on the nature of Arthur’s court: the surface of beauty and nobility overlays the threat of its downfall, as voiced by Guenivere’s mother. Hahn suggests that the text’s use of formulaic scenes and focus on material objects “urges an audience not to extract a unique, internalized meaning, but to take delight in the structural, narrative, thematic, and stylistic variations that constitute the substance of such a performance”, but the more sinister undertones of this performance are also hinted at here.²¹² As Spearing puts it, “the continuation is under a shadow, that of the ghost’s prophecy of doom whose seeds lie within the court itself”.²¹³ The presence of the ghost indicates the existence of a subtext of fear and vulnerability that is aligned with the feminine non-human, and which stands in opposition to the man-made artifice that attempts to cover up this anxiety. The cracks in this masculine fantasy of dominance eventually lead to the tragedies at the end of Arthur’s story, which overshadow the *Awntyrs of Arthure*, even if we do not see them in this text. This

²¹¹ The ekphrasis here hints at the significance of clothwork in romance, which has been explored in work such as Morgan Boharski, “Woven Words: Clothwork and the Representation of Feminine Expression and Identity in Old French Romance” (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 2018).

²¹² Hahn, Introduction to “The Awntyrs off Arthur,” 2.

²¹³ Spearing, “*The Awntyrs off Arthur*,” 200.

also suggests that the counter-narrative of non-masculine, non-human power that operates below the surface can nevertheless hold weight. Thus, the *Awntyrs of Arthure* can be seen to frame and foreshadow the collapse of Arthur's kingdom in its treatment of the non-human, even though its ending is ostensibly hopeful.

Apples, Carts, and Elms: Lancelot and Trees in *Le Morte Darthur*

When this collapse does occur at the end of the *Morte*, it is Lancelot's involvement with Guenivere which catalyses the sequence of events that ends Arthur's life, despite his usual designation as the best of Arthur's knights. He is a central character in the *Morte*, and is given more narrative space than any other knight, helping to fill the vacuum of Arthur's absence. His narratives are dominant even in tales that Caxton named for other knights, such as "Sir Tristram", in which Lancelot is given more narrative space than the eponymous hero.²¹⁴ Though the tales in which he appears differ greatly, he is viewed positively throughout. This is the case even when his characterisation is problematic, such as in the Sangreal tale, in which his affair with Guenivere is most overtly challenged.²¹⁵ Lancelot's introduction at the beginning of "The Noble Tale of Sir Launcelot du Lake" foreshadows how Lancelot's heroism exists alongside his failures. Although many of Arthur's knights prove their prowess and noble deeds in the tournament that opens the tale, "in especial hit was prevyed on Sir Launcelot de Lake, for in all turnementes, justys, and dedys of armys, both for lyff and deth, he passed all other

²¹⁴ Though Danielle Morgan MacBain has also convincingly argued that Malory's Lancelot is "tristramized" in *Le Morte Darthur* ("The Tristramization of Malory's Lancelot," *English Studies* 74, no. 1 (1993): 57-65).

²¹⁵ Elizabeth Scala provides a good overview of Lancelot's problematic characterisation in "Disarming Lancelot," *Studies in Philology* 99, no. 4 (2002): 380-403.

knyghtes" (1:253.8-10), but at the same time it states: "and so he loved the quene agayne aboven all other ladyes dayes of his yff, and for hir he dud many dedys of armys and saved her from the fyre thorow his noble chevalry" (1:253.16-19). This foreshadows one of the climactic moments of the *Morte*, in which Lancelot saves Guinevere from execution after their affair is made public, accidentally kills one of Gawain's brothers, and catalyses the events that eventually bring about Arthur's death, as the *Awntyrs of Arthure* references. This allusion to the tragic end of the text within only a couple of lines of Lancelot's introduction is telling, as it sets up the text's tendency to insist on Lancelot's excellence, while, at the same time, drawing attention to the more troubling aspects of his character.

Nevertheless, Lancelot's love for Arthur's queen carries with it a tension that cannot be completely dispelled, and allows us to glimpse the potential vulnerability of the chivalric power structures upon which the *Morte* is based. This vulnerability has been widely focussed on by other scholars, and is usually addressed in terms of the tensions inherent in the chivalric ideal itself. Dorsey Armstrong, for example, argues that Arthur's death, and therefore the breakdown of the chivalric social order, result from the failed interplay between those features of the chivalric world that previously ensured its survival: "homosociality, heteronormative desire, and kinship come into conflict".²¹⁶ K.S. Whetter makes a similar argument: "the tragedy is all the greater precisely because it is the same traits that make knights great – Launcelot's love of Gwennyvere or Balyn's and Gawayne's senses of honour – that also ultimately secure the destruction of the Round Table".²¹⁷ This does not preclude the

²¹⁶ Dorsey Armstrong, *Gender and the Chivalric Community in Malory's Morte d'Arthur* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), 174.

²¹⁷ Whetter, *Manuscript and Meaning*, 19-20; also see 138-139. Whetter convincingly argues that Malory's corresponding "focus on individual and collective knightly character and deed and tragedy, are emphatically announced and reinforced by the marginalia and rubrication of Winchester, as well as by the lexical-textual narrative of the *Morte Darthur* proper" (88); also see 105-198.

heroism of Arthur's knights, and Lancelot specifically; in fact, Whetter convincingly argues that Malory "establishes that Launcelot is not irreparably flawed, but glorious and heroic, even in defeat".²¹⁸ At the same time, these cracks in the foundations of the constructs that support masculine, chivalric authority provide an opportunity to glimpse alternative configurations of identity and power.

In this section, I will explore how trees act as a point of access to these alternative configurations, and propose a new way to read Lancelot's characterisation according to the arboreal presences that define him. Given his importance, it is perhaps not surprising that Lancelot is the character that interacts the most with trees in the *Morte*, but the ways in which he is connected to trees are somewhat unexpected, if one presumes that trees will stay deep in the background of his narratives. Lancelot's character is as much dependent upon trees as the other non-human aspects of his identity, and, consequently, trees hold a certain power over him; the trees with which Lancelot is associated witness his vulnerability and delineate the more problematic aspects of his characterisation. Beginning with fruit trees, I will address how Lancelot's identity becomes entangled with the multivalent and interlinking meanings of apple and fig trees in his own tale and the Sangreal tale. In particular, I will focus on the first instance in which he is associated with an apple tree, as it also features four women who interact with trees in ways that suggest how the eco-subtext of the *Morte* might be linked to the uncanny feminine presences within it. I will also discuss the Knight of the Cart episode, in which I argue that Lancelot becomes a kind of tree at a moment of heightened narrative tension. Finally, I will turn to an elm tree that stands as witness to another instance

²¹⁸ Whetter, *Manuscript and Meaning*, 138. This is part of his wider argument that Malory memorialises rather than critiques the chivalric ideal; again, see 105-198. I will return to this type of characterisation in Chapter Three, when discussing Gawain's flawed but valorised characterisation in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

of Lancelot's vulnerability and encapsulates how trees can be seen to define him. However, in doing so, these trees are not necessarily restrictive or restricted, and instead allow for alternative identity constructions that open spaces for marginal power, through which the largely "absent" narratives of the *Morte* can be glimpsed.

Trees begin to inform Lancelot's identity from the very moment his tale begins. As previously mentioned, we are told that he surpasses all other knights (1:253.8-10) and that he loves Guenivere (1:253.16-19), and then we are told that he "thought hymself to preve in straunge adventures" (1:253.21), which necessitates that he rides "into a depe foreste and so into a playne" (1:253.24-25). Lancelot wishes to sleep, so his travel companion – his nephew Lionel – "aspyed a grete appyll-tre that stoode by an hedge" (1:253.27-28) and so "they alyted and tyed there horsys unto sondry treis, and sir Launcelot layde hym downe undir this appyll-tre" (1:253:32-34). Immediately, Lancelot is associated with trees, not only in the sense that he rides into the forest for adventure, but also because of his interaction with this individual apple tree, to which I will return shortly.

First, however, it is worth focussing on the "sondry treis" to which Lancelot and Lionel tie their horses here. Using trees as a hitching rail is not uncommon in the *Morte*; Arthur and Merlin tie their horses "unto two treys" when they encounter the Lady of the Lake (1:53.7-8), for example, and several of Arthur's knights – including Pelleas, Lamorak, and Tristram – do so as well (1:170.28-29, 2:481.30-31, and 2:780.13 respectively). However, it is Lancelot that ties his horses to trees the most throughout the tales. Excluding this first instance of Lancelot and Lionel tying their horses to "sondry treis", Lancelot does it four times, across multiple tales (see 1:282.34-35, 2:776.28, 2:821.6, 2:893.31). That so many mentions of trees in the *Morte* are related to their use as a hitching rail is indicative of an anthropocentric view of the non-human that incorporates trees within structures that control the

natural world according to human needs, as these trees exist as objects of human convenience. In the case of the “sondry treis”, their location also alludes to this, as hedges like the one that they stand by were often used to divide and enclose land in the Middle Ages.²¹⁹ The word “sondry” also reflects a certain anthropocentric disregard for the non-human; in Middle English, this word could mean individually, physically apart, or – as in modern English, and most relevantly – variously. Here, “sondry” indicates how marginalised and utilitarian these trees are; they are miscellaneous and invisible, except in their usefulness to humans. Even if the other meanings of this word – individually or physically apart – were intended, one can see in these meanings a fracturing, or else a kind of separation, that likewise suggests these trees are not seen as a whole entity, but rather as a singular branch or trunk to be used practically by humans.

Nevertheless, these “sondry treis” are also afforded a certain power if we read them as contributing to Lancelot and Lionel’s chivalric assemblages. While the frequency of references to trees being used as hitching posts does reflect a certain verisimilitude – knights have to tie their horses somewhere – this practical, background use of trees also ties knightly identity to the arboreal. A knight’s horse was an essential aspect of his chivalric identity; as mentioned previously, chivalric assemblages comprised both human and non-human elements. That a knight’s identity was so tied to his horse can be seen to enmesh them with the non-human, just as they are dependent on their armour as a non-human “prosthesis”, in the words of Godden.²²⁰ Thus, the act of tying these symbolically important horses to a tree can be seen to bring the vegetative non-human into this enmeshment. These trees are peripheral and defined according to their use, just as the horses in

²¹⁹ I discussed this type of enclosure in my introduction.

²²⁰ Godden, “Prosthetic Ecologies,” 1273-1290; I mentioned Godden’s arguments in my introduction and will do so in more detail in Chapter Three.

question are domesticated and controlled. Indeed, both are literally “tied down” here. However, at the same time, in tying such a central aspect of their identity to a tree, these knights are, in a way, also aligning their chivalric identities with the embodied, material world. In her discussion of trees in the *Morte*, Rudd points out that Malory’s “combination of the mythic and the mundane offers both the security of the tree as a tethering post and the challenge of the forest as the realm of the past”.²²¹ Likewise, the mundane act of using trees in this way can exist alongside another level of meaning, through which this act becomes one of human and non-human entanglement.²²²

In the case of Lancelot, the fact that he ties his horse to a tree is only the beginning of his identification by means of trees. This is seen again in relation to the aforementioned apple tree, under which Lancelot falls asleep shortly after he is introduced. This apple tree is intimately tied with Lancelot, and is referenced repeatedly in association with him; it appears five times throughout the episode (see 1:254.28, 33, 1:256.12, 18, 26), and is the second most-referenced tree in the *Morte*.²²³ That this part of the episode is set on a “playne”, suggesting an absence of trees that is uncharacteristic of most outdoor settings in medieval romance, renders the presence of the apple tree even more noteworthy.²²⁴ Indeed, while the physical presence of this tree is initially undermined, it soon comes to occupy a space of potential power. When Lionel first spots the tree he says “Sir, yondir is a fayre

²²¹ Rudd, *Greenery*, 87.

²²² The same entanglement can also be seen in the fact that Ector and Lionel, whose narrative in this tale is interlaced with Lancelot’s, face dire consequences underneath a tree that has shields tied to it, again both literally and metaphorically tying knightly identities to trees (see 1:255).

²²³ The most referenced tree is the Tree of Life in the Sangreal tale, which I will discuss in the second part of this chapter.

²²⁴ I discussed the prevalence of tree-based settings in romance in my introduction.

shadow" (1:253.28-29), which obscures the presence of the tree, as it is invisible except in terms of its potential to provide shade; it is only a shadow.²²⁵

However, this obscurity soon gives way to an emphasis on the physical presence of the tree, and, moreover, the narrator repeatedly uses it as an identifier for Lancelot. After Lionel leaves Lancelot and is imprisoned with Sir Ector, the narrator references the tree to return to Lancelot: "now leve we thes knyghtes presoners, and speke we of Sir Launcelot de Lake that lyeth undir the appil-tre slepyng" (1:256.17-18). Immediately afterwards, Lancelot is approached by four "queenys of a grete astate" (1:256.19-20) who ride past him: "they loked and were ware of a slepyng knyght lay all armed undir an appil-tre" (1:256.25-26). Here, Lancelot is so connected with the tree that it even replaces his name as an identifier; although the ladies recognise him as Lancelot (1:256.27), the narrator uses only the apple tree to refer to him. This identification according to the vegetative non-human is preceded by the fact that the queens are initially alerted to Lancelot's presence by his horse: "they herde a grete horse besyde them grymly nyghe" (97). Here we can see the non-human aspects of Lancelot's identity coming to define him more and more; the shade this apple tree provides prefigures the shadow it casts over Lancelot's character.

Indeed, the tree's shadow is not always a place of shelter for Lancelot, and his association with this apple tree flags the transgressions of gender and chivalric norms that occur in this scene. First, although Lancelot's armour usually contributes to the assemblage of his identity, in this episode his armour – or lack of it – is a

²²⁵ Which, as Rudd notes, a real apple tree would certainly be capable of providing (*Greenery*, 79).

destabilising presence.²²⁶ While the ladies see Lancelot sleeping “all armed” under the tree (1:256.26), in the initial description of Lancelot falling asleep, he has “his helmet undir his hede” (1:253.4); this is an image of vulnerability, and he is clearly not battle-ready. This alone may not be enough to put Lancelot’s chivalric identity at risk; removing a knight’s armour does not always indicate that he is no longer a knight. However, in this case, the fact that Lancelot is at least partly disarmed prefigures the other ways in which his masculine, chivalric identity is threatened in this episode.²²⁷ Soon after the queens see Lancelot, he is placed in a position of passivity as an object of feminine gazing and action: the queens look upon him while he is sleeping underneath the tree, and decide “they wolde have hym to hir love” (1:256.28-29), which inverts the romance trope of a knight gazing upon his lady. Soon after, this gazing becomes more overtly threatening as Morgan le Fay – one of the queens – states that she intends to “put an inchauntement upon [Lancelot] that he shall nat awake of all this seven owres” (91:256.31-32) and transport him to her castle, where the queens intend to force him to “chose whych of [them] he woll have unto peramour” (1:256.35-36). Saunders emphasises how this renders Lancelot vulnerable here: “the forest of sport and delight is thus transformed into a menacing landscape which provides the antithesis to courtly order through its association with the otherworld and its threat to the best of Arthur’s knights”.²²⁸

In relation to this aspect, it is worth emphasising the supernatural associations of this apple tree. As discussed in my introduction, trees were often

²²⁶ Godden also discusses how dependency on prosthetics not only strengthens but also undermines chivalric identity in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*; this will be further discussed in Chapter Three.

²²⁷ Scala makes a distinction between the terms “disarmed” and “unarmed” that is relevant here; though Malory tends not to distinguish between these terms, it is useful to note that “while Lancelot cannot, by definition as ‘best knyght of the worlde,’ be *unarmed* (i.e., defeated) by another knight, there are important moments in the narrative when he is *disarmed*, moments in which Lancelot wears no armor, carries no arms, and is significantly overcome” (“Disarming Lancelot,” 384, also see 383; emphasis in original).

²²⁸ Saunders, *The Forest of Medieval Romance*, 170.

sites of interaction with the Otherworld, both in medieval folklore and elsewhere in romance. There is also often a sexual element to these encounters – Sir Launfal is summoned to meet his lover while he sleeps underneath a tree, for example – and these sexual encounters are frequently violent, as in *Sir Orfeo*, *Sir Gowther*, and *Sir Degaré*.²²⁹ In the case of Lancelot and the apple tree, it is Morgan that enacts this power. Her supernatural nature is mysterious and largely unexplained in the *Morte*; and while elsewhere she is described as “Morgan le Fey” – literally “Morgan the fairy” – here she is described only as a “queen”.²³⁰ Nevertheless, when Lancelot is objectified and acted upon by the queens beneath the tree, his passivity is emphasised by the intertextuality of this image of supernatural intervention beneath trees, which is often erotic and threatening.

However, there are ways in which this apple tree stands alone within this trope, especially in terms of the actions of the queens. As they are introduced, the queens are described as follows:

So there com by hym four queenys of a grete astate; and for the hete sholde nat nyghe hem, there rode four knyghtes aboute hem and bare a cloth of grene sylke on four sperys betwyxte hem and the sonne (1:256.19-22)

First, it is worth noting that the knights that accompany the queens are described no further, and remain silent and largely invisible throughout the episode. They are only

²²⁹ These texts will be discussed in Chapter Four.

²³⁰ Saunders also discusses how Morgan is Otherworldly but simultaneously “part of the courtly political structure” (*The Forest of Medieval Romance*, 170). In this case, the apple tree could also allude to her fairy nature, as apple trees are associated with the Isle of Avalon, where Morgan allegedly takes Arthur at the end of his life. This association is seen, for example, in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Vita Merlini*: “The *Island of Apples* gets its name ‘The Fortunate Island’ from the fact that it produces all manner of plants spontaneously. It needs no farmers to plough the fields. There is no cultivation of the land at all beyond that which is Nature’s work. It produces crops in abundance and grapes without help; and apple trees spring up from the short grass in its woods ... That is the place where nine sisters exercise a kindly rule over those who come to them from our land. The one who is first among them has greater skill in healing, as her beauty surpasses that of her sisters. Her name is Morgen, and she has learned the uses of all plants in curing the ills of the body” (Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Life of Merlin*, ed. and trans. Basil Clarke (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1973), 101). Also see Saunders, *The Forest of Medieval Romance*, 134.

briefly mentioned again after Lancelot has been enchanted, when the narrator states he is carried back to Morgan's castle "on horsebak betwyxt two knyghtes" (1:257.3) and where they act more as servants than knights. Although the presence of other knights on horseback would conventionally re-affirm chivalric identities, these knights have no identity outside of their service to the queens, and mirror Lancelot's enchanted passivity.

Furthermore, these knights are being used by the queens to manipulate the non-human. As previously mentioned, Lionel reduces the apple tree to its function, referring to it only as a "fayre shadow" (1:253.29). The queens here take this one step further, by reproducing the effects of natural objects existing in the landscape in order to create an artificial environment; they ride beneath man-made shade, just as Arthur's court congregates beneath tree-like pavilions in the *Awntyrs of Arthure*. The green silk and the four spears imitate trees, providing the queens with their own "fayre shadow". Moreover, the spears are *made* of trees that have been felled and fashioned to facilitate masculine violence, but are here used to hold up luxurious cloth for the comfort of women, and perhaps also to preserve their beauty. Just as the queens' use of servant knights hints at their power, this appropriation of masculine symbols of violence is indicative of the ways in which they are transgressive figures. The added dimension that the spears were once trees defines this transgression in ways that equate feminine power over the masculine with power over the non-human. In ecofeminist terms, then, these women are exhibiting a subversive disregard of traditional hierarchies, as they are no longer simply equated with the non-human, but are in control of it. As discussed previously, the tendency to associate women with nature has been addressed by modern attempts to secure "women's ascent from the sphere of nature".²³¹ These attempts can be as

²³¹ Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 20.

problematic as those that uncritically embrace this association, as they potentially reinforce masculine/feminine and human/non-human hierarchies. Viewed in these terms, the queens participate in the trend for the non-human world to be dominated and manipulated by humans, by displaying power over both man and nature.

However, the queens' power is soon undermined, and, notably, this happens in the absence of nature. After Lancelot wakes from his enchanted sleep, Morgan tells him "thou art oure presonere" (1:257.23) and demands that he choose one of them in a speech (1:257.22-34) that reveals their identities as "quene Morgan le Fay, quene of the londe of Gor, ... quene of North Galys, and the quene of Estlonde, and the quene of the Oute Iles" (1:257.30-32). However, unlike when they were outside and riding under their fashioned "trees", the queens are unable to hold their power over Lancelot here, despite this emphasis on their status. He laments his situation – "'This is an harde case,' seyde sir Launcelot, 'that other I muste dye other to chose one of you'" (1:257.35-36) – but all he has to do is verbally refuse the queens (1:258.9) and immediately, without speaking any further, "they departed and leffte hym there alone" (1:258.11). Subsequently, although Lancelot "made grete sorow" (1:258.11-12), he is almost immediately approached by a damsel who frees him after securing his promise to help her father, King Badgemagus (1:258-259). The castle in which Lancelot is imprisoned seems to belong to Morgan, who states that they will take him to "[her] castell" (1:256.33) before she has him carried to "Castell Charyot" (1:256.4). However, the queens have no power to keep Lancelot prisoner after he refuses them, despite the fact that they are demonstrably able to enchant and imprison him. Here, we can perceive a significant absence in this narrative, as we are given no explanation for these actions, or indeed for the inaction of the queens upon Lancelot's refusal. There could be many explanations for this, or no explanation at all, as we must accept when addressing these

narratives. However, it is significant that the queens seem to lose their power in the absence of trees – both the apple tree that Lancelot was sleeping beneath, and the “trees” they created for themselves. In the enclosed space of the castle, the queens can no longer manipulate the non-human, and also lose their power over men.

The ambiguous power exhibited by these queens can also be linked to other symbolic associations of the apple tree. The metaphorical “shade” of this particular tree is wide-ranging; as well as its links to the Otherworld, it has certain connotations within a Judeo-Christian framework.²³² Although the exact specification of the fateful Tree of Knowledge is not provided in Genesis, and could have been a fig tree, by the time Malory was writing, its iconography was connected to the apple tree.²³³ That the apple tree in this episode is associated with active women who exert a threatening power over Lancelot can therefore be viewed through the lens of Eve and the Fall of mankind.²³⁴ Like Eve, the queens are transgressive figures who seek to seduce a man, thereby endangering his physical and spiritual wellbeing. In a sense, the queens therefore “pick” Lancelot, who can be viewed as the “fruit” of the tree. He is a temptation that these women are not tricked into accepting, as Eve is seduced into picking the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge; instead, they assert their agency by enchanting him to facilitate *their* seduction, and he becomes a passive tool through which they enact their power. That the queens can manipulate nature and artificially transform their immediate environment parallels their supernatural abilities and prefigures their power over Lancelot. The fact that they re-purpose spears as “trees” in the presence of the apple tree knits together these various

²³² Rudd also mentions this (*Greenery*, 79).

²³³ In fact, this was established well before; this tree was regularly considered to be an apple tree from as early as the fifth century, and was generally thought to be so by the middle of the twelfth century; see Dercks, “Two Trees in Paradise?” 145-147.

²³⁴ Medieval perceptions of Eve were mentioned in my introduction.

strands of meaning. Thus, in the presence of the apple tree and their own manufactured shade, these women are dangerous and powerful.

However, Lancelot is able to assert his masculine dominance in the absence of the apple tree; like the spears, this tree is a symbol that is subject to the changeable discourses of the *Morte*. Inside the space of Morgan's castle, here a space of re-confirmed masculine power, the tree is absent, but still metaphorically exploited, since Lancelot's treasonous, adulterous relationship with Guenivere can also be linked to the apple tree's connotations of sin and temptation. Lancelot ostensibly denies this sin in the same breath that he refuses the queens: Morgan tells Lancelot he "shalt [Guenivere's] love lose for ever, and she thyne" (1:257.28-29) when she is demanding that he choose a paramour, and in his reply he says "were I at my lyberté as I was, I wolde prove hit on youres that [Guenivere] is the treweste lady unto hir lorde lyvyng" (1:258.4-6). The use of "hir lorde" implies but does not specify Arthur, leaving this statement open to the interpretation that Lancelot is suggesting Guenivere would never forsake *him*, as Morgan has suggested. The apple tree is no longer physically present, and no longer lends its metaphorical shade to the queens, but it can be retrospectively linked to Lancelot's sinful relationship with Guenivere.

Indeed, elsewhere in the *Morte*, and especially in the Sangreal tale, this relationship is linked to trees, and specifically to apple trees. Despite his status as the best knight in the world, Lancelot is unable to complete the Grail Quest because of Guenivere, and this failure is repeatedly imagined in terms of the non-human. At one point in the Sangreal tale, Lancelot rides into a certain valley, and "whan sir Launcelot sye he myght nat ryde up unto the mountayne, he there alyght undir an appyll-tre" (2:932.21-22); subsequently, he disarms himself and goes to sleep (2:932.23-24). Instead of the supernatural encounter this catalysed in the episode

with Morgan and the queens, this sleep “now brings a new kind of adventure, that is, *advisioun* or spiritual revelation.”²³⁵ Indeed, subsequently, he is visited by an “olde man” who says “A, Launcelot, of evill, wycked fayth and poore beleve! Wherefore ys thy wyll turned so lyghtly toward dedly synne?” (2:932.27-28); this is soon explained by a recluse, who tells Lancelot that he helped the wrong side in a tournament the day before. He had gone to the aid of some knights dressed in black, as they were losing and “thought sir Launcelot for to helpe there the wayker party in incresyng of his shevalry” (2:931.24-25). However, the recluse explains that he should have helped those dressed in white, because “they with the coverynge of whyght betokenyth virginité, and they that hath chosyn chastité” (2:933.27-28). The fact that Lancelot cannot physically climb the mountain symbolises his failure to spiritually transcend his worldly nature and understand these types of messages. Unlike those knights who wear white as a sign of their virginity and chastity, Lancelot’s relationship with Guenivere means that he cannot quite “climb the mountain” and succeed in the grail quest; instead, he must instead stay below, with the apple tree.

Elsewhere, this failure is embodied by another fruit tree, this time more obviously metaphorical. At one point when Lancelot fails to see the grail, he hears a voice that tells him he is “more harder than ys the stone, and more bitter than ys the woode, and more naked and barer than ys the lyeff of the fygge-tre” (2:895.25-27). Afterwards, he meets a hermit that explains this to him: he is harder than stone because stone “woldyst never be made neyssh nother by watir nother by fyre, and that ys the hete of the Holy Goste may nat entir in [him]” (2:298.4-7), he is bitterer than wood because “wheresomever much synne dwellith there may be but lyttll swettnesse” (2:298.18-19), and he is barer than the fig tree because “He founde in

²³⁵ Saunders, *The Forest of Medieval Romance*, 181. Though, as Saunders continues, “the two are linked by the common landscape and signals of the unexpected within it, such as the hour, the apple tree and sleep” (181).

[Lancelot] no fruyte, nother good thought nother good wylle, and defouled with lechory" (2:898.33-35). This last metaphor is taken even further when the Hermit tells Lancelot that Christ once tried to find shelter in Jerusalem, but no one would harbour him, so he left the town and found "a fygge-tre which was ryght fayre and well garnysshed of levys, but fruyte had hit none" (2:298.28-30), which Christ then cursed the tree as a symbol of Jerusalem. That Lancelot is likened to this fig tree encapsulates the underlying message of the tale, namely that Lancelot is "ryght fayre", but he is not perfect; he has no "fruyte" because of his relationship with Guenivere.²³⁶ The fig tree metaphor therefore branches back to another, biblical fig tree, and while neither are physically present in the narrative, they still have the power to define Lancelot according to the arboreal; he becomes a good "tree" that is nevertheless deficient.²³⁷

However, the idea of fruitfulness – or fruitlessness, in the case of the fig tree image – is one that holds weight on many levels, as elsewhere fruitful tree imagery signals the return of Lancelot's fulfilment of the ideal of the worldly, courtly knight, and signals the reinstatement of his relationship with Guenivere. In "The Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guenivere", Lancelot moves away from the piety and penance he undertook in the Sangreal tale, a movement that is signalled by imagery of spring. The famous "May passage" that introduces the "Knight of the Cart" episode states:

For, lyke as trees and erbys burgenyth and floryssyth in May, in lyke wyse every lusty harte that ys ony maner of lover spryngith, burgenyth, buddyth, and floryssyth in lusty dedis ... for than all erbys and treys renewyth a man and woman (3:1119.3-6 and 10-11).

²³⁶ Though elsewhere he is also described as "an olde rottyn tree" (2:298.19-20), an image that lacks even the partial positivity of the fruitless fig tree.

²³⁷ Here the message is similar to that of *SGGK*, in that Lancelot represents a more useful and attainable model for masculinity precisely because he is not perfect; I will discuss how this is also linked to the arboreal in *SGGK* in Chapter Three.

This has been recognised to “encapsulate the heterosexual love of Launcelot and Gwenyvere in the Knight of the Cart episode”.²³⁸ The verbs here suggest a certain eroticism and fertility that is then – it should be emphasised – explicitly extended from the non-human to the human: “for than all erbys and treys renewyth a man and woman” (3:1119.10-11). The renewal of Lancelot and Guenivere's love is therefore linked to trees through metaphor, and soon after this, the narrator addresses “all ye that be lovers” (3:1120.9-10), asking them to “calle unto youre remembraunce the monthe of May, lyke as ded quene Gwenyver, for whom I make here a lytyll mencion, that whyle she lyved she was a trew lover, and therefor she had a good ende” (3:1120.10-13). This uncharacteristically positive mention of Guenivere precedes an episode in which Lancelot and Guenivere are explicitly intimate (see 3:1131.28-32) – which happens rarely in the *Morte*, and in Arthurian romance more generally – further highlighting how the springtime trees at the beginning of this episode are associated with the specifically erotic love between the two. However, there is also a certain irony attached to this metaphor of spring, as Lancelot and Guenivere's love is not fertile in terms of reproduction. Guenivere never has any children, by either Lancelot or Arthur, which can be seen as indicative of the sinfulness of Lancelot and Guenivere's relationship, here again flagged by tree imagery. Furthermore, they are also middle-aged at this point in the narrative, not the youthful lovers which the imagery of spring suggests.

The aforementioned “Knight of the Cart” episode that these metaphorical spring-time trees herald also features an opposing image of tree death, which is additionally linked to this relationship. The “Knight of the Cart” episode, adapted from Chretien de Troyes' *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*, features Lancelot rescuing Guenivere when she is abducted by an enemy knight, Meliagaunt. In order to save

²³⁸ Whetter, *Manuscript and Meaning*, 164.

her, Lancelot must ride in a cart, an act of shame usually reserved for criminals, which is especially emphasised in Chretien's text: "in those days carts were used as pillories are now ... that cart was for all criminals alike, for all traitors and murderers".²³⁹ This is referenced in the *Morte* when one of Guenivere's ladies sees Lancelot in the cart and says she "suppose he rydyth unto hangynge" (3:1127.5-6). However, the association of the cart with criminals is elided to some extent in the *Morte*, and Guenivere does not share this view: "'Forsothe hit was fowle-mowthed,' seyde the quene, 'and evyll lykened, so for to lyken the moste noble knyght of the worlde unto such a shamefull dethe'" (3:1127.16-19).

Indeed, instead of criminals, the *Morte's* cart is repeatedly associated with wood. It is introduced as "a charyote that cam thydir to feche wood" (3:1126.12-13) and the carter repeats this when he tells Lancelot that he was "sente for to fecche wood" (3:1126:18). When this carter refuses to take Lancelot with him for this reason, Lancelot kills him and insists that his colleague takes him, in the cart, to Meliagaunt's castle, where Guenivere is held prisoner (3:1126.22-30). I propose that, just as Lancelot becomes marked by the shame of riding in the cart in Chretien's version, here he is linked to the dead trees that this cart was sent to carry. That Lancelot and Guenivere's relationship, not to mention Lancelot himself, is repeatedly associated with trees throughout the *Morte* lends weight to this image. Lancelot becomes a sort of tree, but he does so within the multifaceted context of arboreal imagery in the text; he is at once dead and alive, fruitful and barren, ideal and problematic, and passive and active, just as the trees of the *Morte* are all of those things.

²³⁹ Chrétien de Troyes, *Arthurian Romances*, trans. William W. Kibler (London: Penguin, 1991), 363.

Thus, the trees in this text participate in the anthropocentric, patriarchal discourses that infuse it, but their association with Lancelot also places these trees in a position of power. Furthermore, focussing on these trees allows glimpses of the cracks in those discourses; they participate in Lancelot's heroism *and* witness his failures. One final tree image encapsulates this tension between masculine and arboreal power on the one hand, and vulnerability on the other. Towards the end of "The Noble Tale of Sir Launcelot du Lake", there is an episode in which Lancelot is riding past a castle and spots a falcon:

a faucon com over his hede fleying towarde an hyghe elme, and longe lunes aboute her feete. And she flowe unto the elme to take hir perch, the lunes overcast aboute a bowghe; and whan she wolde have tane hir flyght she hynge by the leggis faste (1:282.13-18)

This image of non-human restriction, in which the falcon is leashed and becomes entangled with the boughs of a tree, is followed by an image of human, particularly feminine, restriction, communicated through a threat of violence: a lady runs out of the castle and says "A, Launcelot, Launcelot! as thow arte floure of all knyghtes, helpe me to gete me my hauke; for and my hauke be loste my lorde wolde destroy me" (1:282.22-24). Although the epithet "flower of all knights" is a common, conventional way to refer to the hero in medieval romance, here the likening of Lancelot to the vegetative non-human is followed up by a more direct association of Lancelot with the natural world, specifically the elm tree. Although he replies to the lady that "I am an evyll clymber, and the tre is passynge hyghe, and fewe bowys to helpe me withal" (1:282.32-33), he soon prepares to help her. He first "tyed his horse to the same tre" (1:282.34-35), again linking his chivalric identity to the tree, as previously discussed. Even more tellingly, he then asks the lady to unarm him, and strips himself: "and so whan he was unarmed he put of all his clothis unto his

shurte and his breche" (1:282.36-37).²⁴⁰ The fact that Lancelot is – in chivalric terms – naked when he climbs the tree also foreshadows the fact that his identity will soon be tied to it.

This process of association begins when Lancelot acts destructively towards the tree, both to rescue the falcon and to protect himself when the lady's true intentions are revealed. After this unarming, "with myght and grete force he clambe up to the faucon and tyed the lunes to a grete rotyn boysh [branch], and threw the hawk down with the buysh" (1:282-283.36, 1-2). This act of ripping off a branch is repeated when the lady's real motive is revealed. Her husband, Sir Phelot, has asked her to disarm Lancelot so that he may kill him more easily, and he is "stondyng at the boole of the tre to sle hym" (1:283.8). Subsequently, Lancelot removes a branch from the tree to use as a weapon: "above his hede he sawe a rowgh spyke, a bygge bowghe leveles. And therewith he brake hit of by the body" (1:283.29-30). In both cases, the language used to describe the tree gives it an embodied, material existence. Phelot stands at the "bole" (trunk) of the tree; this word "bole" is also used in Middle English to refer to a person's body.²⁴¹ Additionally, Lancelot removes the branch he uses as a weapon "by the body" of the tree, and this embodiment lends a certain weight to the fact that Lancelot is ripping it apart, especially as he has just told the lady that it has "fewe bowys to helpe" him climb in the first place (1:282.33). He uses the branches as tools, first to help him climb the tree, and then – after ripping them from the tree's body – to help him return the lady

²⁴⁰ Again, Scala's distinction between "unarmed" (being defeated) and "disarmed" (being without armour) is relevant here, as foreshadows the chivalric defeat Lancelot almost endures in this episode.

²⁴¹ Interestingly, Vinaver uses this very word to show the differences between Caxton's edition and the Winchester manuscript: "The two texts are, then, collateral versions of a common original, and each contains at least some elements of it which are not otherwise extant. Thus Malory's '*bole* of the tree' becomes *body* in the Winchester MS. And *hoole* in Caxton" (*The Works*, lxxxviii).

her hawk and to aid him in his fight against an enemy knight. In this way, the tree is characterised as vulnerable and passive, there to be used by Lancelot in any way he wishes.

At the same time, the tree can be seen to participate in a deeper eco-subtext that lends it a certain authority, and Lancelot's use of the tree also figures his bodily vulnerability. Lancelot only rips the branch from the tree after Phelot has refused to give him his sword via one of its branches: Lancelot asks that Phelot "hange my swerde there upon a bowghe" (1:283.20), to which he replies "Nay ... for I know the bettir than thou wenyste. Therefore thou gettyst no wepyn and I may kepe the therefro" (1:283.23-25). That Lancelot then instead turns one of the boughs he references into a weapon suggests that he is going *beyond* his usual chivalric identity – an identity that is linked to his sword and referenced by Phelot here when he states that he "knows" Lancelot – and towards the opposing power of the tree. This tree then allows Lancelot to defend himself and incapacitate Phelot – "sir Launcelot put away [Phelot's] stroke with the rowgh spyke, and therewith toke hym on the hede, that downe he felle in a sowghe to the grounde" (1:283.34-36) – and it is his act of tearing and using the tree branch that saves him, despite the fact that he reverts to the use of a sword to kill Phelot (1:284.1-2). Through Lancelot, the tree participates in the violence between these two knights, and is the only thing that allows Lancelot to ride away "thank[ing] God that he had escaped that harde adventure" (1:284.13-14).

While it is true that any non-human power here can only be enacted through the human – Lancelot uses the tree, which cannot act alone – this tree stands witness to, and participates in, this combat, in which Lancelot is tricked and almost overcome. Lancelot's thankful prayer as he rides away from Sir Phelot's lady suggests that the somewhat comical image of a nearly-naked Lancelot jumping

down from the tree while brandishing the branch hides an undercurrent of danger; Lancelot's vulnerability is comical, but nevertheless pronounced.²⁴² Further, the use of the word "adventure" here flags the fact that this episode should be serving to increase Lancelot's renown in some way. While his use of the tree branch arguably moves him beyond his conventional chivalric characterisation, it seems that this episode is more problematic than affirming for him.²⁴³ Immediately afterwards, Lancelot returns to Arthur's court, and a succession of convenient knights and ladies tell this court about Lancelot's adventures throughout the tale (1:286-287), except – conspicuously – this last one. While the court is even told "how the quenys sorserers four had hym in preson" (1:287.12-13), the episode involving the elm tree is repressed. Whetter highlights the importance of instances of "self-reflexive recording of narrative deeds" such as this, and argues that there is, correspondingly, "an awareness by author and characters that reputation, in the *Morte Darthur*, is arguably more public than private".²⁴⁴ The absence of the elm tree narrative here, then, becomes particularly noteworthy; this absence could suggest that it is simply not important, or is another victim of Malory's abbreviation of his sources, but there is also a sense that this episode goes beyond the text's usual chivalric parameters. The trees with which Lancelot is associated witness his identification as both idealised and problematic. This may be seen as indicative of the fact that, while the non-human is used to identify and aid the human, this does, at times, threaten to destabilise human, masculine structures.

²⁴² I will discuss a similar moment in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in Chapter Three.

²⁴³ Again, I will argue that Gawain undergoes a similar experience in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

²⁴⁴ Whetter, *Manuscript and Meaning*, 89-90.

Trees of Life and Death: Arboreal Imagery in Malory's Sangreal Tale

The blurring of the hierarchies that privilege human, masculine power is also seen at other points in the *Morte*, and an exploration of arboreal imagery in this text would not be complete without a more in-depth discussion of the Sangreal tale. This tale is an adaptation of the Old French *La Queste del Saint Graal*, though, as Cooper rightly argues, it differs significantly from its source text, especially in its treatment of Lancelot; Malory's Lancelot refuses to give up on the Grail quest, and becomes more of a recognisable hero of the narrative.²⁴⁵ To move away from Lancelot for the time being, however, he is not the only knight who is described as a tree in the Sangreal tale; in this section, I will explore some instances in which Gawain and Lionel are also linked to trees. I will then go on to discuss an episode in which the Tree of Knowledge is a central figure, and interacts with Eve. These tree images combine to open up other spaces for transgression and subversion that once again break down the dualism between human and non-human.

On the surface, this tale exhibits a more simple and straightforward depiction of chivalry than the other tales, because it valorises the more pious, chaste aspects of the chivalric ideal, as opposed to the more worldly knightly qualities of courtliness and prowess in battle. The knights that feature in the Sangreal tale come to be ordered into a hierarchy that places Galahad – the most spiritually chivalric knight – at one end of the spectrum and Lionel – the knight who most fails to overcome his characterisation as a worldly knight – at the other. As with other aspects of this tale, this hierarchy is established by visions that are later explained by hermits or other

²⁴⁵ Helen Cooper, Introduction to *Le Morte Darthur: The Winchester Manuscript* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), xiv; also see xx; also see Whetter, *Manuscript and Meaning*, 90.

holy figures; Saunders argues that “the central role of Malory’s forest is to provide the landscape in which such visions occur”.²⁴⁶ For example, Gawain has a vision in which he “saw a rake of bullis, an hundrith and fyffty, that were proude and black, save three of hem was all whyght, and one had a blacke spotte” (2:942.4-6). A hermit interprets this vision thus:

by the bullis ys undirstonde the felyshyp of the Rounde Table whych for their synne and their wyckednesse bene blacke ... And the three bulles whych were whyght sauff only one had bene spotted? The too whyght betokenythe sir Galahad and sir Percivale, for they be maydyns and clene withoute spotte, and the thirde, that had a spotte, signifieth sir Bors de Gaynes, which trespassed but onys in hys virginité (2:946.17-25)

The use of colour symbolism here is repeated often throughout the tale, and I will argue that this emphasis on the non-human as symbols is similarly integral to the semiotic structure of the narrative; again, the non-human is given the power to define the human. Furthermore, although this implies a somewhat anthropocentric approach to the non-human world – as it seems only to be viewed through human perspectives – the power of the non-human in these terms allows us to glimpse the eco-subtext of the *Morte* once more.

The arboreal is again implicated in this eco-subtext in the Sangreal tale. For example, Gawain and Lionel are likened to trees in order to represent their sinfulness. Gawain repeatedly refuses to shed his worldly chivalry, which is seen most obviously in his refusal to listen to holy men and do penance; when offered repentance by a holy man early on in the Grail quest, for example, he responds “I may do no penaunce, for we knyghtes adventures many tymes suffir grete woo and payne” (2:892.19-20), exhibiting a worldly misunderstanding of the salvation being offered to him. Later in the quest, a hermit tells Gawain “Hit ys longe tyme passed sith that ye were made knyght and never synnes servyd thou thy Maker, and now

²⁴⁶ Saunders, *The Forest of Medieval Romance*, 180.

thou arte so olde a tre that in the is neythir leeff, nor grasse, nor fruyte” (2:949.3-7). Not only does this recall the characterisation of Lancelot as a fruitless fig tree, as previously discussed, but the Hermit goes on to extend this even further: “Wherefore bethynke the that thou yelde to oure Lorde the bare rynde, sith the fende hath the levis and the fruyte” (2:949.7-9). Here, Gawain is not simply fruitless, but his fruit has been picked by the devil, rendering this symbol even more unsettling. Lionel, who is even more despicable than Gawain – he not only eschews spiritual chivalry, but also kills other knights without remorse – is represented by a “worme-etyn and fyble tre” (2:958.15) in one of Bors’ visions. Later, a hermit explains that “the sere tre betokenyth thy brothir sir Lyonell, whych ys dry withoute vertu, and therefore men oughte to calle hym the rotyn tre, and the worme-etyn tre, for he ys a murtherer and doth contrary to the Order off Knyghthode” (2:968.8-12). The word “sere”, meaning dry or withered, signals the escalation of this tree metaphor, since where Gawain’s fruit has all been picked, Lionel’s tree is so withered that it no longer grows fruit at all.²⁴⁷ In both cases, knights and trees are again entangled with the non-human; as Rudd argues in her discussion of Gawain’s tree simile, “the choice of comparison seems to imply that knights are as much a part of the forest landscape as trees”.²⁴⁸

Bors also sees another vision that has a tree as its central symbol, and which again links human and non-human. Though the aforementioned vision he has about Lionel is labelled as such – “than he had anothis vision” (2:958.12) – this vision is introduced more generally and is rooted more in reality:

And so a litill frome thens he loked up into a tre and there he saw a passynge grete birde uppon that olde tree. And hit was passyng drye, withoute leyffe; so she sate above and had birdis whiche were dede for

²⁴⁷ See the *MED* entry for “sēr(e)” at <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED39507/track?counter=4>.

²⁴⁸ Rudd, *Greenery*, 81.

hungir. So at the laste he smote hymselffe with hys beke ... And the yonge birdys toke lyff by the bloode of the grete birde (2:956.6-13)

This image refers to the iconography of Christ as a pelican, symbolism that was based upon the classical idea that pelicans killed their offspring and then resurrected them with their blood, killing themselves in the process.²⁴⁹ Medieval theologians Christianised this belief, and the pelican was a popular symbol of Christ throughout the Middle Ages.²⁵⁰ The animal non-human element of this image is significant in itself, especially when it comes to trees, as it involves a bird; birds and trees are connected here, as they are in the ekphrasis of the *Awntyrs of Arthure*.

However, it is the vegetative non-human element that is most of interest here, and the tree upon which the bird sits is also symbolically important. A hermit later explains this reference to Christ as a bird, but also focuses on the tree; he tells Bors that “the bare tree betokenyth the worlde, whych ys naked and nedy, withoute fruyte, but if hit com of oure Lorde” (2:967.12-13). It is fruitful here to draw a connection between the Crucifixion and this tree imagery, as salvation depended on the death of a tree, as well as of Christ; the cross, and the tree it is made from, are integral to Christ’s story. This symbol of salvation is here presented as a living tree, upon which Christ-as-bird alights and sacrifices himself for humanity. That the tree here comes to represent the whole world – the whole of humanity – signals a movement away from tree imagery as representative of individual human identities, which I have been discussing thus far. Instead, the non-human here comes to represent a collective human identity, and – moreover – one which is lacking before God’s intervention. This tree remains bare, leafless, and cannot bear fruit.

²⁴⁹ Tobias Nicklas and Janet E. Spittler, “Christ and the Pelican: Function, Background and Impact of an Image,” *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 19, no. 2 (2016): 323-337.

²⁵⁰ Nicklas and Spittler, “Christ and the Pelican,” 323-337.

In contrast, there is another tree in this tale that does bear fruit, and which can be seen to represent a site of fertile human – specifically feminine – power. The Sangreal tale features a retelling of the story of the Tree of Knowledge, which conventionally stands as a foil to the cross, with the tree and its sinful connotations on one hand, and the cross and salvation on the other.²⁵¹ The Tree of Knowledge in the *Morte* can therefore be seen to exist in opposition to the image of the bare tree previously discussed, with its connotations of the Crucifixion. In this text, Eve takes a branch from the Tree of Knowledge when she leaves Eden and grows a tree from it, which Solomon’s wife mines years later to make some spindles that Bors, Percival, and Galahad – the three knights who achieve the grail – encounter while sailing to Carteloise with Percival’s sister, who tells them this story (2:990-993). The repeated references to the tree that Eve grows and the abundance of wood-based products within the main narrative and Percival’s sister’s inset narrative interact to open a space for overlapping feminine and non-human agency.

Previous approaches to this episode by Jennifer E. Looper and Gillian Rudd have highlighted how it subverts those discourses that dominate the rest of the text, and have emphasised the multivalent nature of the tree. In her argument about the corresponding episode in *La Queste del Saint Graal*, Looper argues that it “recounts how a group of women, from generation to generation, transmitted culture by replanting the Tree of Life outside the Garden of Eden and by shaping spindles from this Tree to send a message of imminent redemption that is eventually intercepted by Galahad” and works against “the patrilineal social model” presented in the rest of the narrative, which “emphasizes the male role in founding and perpetuating

²⁵¹ See the discussion of this in my introduction. Though the tree is not labelled the Tree of Knowledge in Malory, and is labelled as the Tree of Life in *Le Queste del Saint Graal*, I will refer to it as such, and it is certainly Edenic; in any case, these two trees were conflated, as I will reference again below.

genealogies and in the dominant cultural activity of the Vulgate”.²⁵² Although she mentions the tree peripherally, Looper’s argument can be extended by focussing further on the tree, and highlighting how the tree’s products become wooden actants in the narrative. In doing so, I am also indebted to Rudd’s reading of this tree, which highlights how it is cultivated, both literally and symbolically; she reads this tree in terms of gardening metaphors, and argues that its grafted nature is central to its meaning, such that “the trees of this inset story ... are both realistic and highly symbolic”.²⁵³ In the following section, I will bring together these two approaches, by focussing on the tree’s symbolic power, as well as on how it embodies the feminine authority that infuses the subtext of this narrative, using an ecofeminist approach to further explore how a focus on the arboreal non-human can open up our understanding of this text.

To begin, it is first necessary to explore how the central tree of this tale is connected to Eve. First of all, Eve is wholly responsible for the planting and cultivation of the tree, as she takes what we may term a scion,²⁵⁴ the very branch from which she picked the apple that brought about the Fall, and plants it outside Eden:

‘Thes spyndyls’, seyde the damesell, ‘was whan synfull Eve cam to gadir fruyte, for which Adam and she were put out of Paradyse. She toke with her the bowgh whych the appyll hynge on, then perseyved she that the braunche was freysh and grene, and she remembird of the losse which cam of the tre. Than she thought to kepe the braunche as longe as she myght, and for she had no coffir to kepe hit in, she put hit in the erthe (2:990.22-29)

²⁵² Jennifer E. Looper, “Gender, Genealogy, and the ‘Story of the Three Spindles’ in the ‘Queste del Saint Graal,’” *Arthuriana* 8, no. 1 (1998): 55.

²⁵³ Rudd, *Greenery*, 78; also see 76-77. Saunders puts forward a similar argument when discussing Morgan le Fay and the apple tree episode discussed above: “in Morgan le Fay, Malory brings together the otherworldly and the human: his forest is at once a symbolic and a realistic landscape” (*The Forest of Medieval Romance*, 170).

²⁵⁴ See the discussion of grafting processes in my introduction.

Rudd emphasises how Solomon's wife's carpenter – who is tasked with cutting into the resulting tree many years later, and who will be discussed further below – makes apparent the “tending and nurture which has gone into maintaining this particular stock”.²⁵⁵ However, Eve also displays considerable skill here, and the tree would not exist without her and her impulse to “kepe” this piece of Eden.²⁵⁶

Although she is first introduced as “*synfull* Eve” (2:990.22-23; my emphasis), the Fall itself is glossed over here, and Eve is active and cognitive in a positive way. Instead of a focus on her responsibility for Original Sin, here her implied knowledge of gardening and her connection to the earth allow her to take a piece of Paradise with her. Her actions result in the growth of an Edenic tree, or at least the offspring of an Edenic tree, where humans can access it, putting Paradise within reach. The result is a “grete tre” (2:990.30), elsewhere “the fayryst tre” (2:991.9); she has created a superlative living thing, which stands in direct contrast to the conventional understanding of Eve as the reason for sin and death. This is more emphasised in the Old French version of the text, in which the tree that Eve grows is referred to as the “Tree of Death” until a disembodied voice tells Adam and Eve not to despair, that “the tree has more life than death in it”, and it is thereafter called the Tree of Life.²⁵⁷ Though Eve's legacy is also therefore mediated by the tree – and these allusions to salvation – in *La Queste del Saint Graal*, Malory removes even these initially negative associations of the tree, and of Eve. This shows another way in which absence operates in this text, and also allows for a re-imagination of the Fall

²⁵⁵ Rudd, *Greenery*, 77.

²⁵⁶ It should also be noted that her first instinct seems to be to keep the branch within a coffer – a man-made object, likely made of wood – and it is only the absence of a suitable way of enclosing the branch that she decides to plant it.

²⁵⁷ E. Jane Burns, trans. *The Quest for the Holy Grail*, Lancelot-Grail: The Old French Arthurian Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation vol. 6, ed. Norris J. Lacy (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2010), 132. All subsequent references to *La Queste del Saint Graal* will be from this edition.

as a “losse” that is commemorated by the “grete tree”, and therefore as something that can be accepted and atoned for by Eve herself.²⁵⁸

Indeed, Eve’s characterisation in this tale is more in line with medieval representations of Mary, as she becomes a positive and respected maternal figure who also creates a link between humanity and Paradise, again in relation to the tree.²⁵⁹ Instead of a focus on her seduction by Satan and temptation of Adam, it is Eve’s virginity that is first emphasised as she leaves Eden; Percival’s sister recounts that the tree was “as whyght as ony snowe, braunchis, bowis, and levys: that was a tokyn that a maydyn planted hit” (2:990.31-32). That the tree highlights Eve’s virginity is especially significant within the context of this tale; I have already discussed the emphasis placed on the virginity of the “best” knights, which was also communicated through references to white non-human elements. Though Eve almost immediately moves from maiden to mother, the way she does this retains these more positive associations:

So lay Adam with hys wyff undir the same tre, and anone the tre which was whyght felle to grene os ony grasse, and all that com oute of hit. And in the same tyme that they medled togydirs Abell was begotyn (2:990-991.34-35, 1-2)

²⁵⁸ In this way, the living tree also stands with the many tombs and inscriptions throughout the *Morte* that commemorate and memorialise its masculine presences in a material way, as Whetter discusses (see especially *Manuscript and Meaning*, 163-165); he argues that the material manuscript also does this, as its rubrication literally highlights these processes (159-198). On the other hand, the tree becomes more than a simple marker, as I will argue below.

²⁵⁹ In the Middle Ages, Mary stood as a foil to Eve, just as the Tree of Knowledge and the cross stood in opposition. Liz Herbert McAvoy succinctly summarises why Eve must be countered in this way: “the obsession with death, built into Christian theology, denies the fundamentality of the natal and maternal to human existence – to the extent of having to produce a man – Adam as the first mother and a *virgo intacta* – Mary as the ideal mother” (“Flourish like a Garden’: Pain, Purgatory and Salvation in the Writing of Medieval Religious Women,” *Medieval Feminist Forum* 50, no. 1 (2014): 37). The idea of Adam-as-mother refers to the fact that Eve is birthed from his rib, which is directly referenced during this episode in *La Queste del Saint Graal* (131). Looper also discusses the Eve/Mary binary in relation to this tale, though more in relation to the spindles (“Gender, Genealogy,” 50, 55-57, and 59). Furthermore, although there is not the space to discuss it here, the focus on Eve as opposed to Mary ties in with the rhetoric of this tale, which is more interested in presenting a model of redemption in Lancelot than it is in the perfection of Galahad.

Although Adam enters the narrative here, and Eve is temporarily reduced to his nameless “wyff”, Eve has equal agency in the conception of Abel: “they medled togydirs” (2:991.2). Indeed, the movement from white to green – with its connotations of new growth and fertility – tracks *Eve’s* movement from maiden to mother, as the tree is firmly connected to her, even years later when Solomon’s wife approaches the carpenter to make spindles from the tree; he is resistant, and objects that “thys ys the tre which oure firste modir planted” (2:993.11-12). Thus, although this tree becomes “a literal family tree”, as Rudd argues, it is more associated with Eve than Adam.²⁶⁰

The genealogical significance of the tree, and Eve’s association with it, is further highlighted by the tree’s final colour change, from green to red, when Cain slays Abel beneath it. Notably, Cain is absent when the tree moves from white to green; although Genesis 4:1-2 clearly states that Cain was born before Abel, here the movement from white to green, from maiden to mother, is undoubtedly linked with Abel, and Abel alone. Cain is not mentioned until he slays Abel (2:991.4), and is never associated with Eve, or indeed identified as Abel’s brother at all. This again implies a more forgiving view of Eve, as she is associated with her righteous son, but not the first murderer. However, it also complicates the Great Mother narrative, as Abel does not produce heirs before Cain murders him. Although the medieval audience of the *Morte* would have been aware that Eve gave birth to both Cain and Abel, the narrative only makes clear her relationship with the latter, immediately before he is murdered.

However, the seemingly absent narrative of Cain’s conception is replaced by further description of Eve’s tree, which mediates Eve’s characterisation as a good

²⁶⁰ Rudd, *Greenery*, 76.

mother to all by simultaneously embodying the blood of her child. After Abel is conceived:

Thus was the tre longe of grene coloure. And so [hit] befelle many dayes aftir, undir the same tre, Cayme slew Abell, whereof befelle grete mervayle, for a[s] Abell had ressayved dethe undir the grene tre, he loste the grene colour and becam red; and that was in tokenyng of blood. And anone all the plantis dyed thereoff, but the tre grewe and waxed mervaylusly fayre, and hit was the most fayrst tre and the most delectable that ony man myght beholde and se; and so ded the plantes that grewe oute of hit tofore that Abell was slayne under hit (2:991.3-12)

As Rudd argues, the tree is harvested “for cuttings, which in turn have flourished. Or at least did until Able’s murder. Thereafter, all cuttings taken die off”.²⁶¹ However, the plants that grew out of the tree before Abel was slain are able to flourish. These plants can be seen to represent Adam and Eve’s other offspring, such as Cain and, more importantly Seth, Noah’s ancestor. Although these figures are not mentioned explicitly, like these plants, they go on to produce many descendants and continue Adam and Eve’s family tree.

As the tree moves from green to red, then, it also begins to embody the masculine, again in relation to Eve. When Solomon’s wife decides to use the tree, it is classified as “the tre whych Abelle was slayne undir” (2:993.8). This male-centric classification is almost immediately subverted by the carpenter, who refers to the fact that Eve planted the tree (2:993.11-12), as previously mentioned; this also acts as a reminder that the tree tracked Eve’s movement from maiden to mother with the birth of Abel. Indeed, although Eve physically disappears from the narrative after “Abell was begotyn” (2:991.2), these rhetorical structures indicate that she does not disappear completely, but instead is incorporated into the tree that she grew and maintained, and which reflects her line of descendants. The clearly feminine connotations of the tree birthing other plants – other scions – again link it to Eve, as

²⁶¹ Rudd, *Greenery*, 76.

does the continuity of the colour symbolism. The red of the tree represents Abel's blood – “that was in tokenyng of blood” (2:991.7) – but also Eve's; her movement from maiden to mother has culminated in the death of her child.²⁶²

This is highlighted by the fact that Eve's tree bleeds when the carpenter begins his work for Solomon's wife: “Anone as he began to worke, there com oute droppis of blood” (2:993.14-15). Thus, the tree becomes anthropomorphised, and the carpenter reacts with horror, only continuing the work when Solomon's wife insists: “and than wolde he a leffte, but she wolde nat suffir him” (2:993.15-16). This could, as Rudd argues, show an “implied respect for the trees as sentient beings”, which “makes [the carpenter] markedly reluctant to carve wood straight out of the living tree trunks”, a point I will return to below.²⁶³ However, I suggest that this anthropomorphism, combined with the tree's existing link to Eve – of which the carpenter has just reminded us (2:993.11-12) – also connects his horror at the tree's blood to his reluctance to disrespect Eve. This is, in effect, *her* blood, as the tree embodies her position as the “firste modir” (2:993.11-12). It is also tied to Abel, whose blood was spilt beneath the tree, and who was conceived by Eve as the tree turned from white to green. Thus, this tree is firmly tied to her blood – the blood she passes down through her family tree – allowing for the continuation of the Great Mother narrative in the figure of the tree, even if the figure of Eve disappears.²⁶⁴ Its “sentience”, therefore, is connected to the first woman and her offspring.

²⁶² *La Queste* makes the link between the tree's red colour and Abel's blood even clearer: “The Tree immediately lost its green colour and became completely red, to commemorate the blood that had been spilled” (135) and “for no one with any sense can look at the scabbard, which was made from the Tree of Life, and not be reminded of Abel's blood” (140) – this will be discussed further shortly.

²⁶³ Rudd, *Greenery*, 78.

²⁶⁴ The idea that Eve's blood is connected to that of her descendants is supported by the common medieval belief that menstrual blood was the mother's contribution to her child, and the vector through which Original Sin was passed on. This could also account for the carpenter's horror, as menstrual blood was consequently thought to be poisonous. However, just as the tale glosses over the Fall, it would seem that the “blood” she passes on to Abel,

In ecofeminist terms, then, here we have a tree that is associated with a feminine presence who has knowledge of the earth. Moreover, this knowledge is explicitly linked to her own fertility. On the one hand, this suggests a potentially reductive representation of both the feminine and the non-human; as discussed in my introduction, the traditional association between them is usually limiting. Indeed, both the tree and Eve are here ensnared within structures that regard them in relation to their products, as the tree is mined for its wood and scions, and Eve seems only to be valued for her reproductive capability. However, at the same time, this association begins to break down human/non-human hierarchies, and consequently destabilises the structures that rely on them. The tree is somewhat anthropomorphised through its connection with Eve, but, as referenced in my introduction, sometimes anthropomorphism is “worth the risks”, because “it, oddly enough, works against anthropocentrism: a chord is struck between person and thing”.²⁶⁵ This begins to break down the dualism between human and non-human; to draw on a core argument also highlighted in my introduction, Plumwood argues that “women must be treated as just as fully part of human culture as men. But both men and women must ... develop an alternative culture which fully recognises *human* identity as continuous with, not alien from, nature”.²⁶⁶ I argue that Eve and her tree can be read as starting this process, especially when we consider how Abel is also embodied in this tree, which breaks down human/non-human and masculine/feminine boundaries.

and that is contained within the tree, is more in line with the idea of a noble “bloodline”. For explorations of medieval ideas of blood, including these opposing concepts of blood, see McCracken, *The Curse of Eve*, and Bettina Bildhauer, *Medieval Blood* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009).

²⁶⁵ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 120.

²⁶⁶ *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 36.

Furthermore, the ways in which future generations of women interact with this special tree within the tale – and specifically the ways in which the tree’s products are handled and spoken of by these women – can again be seen to open a space for both the feminine and the non-human to hold power and counteract the dominant patriarchal discourses of the text. I will now turn, then, to some of the tale’s wooden objects, which become “things” that participate within the narrative, just as we have seen that the tree grown from the Tree of Knowledge is a living thing that does so.²⁶⁷ This part of the tale is particularly rife with wooden products, and although they are sometimes as invisible as the wood that usually surrounds Arthur and his knights, the tale’s feminine presences give voice to them. The story begins in a wood-rich environment, as the knights board a ship “mervaylous fayre and ryche” (2:985.18) and find a “fayre bedde” (2:985.19), over which the spindles hang.²⁶⁸ I will return to the spindles shortly, but first it is worth noting that as Percival’s sister recounts the story of the spindles, she also reveals how this ship was made; it was commissioned by Solomon’s wife, who states “I shall lette make a shippe of the beste wood and moste durable that ony man may fynde” (2:992.10-11). Although subsequently “Salamon sente for the carpenters” (2:992.12), and although these carpenters are specifically male – it is the “beste wood ony *man* may fynde” (my emphasis) – it is Solomon’s wife that draws attention to the fact that the ship upon which the spindles reside is made of wood. Thus, the spindles exist in an artificially wooden environment – hanging above a wooden bed in a wooden ship – that magnifies human, male manipulation of the non-human world, on behalf of a woman.

²⁶⁷ I am defining “things” here and elsewhere according to thing theory, which I addressed in my introduction.

²⁶⁸ In some versions of the text, the spindles are attached to the bed; see *La Queste del Saint Graal* 138, for example.

Indeed, the manipulation of wood from this tree is also enacted by the feminine. It is Solomon's wife who forces the carpenter to mutilate Eve's tree: "'Do hit,' seyde she, 'other ellis I shall destroy the'" (2:993.13). On the one hand, this depiction of an active woman, labelled "evyll" by the narrator (2:991.17), can be viewed as a stereotype of dangerous feminine agency, trapping Solomon's wife within patriarchal discourses. On the other hand, just as Eve is initially labelled "synfull", but becomes redeemed, there is a subtle valorisation of Solomon's wife that allows her to subvert the discourses that could reduce her to a stereotype. Eve takes a limb from the Tree of Knowledge, mutilating it to create a legacy of growth quite removed from the legacy of sin and death that is usually attributed to her, and Solomon's wife orders this tree to be mutilated to facilitate a different sort of feminine power, passed down through wooden objects.

These wooden objects, the spindles, are explicitly *feminine* objects that are linked to Eve's tree. Associated with women's work, spindles are objects that were strongly tied to feminine presences in medieval life and literature.²⁶⁹ The spindles in this text maintain the colour symbolism of Eve's tree – "there were spyndelys whych were whyght as snowe, and othir that were rede as bloode, and othir abovyn grene as ony emerawde" (2:990.17-19) – which ties them to the living tree, no longer visible, and, thus, to Eve. The colour of the spindles is not the outcome of human action or intervention – they are not painted, their colour is not artificial – rather, it is part of, for want of a better phrase, their natural essence: they are white, green, and red "of naturall coloure within, and withoute ony pay[n]tynge" (2:990.20-21; repeated 2:994.19-20). This emphasises the paradoxical existence of the spindles, as they are artificial things, created by humans, that nevertheless carry their own internal

²⁶⁹ Though this so-called "women's work" is often seen as limiting, the idea that feminine power can be transmitted through the action of clothwork is also explored by Morgan Boharski in her dissertation, entitled "Woven Words" and referenced above.

life, a “naturall coloure within”. It should be noted that the word “naturall” here refers to the character of the spindles, and not “natural” in the modern sense.²⁷⁰ However, the colourful properties of the spindles are also linked to the “natural” non-human, as they reflect the colour changes of Eve’s tree. Although these colour changes are also unnatural – in the sense that a tree would not usually turn completely white, green, or red – this tree is still a living non-human thing.²⁷¹ On the other hand, the tree is also intimately linked with the figure of Eve, and Rudd has convincingly discussed its cultivated, grafted nature, as previously mentioned.²⁷² Therefore, the boundaries between human and non-human, “natural” and artificial, are further elided here, in relation to the feminine presence in this tale.

This prefigures how these feminine objects become things that participate in the narrative, providing a link between Eve, Solomon’s wife, and Perceval’s sister. Though Solomon’s wife ordered the spindles to be made, it is Percival’s sister that voices their story, forming the last link in the chain of feminine authority that Looper discusses: “while the story of the spindles itself works to destabilize the Mary-Eve binary and to privilege women’s agency in general in the creation of family trees, Perceval’s sister’s actions put the theory encapsulated in this story into practice”.²⁷³ She does this by emerging as a Christ-like figure, who sacrifices herself to advance the Grail quest soon after the Tree of Knowledge episode (2:1002-1004). Her role is so instrumental to the success of the quest that Galahad tells her “ye have done so much that I shall be your knyght all the dayes of my lyff” (2:995.30-31).²⁷⁴

²⁷⁰ See the discussion of this word in my introduction.

²⁷¹ Indeed, although it is obviously true that the wood of a tree would not change colour, movement between the colours white, green, and red do occur naturally, such as in the hawthorn tree, which has white flowers and red fruit.

²⁷² Rudd, *Greenery*, 76-78.

²⁷³ Looper, “Gender, Genealogy,” 59.

²⁷⁴ This also supports Donald Hoffman’s argument that Percival’s sister is a more Christ-like figure than any of the knights; Galahad is Christ’s knight, after all. See Donald L. Hoffman, “Perceval’s Sister: Malory’s ‘Rejected’ Masculinities,” *Arthuriana* 6, no. 4 (1996): 73; for the

Galahad's announcement here does not occur in relation to her sacrifice, however, but instead refers to her role in arming him. She has just given him an important sword, another object that links the women of this tale. The sword, "which hath bene desyred so much in the realme of Logrys" (2:995.20-21), was commissioned by Solomon's wife, who ordered it to be made from King David's sword (2:992.18-25). She also states that "I shall lette make a gurdyll thereto, such one as shall please me" (2:992.26-27). Solomon, however, is not pleased by the girdles she produces – "And the gurdyls were of hempe. And therewith the kyng was ryght angry" (2:992.33-34) – to which his wife replies that she has nothing to do justice to the sword, and prophesies the involvement Percival's sister (2:993.1-4). Subsequently, it is Percival's sister who provides an appropriate girdle for the sword, as she weaves it from her hair (2:995.2-6), materially tying herself to this creation of Solomon's wife.

Indeed, though the sword is powerful, it is its trappings that are most relevant here, as they highlight the continuity between Eve, Solomon's wife, and Percival's sister; specifically, it is the sword's sheath that does this – through the medium of a tree – in another "absent" narrative. In a throwaway statement made by Percival's sister after she has revealed the girdle, she hints at this narrative:

‘Truly,’ seyde she, ‘the name of the swerde ys the Swerde with the Straunge Gurdyls, and the s[h]eeth, Mevear of Blood. For no man that hath blood in hym ne shall never see that one party of the sheth whych was made of the tree of lyff’ (2:995.14-18)

Though this sheath is referenced elsewhere, when Solomon's wife commissions it – "and aftir that make a mervaylous sheethe" (2:992.25) – it is not otherwise referred to as being made from the Tree of Life, which here links this sheath all the way back

Christ-like associations of Percival's sister, also see Looper, "Gender, Genealogy," 59 and Whetter, *Manuscript and Meaning*, 146.

to Eve. Although the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge, from which Eve took the apple – and, in the *Morte*, a scion as well – are ostensibly different trees, I have previously discussed how they were often conflated.²⁷⁵ Further, in the Old French *La Queste del Saint Graal*, the tree that Eve plants is explicitly called the Tree of Life (see 132 and 133, for example) and the link between the sheath and the tree is made more explicit through a reference to Abel's blood: "for no one with any sense can look at the scabbard, which was made from the Tree of Life, and not be reminded of Abel's blood" (140). Malory's reduction of his source texts has therefore again resulted in an "absent" narrative; although Malory does not make it clear, and even *La Queste* does not specify it, Solomon's wife must have taken more wood from Eve's tree after it was used to make the spindles. Even if not, the conflation of Eden's trees can be seen to link the sheath, like the spindles, to these generations of women, via the arboreal.

The sheath therefore becomes an object through which an otherwise hidden feminine subtext is glimpsed.²⁷⁶ Just as the spindles are feminine objects, the sheath has clear feminine connotations, as it is a receptacle into which a sword – a phallic symbol of masculine identity – is inserted. In addition to this, I would like to draw attention to the fact that "no man that hath blood in hym ne shall never see that one party of the sheth" (2:995.16-18). This could be meant in a superlative sense – that is, in the sense that no man will ever see a sheath as marvellous as this one – but it could also be taken to mean that the sheath is invisible to men. The latter reading particularly reinforces the argument I have just put forward, that the trees in this story, and their products, participate in a sub-textual narrative that is not always visible to or within the human, masculine discourses that usually dominate romance

²⁷⁵ See Dercks, "Two Trees in Paradise?" 143-158.

²⁷⁶ Heng discusses similar glimpses of an underlying and largely absent feminine subtext in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, which I will discuss in Chapter Three.

narratives. Even if the former meaning is taken, the sense that this sheath is uncanny enough to be singular also highlights how alternative – specifically feminine and non-human – forces are at work here. This undercurrent of feminine power is passed down from Eve, through to Solomon’s wife, and eventually on to Percival’s sister, through a tree and its products, implicating the feminine in the eco-subtext as well.

Moreover, these entangled feminine and eco-subtexts interact with the masculine presences in the main narrative, in the sense that this feminine power also silently supports the tale’s construction of pious chivalric masculinity. The sheath that Percival’s sister gives to Galahad protects the sword that she also gives him, and which he takes to complete his quest. As Whetter argues, “she even *completes Galahad’s knighthood* by girding him with the Sword of the Strange Girdles”.²⁷⁷ Here, she is supporting what Looper has termed “the patrilineal social model represented by Galahad’s progress”, which the narrative once again focusses on as this episode draws to a close.²⁷⁸ This could be seen to marginalise the feminine and the non-human once more, especially as both slip from view as Galahad moves on to complete the grail quest. However, within the context of the rest of the *Morte*, in which we have seen that power is not always visible or easily fathomable, it is significant that these masculine discourses are here dependent upon feminine, non-human elements. Even the moment of masculine activity in which Galahad takes the sword – “And than he gryped aboute hit with his fyngirs a grete dele” (2:995.25) – is immediately followed by a subtle instance of feminine agency, as the end of this sentence reads “and than [Percival’s sister] gurte hym aboute the myddyll with the swerde” (2:995.26): she is the one to arm him. Imbued

²⁷⁷ Whetter, *Manuscript and Meaning*, 147; my emphasis.

²⁷⁸ Looper, “Gender, Genealogy,” 55.

with the power of Eve and Solomon's wife before her, Percival's sister represents the final stage in the process of redemption that was founded when Eve re-planted the Tree of Knowledge/Life outside Eden.

In this process, feminine and masculine, human and non-human, can be seen to momentarily exist together in a balance that elides the boundaries between them. Galahad's chivalric identity becomes an assemblage that not only incorporates the non-human, but also the feminine, approaching Cohen's idea of a human identity that is "unstable, contingent, hybrid, discontinuous", and within which "gender, race, sexuality, and nation are essential but not sufficiently definitive components of this production".²⁷⁹ Just as Eve and Abel are both embodied by the tree, Percival's sister literally and metaphorically ties Galahad – girdles him – with a sheath and sword that weaves his identity with her own, and those of the women before her, in part through the medium of a tree and its products.

The mysterious power of the spindles and the sheath that makes this possible is emphasised by one last aspect of this tree: its uncanny multiplication at one point in the text. When the carpenter takes wood for the spindles, Solomon's wife calls him to the "tre whych Abelle was slayne undir" (2:993.8), the red tree; after she convinces him to take its wood, "he toke as mucche woode as myght make a spyndyll, and so she made hym to take as mucche of the grene tre, and so of the whyght tre" (2:993.16-18). This suggests that there are three separate trees, instead of one tree that changes colour, as implied previously. Rudd discusses this as related to the grafted nature of the tree: "we are in fact dealing with three separate stocks, two of which (green and red) descend from the original and still flourishing third (white)."²⁸⁰ This reading highlights how we may view these trees as realistic,

²⁷⁹ Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines*, xxiii; I discussed this argument in my introduction.

²⁸⁰ Rudd, *Greenery*, 77.

marking this as a rare instance of attention to “real” trees in the *Morte*. However, on another level, the uncertain nature of the tree/s adds to the uncanny, underlying narrative of non-human power. This could be simple slippage by Malory, and indeed the French version makes it clearer that the carpenter first takes wood from the red Tree of Life, then wood from two separate trees grown from its scions, one green and one white (138). However, this “slippage” is therefore also a symptom of how the *Morte* is “a story more absent than present”; in shortening this tale, Malory has again created an “absent” narrative.²⁸¹ Through this process, the tree/s here are given an almost supernatural ability to multiply, connected to realistic gardening practices, but also set apart from them. Eve has created a “forest” of sorts, connected to those tree-based settings that are cultivated and maintained by humans for recreation and production, but also growing beyond human parameters.²⁸²

This uncanny aspect of the tree is transferred to the spindles through the continuation of the colour symbolism, and to the sheath through its similarly slippery presence: its relationship with the tree is there one moment and gone the next. This highlights how there is sometimes more to the non-human than meets the eye; drawing attention to the tree/s of this tale reveals that their power lives on in the things that they produce, both in terms of the tree’s offspring, and in terms of its wooden products. Though invisible for the most part, the power of the tree, and the power of the women in this episode, can be glimpsed occasionally, especially in the objects that come to interact with men – the spindles and the sheath – such that the largely absent narrative of the text’s women and its trees comes to the foreground.

²⁸¹ Scala, *Absent Narratives*, 170.

²⁸² See the discussion of forest maintenance in my introduction; hunting practices were accompanied by farming of forest and wood landscapes for wood. Eve’s “forest” can be linked to that which Arthur and his men hunt within in *The Awntyrs of Arthure*, for example.

Conclusion

To conclude this chapter I will return to where I began, and to Arthur, in keeping with the cycles of the *Morte* and its predecessors, in which Arthur often features at the beginning and end.²⁸³ Arthur's story in the *Morte* is largely one of absence, like the stories of its women and its trees. To return again to Scala's arguments, she states that "[i]f Malory's *Morte* appears as a narrative, or group of narratives, marked by a number of absences in its complex organization, it is more centrally structured around an absence in terms of its central character and potential protagonist".²⁸⁴ This, she argues, is what makes Arthur's story so enduring, as it allows the reader or receiver of his legend to map their own desires onto him: "in the space left blank by the absence of Arthur, then, we can glimpse an image of the desiring reader".²⁸⁵ Arthur's importance in this sense can also be extended to other characters in the *Morte*; Whetter argues that "Arthur's presence and importance, sometimes in the background and sometimes in the foreground, is constantly evoked", even in the tales of the *Morte* that do not focus on him.²⁸⁶ Furthermore, "the other characters are who they are because of Arthur".²⁸⁷ This chapter has offered a reading of *Le Morte Darthur* that highlights how trees can also be seen in these terms, as they occupy a similarly liminal space of power that is central to the text, but largely invisible. Trees are constantly evoked by the settings of the *Morte*,

²⁸³ The final lines of *The Awntyrs of Arthure* also repeat the first lines, and reference Arthur: "In the tyme of Arthur an aunter bytydde" (1) and "In the tyme of Arthore / This anter betide" (714-715). As previously noted, Hahn also remarks on this (Introduction to "The Awntyrs Off Arthur," 2).

²⁸⁴ Scala, *Absent Narratives*, 170.

²⁸⁵ Scala, *Absent Narratives*, 198. She links this to Roland Barthes' famous theory: "to use (most of) Barthes's words, 'the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the A[r]th[u]r'" (198; she is quoting Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image-Music-Text*, ed. and trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1990), 148.

²⁸⁶ Whetter, *Manuscript and Meaning*, 196.

²⁸⁷ Whetter, *Manuscript and Meaning*, 207.

which make its knights “who they are”. The importance of the trees within these settings is not negated by the fact that they largely remain in the background. Instead, this positioning allows the arboreal non-human to act outwith conventional courtly and chivalric parameters of power.

If I have therefore filled Arthur’s empty space with the “absent” narratives of the *Morte*’s trees, it remains to be seen how Arthur himself is associated with trees. When Arthur is dying, he tells one of his remaining knights, Bedivere, to “take thou here Excaliber, my good swerde, and go wyth hit to yondir watirs syde ... I charge the throw my swerde in that water” (3:1238-1239.33-34, 1). However, Bedivere “seyde to hymselff, ‘If I throw thys ryche swerde in the water, thereof shall never com good” (3:1239.7-8), and so he “hyd Excalyber undir a tre” (3:1239.9-10). This is the last mention of a tree in the text, and it mirrors the “two treys” (1:53.8) to which Arthur and Merlin tie their horses while they retrieve Excalibur from the Lady of the Lake at the start of the text; that is the only time that Arthur is explicitly associated with trees. Whether or not the tree Arthur uses as a hitching rail is the same as the tree under which Bedivere attempts to hide Excalibur, the presence of a tree at both of these moments can be seen to flag the eruption of the eco-subtext here, in relation to Arthur’s sword, a vital marker of his identity as king and lord of the Knights of the Round Table.

We are only afforded here a slight hint that Arthur’s identity could be tied to trees, but it is precisely this obscurity that is of interest; the idea that the non-human can be both present and absent, both important and background, is at the centre of this chapter, and this thesis. Indeed, the tree that Bedivere hides Excalibur beneath soon slips from view. When Bedivere returns to Arthur after hiding the sword, Arthur asks what he saw, and Bedivere replies “nothyng but wawis and wyndys” (3:1239.14), so Arthur calls him a liar and sends him again to throw the sword in the

lake (3:1239.15-18). This time no tree is mentioned; it is absent both when Bedivere retrieves the sword from its hiding place, and when he decides to hide it again:

Than sir Bedwer[e] returned agayne, a[n]d toke the swerde in hys honde;
and yet hym thought synne and [s]hame to throw away that noble swerde.
And so effte he hyd the swerde and returned agayne” (3:1239.19-22)

This tree, therefore, is both present and absent, and is used both to hide the sword – an important symbol of Arthur’s identity – and mark its presence, but then slips from view.²⁸⁸ Like Arthur, this tree is important, but also largely invisible. The two tales in which Arthur appears the most, the first and last, frame the other tales, and the tree/s associated with Excalibur likewise frame the other tree references in the *Morte*, which are also vital but tend to stay in the background.

Although these are the only times that Arthur is explicitly associated with trees, his knights are repeatedly linked to them, as I have shown in this chapter in relation to Lancelot and the knights that feature in the Sangreal tale. Two further instances of association, specifically with oak trees, are also relevant. In “The Noble Tale of Sir Launcelot du Lake”, Lancelot finds some knights of Arthur’s court (Sagramore, Ector, Gawain, Uwain) beneath an oak tree: “there by hym in a slade he sey four knyghtes hovynge undir an oke” (1:277.4-5). Though these knights mistake Lancelot for Kay, he is immediately able to identify them (1:227.6-9). In another episode, in “The Book of Sir Tristram de Lyones”, Tristram meets a mystery knight, who turns out to be one of Arthur’s knights, Sir Lamorak, and whose “stronge myghty horse stood passyng nyghe hym ityed to an oke” (2:481.30-31). I highlight these two oak trees because they both mark instances of mistaken or unknown identity and are sites of interaction between knights that belong to Arthur’s court. As

²⁸⁸ Interestingly, the tree is first absent and then present in the French *La Mort le Roi Artu*, instead of present and then absent, as in Malory; see Norris J. Lacy, trans. *The Death of Arthur*, Lancelot-Grail: The Old French Arthurian Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation vol. 7, ed. Norris J. Lacy (Cambridge, D.S. Brewer, 2010), 128.

previously mentioned in relation to the oak trees beneath which the members of Arthur's court hunt in the *Awntyrs of Arthure*, oak trees represent strength and endurance, but also – I want to emphasise – nobility and royalty. These instances could therefore be seen as small eruptions of an eco-subtext that tie Arthur to trees; the presence of trees that symbolise royalty at moments in which Arthur's knights are gathered together could be read as Arthur being represented by these oak trees, in his absence. In a way, Arthur could be seen as present within the oak trees, silently witnessing interactions between his knights, though he does not leave Camelot.

Even if this reading places too much weight on the human meanings ascribed to these trees, Arthur is “tree-like” in other ways. Just as the framing narrative of Arthur and Camelot is necessary in all of the tales, each tale requires the Knights of the Round Table to seek some sort of *aventure* in tree-based settings; both are integral to all the interlacing narratives of the *Morte*, even when they are not focussed on. Arthur in a sense *becomes* the trees of these narratives through his occupation of a similar position of marginal importance. I have shown how Lancelot's association with trees culminates in a metaphor through which he also becomes a tree; the apple, fig, and elm trees that witness and participate in Lancelot's vulnerability mark his problematic chivalric identity. Gawain and Lionel's more straightforwardly denounced identities are also connected to metaphorical trees, during the Sangreal tale's repeated emphasis on the non-human as symbolically fruitful. When Eve's tree enters the narrative, it is just as symbolically powerful, while at the same time being rooted in a real network of human manipulation of the non-human. This manipulation, however, does not preclude the possibility that this tree has power of its own, and once again human and non-human are connected, in ways that I have suggested open up spaces of power

outwith Arthur's court and underneath the narratives of his knights. Just as the trees in the *Awntyrs of Arthure* participate in the narrative alongside Guenivere's mother to unsettle the foundations of this court, despite the artificial "trees" that are implicated in its attempts to cover the cracks this causes, the trees in the *Morte* become active things. They function to define the human and hold power beyond it, allowing us to glimpse the ghostly presence of an alternative eco-subtext. Although these trees are predominantly absent and seemingly belong to the narrative background, this chapter has nonetheless demonstrated that their presence is still active and vital; like Arthur, they sit just below the surface, waiting to return.

Chapter Two: Trees as Markers in *Ywain and Gawain*

Ywain and Gawain is an important text in which trees come to define human identities. Here, we again see how these trees can open up a space for alternative authorities. Like *Le Morte Darthur*, this text is concerned with memory and memorialising the chivalric ideal; it starts with a knight remembering and recounting the story of one of his adventures to the other members of Arthur's court, and it is the memory of this story that drives the protagonist, Ywain, to ride out on his own quest, which precipitates his own growth into a knightly hero and husband. While *Le Morte Darthur* can be seen as an attempt to elegise the chivalric ideal by interweaving stories of Arthur and his knights, *Ywain and Gawain* focusses primarily on Ywain, whose identity – I will argue – incorporates more than masculine, chivalric ideals.²⁸⁹ The only extant copy of this poem survives in British Library MS Cotton Galba E. ix, which dates from the fourteenth century. Though this work is titled *Ywain and Gawain*, the title of its Old French antecedent, *Le Chevalier au Lion* (*The Knight of the Lion*), is perhaps more appropriate, at least for the purposes of this chapter, as it is Ywain's interaction with the non-human that is of most interest to my argument. Also relevant is the title of the Welsh version of the tale, *Iarlles y Ffynnawn* (*The Lady of the Well*) as it draws attention to the importance of Ywain's wife and her spring. This chapter will focus on these two aspects of the text – its treatment of the non-human alongside the feminine – using trees as a lens to view their hidden significance.

Another characteristic that *Ywain and Gawain* shares with *Le Morte Darthur* is that, like the latter, this poem significantly reduces its French predecessor. It is

²⁸⁹ Again, see Whetter for a more in-depth exploration of *Le Morte Darthur* in these terms (*Manuscript and Meaning*, 159-198).

“not quite two-thirds as long as its indisputable source”, *Le Chevalier au Lion*, and “this reduction was achieved by the sacrifice of what are usually thought to be Chrétien’s chief glories”.²⁹⁰ This poem has therefore joined the ranks of those Middle English romances that have been considered “provincial, bourgeois, and interested only in action and the outward show of events”, such that “they are thus inferior to their continental cousins”.²⁹¹ In the case of *Ywain and Gawain*, this belief has been further complicated by an enduring idea, first put forward by Gustav Schleich, that the only surviving manuscript version of this text “is not without lacunae, and that a number of the major omissions, far from representing the intention of the English poet, are in reality the result of faulty or careless copying”.²⁹² Even those that dispute this have classified this poem according to what it is missing; for example, J.L. Weston argued in 1898 that “though, perhaps, we may not possess the *entire* poem, what we do possess represents very accurately the original text”.²⁹³ This focus on the so-called “original” text is indicative of the time Weston was writing – before medievalists began to understand the value of manuscript versions independent of their relationships to the so-called “original” texts – but others have continued to emphasise the “validity” of the extant version of *Ywain and Gawain*.²⁹⁴ Furthermore, as scholars have begun to address Middle English romances on their own terms – taking “into account not only the inclusion, absence, and order of

²⁹⁰ Norman T. Harrington, “The Problem of the Lacunae in *Ywain and Gawain*,” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 69, no. 4 (1970): 659.

²⁹¹ John K. Bollard, “Hende Words: The Theme of Courtesy in *Ywain and Gawain*,” *Neophilologus* 78 (1994): 655. For an example of work arguing this, see Juliette de Caluwé-Dor, “Yvain’s Lion Again: A Comparative Analysis of Its Personality and Function in the Welsh, French, and English Versions,” in *An Arthurian Tapestry: Essays in Memory of Lewis Thorpe*, ed. Kenneth Varty (Glasgow: Published on behalf of the British branch of the International Arthurian Society by the University of Glasgow, 1981), 229-236; she argues that *Ywain and Gawain* has “eliminated and reduced many of Chrétien’s effects” (232) and that the poem is “homely” (236), for example.

²⁹² Harrington, “The Problem of the Lacunae,” 659-660.

²⁹³ J.L. Weston, “‘Ywain and Gawain’ and ‘Le Chevalier au Lion,’” *The Modern Quarterly of Language and Literature* 1, no. 2 (1898): 99.

²⁹⁴ See, for example, Harrington, “The Problem of the Lacunae,” 660.

narrative details, episodes, and themes, but the different underlying narrative modes and traditions drawn upon by an author or redactor” – *Ywain and Gawain* has started to receive “the attention it deserves as an independent text with its own agenda”.²⁹⁵ If, again, we consider absence to be productive when it corresponds with marginal or ambiguous presence, as in the *Morte*, *Ywain and Gawain* can be appreciated from a new perspective, which embraces the ways that it differs from *Le Chevalier au Lion*, and foregrounds the non-human.

That being said, this poem does follow the basic plot of its French predecessor. It opens with an inset story told by a knight of Arthur’s court, Colgrevice, to entertain Guenivere while Arthur is sleeping. He recounts how, while riding through a forest one day, he happened upon a “cherle” (268), who told him he could find *aventure* nearby by locating a well under a fair tree and pouring water from a basin onto a stone.²⁹⁶ Colgrevice proceeds to do this, which results in a great storm and the appearance of a black knight, who defeats him in combat. Ywain, upon hearing this story, sets out to find the well and tree, and is able to defeat the black knight, Salados. After mortally wounding him, Ywain follows Salados back to his castle, where he avoids the ire of Salados’ men with the help of Lunet, the maidservant of Salados’ wife, Alundyne. Ywain then falls in love with Alundyne, and Lunet convinces her to marry him. When Arthur and his retinue visit the newlyweds, Ywain decides to re-join Arthur’s court after Gawain warns him that he should not “leves al his chevalry ... when he haves a lady wed” (1458-1460). Alundyne permits Ywain’s departure after he promises to return within a year; when

²⁹⁵ Bollard, “Hende Words,” 655 and Joanne Findon, “The Other Story: Female Friendship in the Middle English *Ywain and Gawain*,” *Parergon* 22, no. 1 (2005): 72, n. 4 respectively. Joanne Findon also notes that it remains largely underappreciated in this sense.

²⁹⁶ This reference, and all subsequent references, are to Mary Flowers Braswell’s edition in *Sir Perceval of Galles and Ywain and Gawain* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995).

he forgets this promise, she banishes him and he retreats into the forest, mad with grief. A passing lady heals his madness with an ointment, but he continues to travel in the forest, eventually finding and befriending a lion, who thereafter travels and fights with him. In the episode for which this text seems to be named, Ywain and Gawain then end up on separate sides of an inheritance dispute between two sisters, though they abandon the ensuing combat when they recognise each other. Finally, when Ywain returns to the well and casts water on the stone once more, Lunet cleverly tricks Alundyne by convincing her to let “The Knight of the Lion” protect her from the perceived threat this implies, and Alundyne and Ywain are reconciled.

Even from this brief summary, it is clear that the non-human presence in this text is varied and vital. This chapter will begin with an examination of the lion, whose relationship with Ywain can be viewed through the lenses of ecocritical theory and materialism as embodying another human/non-human enmeshment. I will then briefly focus on another non-human element, the earth, to ground my consideration of the poem’s trees as connected to chivalric identity and violence. Before turning to the “real” trees of this text, however, I will also explore two instances of arboreal metaphor that prefigure how Ywain’s identity is entangled with the vegetative, as well as the animal, non-human. Specifically, his relationship with the hawthorn tree that stands above the well is one that encodes both strength and vulnerability, much as Lancelot’s relationships with trees define him as both problematic and heroic. Finally, I will consider how Lunet and Alundyne interact – or, rather, do not interact – with this tree, to further uncover how viewing the tree as connected to Ywain in this way allows for powerful and subversive subtexts to be glimpsed once more. In my conclusion, I will consider how the eco-subtext operates during Ywain’s period of madness, to bring together the hybrid aspects of his identity. Randy P. Schiff argues

that “perennial premodern fears of forests as places where one can ‘lose oneself’ shape Chrétien’s absolute portrait of knightly anxiety about socioeconomic fluidity” in *Le Chevalier au Lion*.²⁹⁷ Though Yvain does, in a sense, “lose himself” among trees in *Yvain and Gawain*, I will argue that he also builds a new identity in the presence of the arboreal. In this way, trees in this poem become markers in several senses; they simultaneously act as markers of location, markers of human identity, and markers of non-human power. Thus, they once again participate in the narrative to demarcate spaces of subversion and inclusion.

Laying the Ground of Arboreal Power: The Lion and the Land

To introduce the ways in which the non-human is entangled with human identities in *Yvain and Gawain*, I will start with the central figure of the lion. In his discussion of *Le Chevalier au Lion*, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen argues that

The narrative envalues domesticity over errantry, so that when Yvain is repudiated by his spouse for continuing after marriage to inhabit his premarital, homosocial world, the knight loses his identity completely ... taming the exotic beast [the lion] enacts the process of domesticating his own selfhood, of transforming his identity from the individuations of heroism to a more relational mode of being.²⁹⁸

This “relational” mode is one that once more calls upon the idea that human identities are enmeshed with the non-human, and that viewing them as such subverts structures that otherwise restrict the natural non-human world. Thus, while

²⁹⁷ Randy P. Schiff, “Reterritorialized Ritual: Classist Violence in *Yvain* and *Yvain and Gawain*,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 56, no. 3 (2014): 231. He is quoting William Cronon, “The Trouble With Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: Norton, 1996), 70.

²⁹⁸ Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines*, 62. The “loss of identity” Cohen mentions here alludes to Yvain’s period of madness; I will discuss Yvain’s “wodeness” further below.

Yvain “tames” the lion, who is heavily anthropomorphised, his very identity is nevertheless dependant on animal intervention; the lion becomes “an animal whose passion for Yvain teaches the knight to become a man”.²⁹⁹ Other previous approaches to the lion have viewed him as a type of vassal to Yvain, which also brings Yvain’s lordship in line with the non-human.³⁰⁰

In *Yvain and Gawain*, the lion retains this ability to influence Yvain’s characterisation. Although Schiff argues that the lion-free title of this poem reflects that “the *Yvain*-poet’s version removes the nonhuman animal center stage and thereby highlights human agency”, the lion remains essential in *Yvain and Gawain*.³⁰¹ First, it must be emphasised that this lion incorporates both human and non-human. This is introduced soon after Yvain saves him from a dragon – the act that begins their relationship – when the lion “thanked the knyght als he kowth / Al if he myght nocht speke with mowth” (2005-2006). This suggests that the lion is cognitive and even courtly, but, at the same time, highlights his non-human form, which is unable to speak. In another, later episode, when Yvain faints and injures himself as he falls, the lion again exhibits both human and non-human tendencies: when he “saw [Yvain’s] blude, / He brayded als he had bene wode; / than kest he up so lathly rerde, / Ful mani folk myght he have ferde” (2071-2074). Here, the lion articulates his anthropomorphic grief in a non-human way, and in a way that engenders fear in humans. His subsequent suicide attempt – “And toke the swerde bytwix his fete; / Up he set it by a stane, / And thare he wald himself have slane”

²⁹⁹ Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines*, 62.

³⁰⁰ See de Caluwé-Dor, “Yvain’s Lion Again,” 231; she later argues that the lion also “behaves like a dog” (232). Here I am reminded of Susan Crane’s argument about medieval hunting rhetoric, which, when faced with the intimacy between humans and animals – intimacy both with the hounds and with the hunted animals – elevated the status of these animals to compensate (“Ritual Aspects of the Hunt à Force,” 72-78).

³⁰¹ Schiff, “Reterritorialized Ritual,” 229; Juliette de Caluwé-Dor is similarly dismissive of Yvain’s lion, arguing that *Yvain and Gawain* has “not preserved much” (“Yvain’s Lion Again,” 232) of the nobility and salience of Yvain’s lion: “[t]he lion is assimilated into a dog, and the adapter seems to take pleasure in describing it as such” (“Yvain’s Lion Again,” 236).

(2080-2082) – further exemplifies his grief. The lion’s ability to carry a sword here suggests a human-like dexterity and aligns the lion with Ywain – he has taken up Ywain’s sword – as well as knighthood more generally. Furthermore, Ywain’s reaction to this suicide attempt is to compare himself to the lion: “I saw this wild beste was ful bayn / For my luf himself have slayne; / Than sold Iertes, by more right, / Sla myself” (2097-2100). Here, witnessing the lion’s actions, which are both human and non-human, encourages Ywain to voice his intention to follow suit, though he is prevented from emulating the lion’s suicide attempt by the appearance of his estranged wife’s maidservant, Lunet. Similarly, the lion’s grief causes him to act “als he had bene wode” (2072), just as Ywain’s grief over his wife’s rejection triggers the episode of madness that brings him into contact with the lion in the first place.

Indeed, the lion’s anthropomorphic characterisation is emphasised by his relationship with Ywain, which represents a fusion of human and non-human. Ywain’s identity is intimately tied with the lion for the second half of the text. He is repeatedly referred to as “the Knight with the Lion”, and even those that knew him before he met the lion come to recognise him through the lion’s presence: “[Lunet] knew him wele by his lioun” (3929) at the end of the poem, for example. This identifier even facilitates Ywain’s reunion with his wife, as Lunet tricks her into forgiving him by encouraging her to accept “the Knight with the Lion” into her presence. Schiff asserts that the word “with” indicates Ywain’s “otherness to an animal companion ‘with’ whom he travels”, as opposed to the French “au”, which suggests that Ywain is the knight “of” the lion.³⁰² However, there is a certain equality in the Middle English “with” here. Ywain does not only travel with the lion; they are “with” each other all the time. Ywain himself articulates the intimate relationship that

³⁰² Schiff, “Reterritorialized Ritual,” 243.

this implies, for example when some porters suggest that the lion cannot enter their castle: “Mi lyoun and I sal nocht be twyn, / I luf him als wele, I yow hete, / Als myself at ane mete” (2220-2222). This declaration of love – already significant as it occurs so soon after the lion is introduced – announces the idea that Ywain and the lion are one being; Ywain loves him as he loves himself.³⁰³ Later, Ywain again voices the importance of the lion in this sense: “We er frendes and gude felaws; / He es mine and I am his - / For na tresore I wald him mys” (3794-3796). This suggests that Ywain – in some ways – cannot be parted from the lion; they belong to each other. Although Ywain is elsewhere referred to as the lion’s “mayster” (3782, 3784), this sentiment implies an enmeshment of human and non-human that transcends normative hierarchies of human power.

This link between the human and the natural world can be explored further through a consideration of another non-human, non-arboreal force that is repeatedly referenced in this text: the “earth”. In her chapter on Earth in *Greenery*, Gillian Rudd highlights the range of meanings of the Middle English “erthe”, which could refer to “soil, world, earth as opposed to heaven, and grave”.³⁰⁴ In *Ywain and Gawain*, the earth is mentioned repeatedly in relation to knights and their adventures, or misadventures, as the case may be. The tendency to describe chivalric defeats in terms of one knight being forced “to the ground” is not uncommon in romance literature, and this type of reference to the earth does appear in *Ywain and Gawain*. For example, Gawain uses the common phrase “gone to ground” while he is humbly asserting that Ywain could have defeated him during their combat: “Had we foghten forth a stownde / I wote wele I had gone to ground” (3698). Additionally,

³⁰³ Similar wording is used to articulate the love between Orfeo and Herodis in *Sir Orfeo*; this echoes medieval marriage ceremonies, as I will discuss in Chapter Four.

³⁰⁴ Rudd, *Greenery*, 22; also see 21.

when Ywain fights Sir Kay, “His helm unto the erth smate” (1325), and when he defeats him, “Al descumfite [Kay] lay on grownde” (1349).

While this episode is light-hearted, *Ywain and Gawain* also takes this common phrasing one step further by occasionally colouring it with a more sinister tone. That is, the tendency for defeated knights to be forced “to the ground” is paralleled with the possibility that they could die from these defeats – and end up buried in the ground. This is highlighted after Ywain mortally wounds Salados and follows him back to his castle, where he hears Salados’ men making a “grete noyse” (754) as they try to find him and avenge their lord, “Or that the cors in erth was layd” (767). That Salados is “in erth” is repeated when we witness a conversation between Alundyne and Lunet, in which the latter encourages the former to marry Ywain, her husband’s killer: “Trowes thou the flowre of chevarly / Sold al with thi lord di / And with him be put in molde [earth]?” (981-983). Though Salados’ body is dead and buried, the “flowre” of chivalry can continue to grow; in some ways, Salados’ corpse could be considered fertile, as Ywain does “grow” his own chivalric life from Salados’ death, when he marries Alundyne and becomes protector of her lands. This highlights Alundyne’s connection to the land, to which I will return, but it also underlines an association between the earth and knightly pursuits, especially those that end with violence. At the centre of these pursuits is a tension inherent in the chivalric ideal, which involves the irony that the violence that knights must enact to increase their renown also has the potential to threaten their chivalric standing and their lives, since they may be defeated.³⁰⁵

This association with the earth is retained even when it is not a knight that is interacting with the “ground”. For example, in the Castle of the Maidens episode,

³⁰⁵ Likewise, as I pointed out in my introduction, the reliance of knights upon the non-human strengthened them, but also their bodily vulnerability.

which will be further discussed at the end of this chapter, Ywain must fight two champions of the castle, and the lion is locked up in the said castle at the insistence of Ywain's opponents. His agitation at being separated from Ywain is communicated in part through references to earth: "With his tayl the erth he dang" (3167) and "the erth thare kest he up ful sone" (3223). When he later escapes to help Ywain, "he stirt unto that a glotowne / And to the erth he brayd him downe" (3247-3248); this echoes the vocabulary used to describe fights between knights, which also tends to highlight that one opponent brings the other "to the ground", as just discussed. In fact, here another link can be drawn between Ywain and the lion, as Ywain also repeatedly brings his opponents "to the erth". This is true in the aforementioned case of Salados, but also in other instances, such as when Ywain fights a giant; as he defeats this giant, "Bot fast unto the erth he [the giant] fell" (2484). Once again, then, we see how lion and man are alike, and, furthermore, how both interact with the earth through acts of violence. This interaction also provides a link to the arboreal non-human presences in *Ywain and Gawain*, which spread their roots beneath the surface of the text.

Becoming Arboreal: Metaphorical Trees in *Ywain and Gawain*

The hidden and extensive root systems of *Ywain and Gawain's* trees further characterise Ywain according to the non-human. The ways in which Ywain is entangled with these trees are also connected to violence, and this entanglement both strengthens and threatens his chivalric identity. When Ywain is fighting the giant, the earth is not the only non-human element that is employed to emphasise his victory: "Bot fast unto the erth he [the giant] fell / Als it had bene a hevy tre" (2484-2485). Here, Ywain has literally "felled" the giant, who becomes a tree

through metaphor. At this point, the arboreal is used figuratively in an imagined act of tree destruction to highlight Ywain's dominance over another non-human being, the giant. Defeating a giant, as Ywain does here, was a rite of passage for the knights of medieval romance; other examples include Arthur's defeat of the giant of Mont St. Michel and Tristan's combat with Irish giant Moraunt.³⁰⁶ Even within *Ywain and Gawain*, Ywain's defeat of the giant is used as evidence for his excellence; when Lunet is convincing Alundyne of the prowess of "the Knight with the Lion", she emphasises that he has "slane the grete geant" (3886). Ywain's victory over the giant therefore contributes to his knightly identification, here enacted through literal and metaphorical "felling" of the non-human in the form of a monster that "becomes" a tree.

However, there is another instance of arboreal metaphor that destabilises Ywain's identification in these terms, as he himself "becomes" a tree at a moment in which he is also vulnerable. When Ywain mortally wounds Salados and follows him back to his castle, he is trapped by the castle gate, which cleaves his horse in half – "than fel the portculis onone / bytwyx him and his hinder arsown, / Thorgh sadel and stede it smate al dwon" (680) – and when the other gate also falls (686), "bytwene tha yates now es he tane" (691). Here, the word "tane" (trapped), which I will discuss further in relation to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, can be seen to signal a moment of vulnerability for the chivalric hero of this text. First, it is important to highlight that Ywain's horse is violently killed in this scene. As previously discussed, horses were important markers of knightly identity, so this dismemberment of

³⁰⁶ For a through exploration of giants in medieval romance, including how they cross various boundaries akin to those I argue trees do, see Cohen's formative work on the subject: Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999). In *Le Morte Darthur*, Arthur's defeat of the giant can be found in 1:199-205; I will discuss Tristrem's interactions with giants in *Sir Tristrem* in Chapter Five.

Ywain's horse can be seen to threaten his identity, even if it is presented somewhat comically. At the same time, this violence towards Ywain's horse could also be seen as indicative of a dismissive, marginalising human attitude towards this animal, despite the horse's vital role in identifying Ywain. Similarly, that the gates also cut through Ywain's spurs – "his spores of his heles it schare!" (683) – draws attention to these instruments, which facilitate Ywain's control over the non-human.

On the other hand, this slicing of Ywain's spurs also signals that he is being "cut off" from his usual position of power. Indeed, this is a moment of trauma for Ywain, as he has lost his horse and is trapped in the entrance of a castle full of men loyal to the knight he has just mortally wounded. Additionally – and most importantly to Ywain – he is unable to finish his defeat of Salados: "mikel murnyng gan he ma / For the knyght was went him fra" (693-694). This moment of thwarted action and masculine vulnerability is made even more pronounced by the arrival of Lunet, as the only way that Ywain can escape it is by accepting help from a woman. Lunet – here described only as a "damysel" (698) – comes to Ywain and offers him aid through the medium of a ring, which she tells him will make him invisible and allow him to avoid Salados' men. In fact, she tells him "Als the bark hilles the tre, / Right so sal my ring do the" (741-742). When Ywain accepts her help, he can therefore be seen, in effect, to turn into a tree through this metaphor, becoming the tree within the "bark" of invisibility that Lunet offers him.³⁰⁷

Just as trees are often invisible in romance literature, despite the importance of tree-based settings, Ywain is rendered invisible, like a tree, by this ring. In accepting the ring and this arboreal association, Ywain momentarily removes himself from his position of human, masculine power, and is unable to act – violently

³⁰⁷ Schiff also mentions this metaphor ("Reterritorialized Ritual," 242).

or otherwise – to defend himself; he must rely on Lunet to spirit him away to hide in another part of the castle. Thus, he is denied the opportunity to consolidate and confirm his chivalric identity – the reason he followed Salados to his castle – and is instead linked to trees, as well as the feminine. As Findon argues, when he emerges from his hiding place to meet Alundyne, he leaves “the womb-like shelter of Lunet’s chamber, where he has been invisible (both literally and figuratively) to the rest of the hostile court” and is reborn.³⁰⁸ Though Findon does not discuss it, the arboreal is involved in this rebirth, here only through metaphor. However, later in the poem, trees participate in the loss and renewal of Ywain’s identity more materially, as I will now explore.

Arboreal Entanglements: Ywain and the Hawthorn Tree

The tree bark metaphor captures the essence of the arboreal presence in *Ywain and Gawain*, in that trees are linked with masculinity, and specifically masculine vulnerability. Just as the association between knights and the earth has a dark undercurrent of threat, violence, and death, this poem can be seen to align knights and trees in ways that highlight their vulnerability and open spaces for alternative sites of power. In particular, the presence and occasional absence of the hawthorn tree that stands over Alundyne’s well reflects how it also stands as a marker to the underlying eco-subtext of *Ywain and Gawain*. This tree witnesses several moments of heightened narrative tension, involving both combat between knights and Ywain’s internal combat with himself, and is central to the masculine perspective of the story. On the other hand, it is absent from the feminine discourses

³⁰⁸ Findon, “Female Friendship,” 89, n. 46.

of the text, rendering its connection with Ywain subversive even beyond the human/non-human entanglement that this connection implies.

The hawthorn tree is first referenced in the opening episode of the text, when Colgrevice is telling his story to Guinevere and the court. It is therefore embedded in several layers of storytelling, as it is first glimpsed when Colgrevice recounts that a “cherle” (268) tells him of it. It is useful first to take note of this so-called churl, as he interacts with the forest in ways that foreshadow how Ywain is defined by trees. Schiff argues that Chrétien’s equivalent “herdsman” is a derogatory representation of a peasant that is “exploiting forest resources”, who “introduces himself as uncannily tree-like” as he is sitting on a tree stump, waving his wooden club, and then standing on a tree trunk.³⁰⁹ Consequently, he asserts, “the unsettling herdsman, blurring the lines between human and animal – and now between animal and vegetable – becomes part of the romance’s central identity quest”.³¹⁰ Similarly, Robert Pogue Harrison argues that the herdsman “defines the knight’s own shadow – the shadow of his heroism, his prowess, his rage”.³¹¹ Colgrevice’s description of the churl begins with the assertion that he is “a lathly creature” (247) and goes on to compare him to various animals, including a horse (252), an ox (252), an elephant (257), a giant (258), a cat (260), a boar (262) and finally the more generic “beste” (274). The vegetative non-human is not excluded from this description, as Colgrevice relates “his browes war like litel buskes [bushes]” (261). He also repeatedly mentions that the churl holds a mace (249, 266), a weapon usually reserved for more uncivilised – often non-human – characters.³¹²

³⁰⁹ Schiff, “Reterritorialized Ritual,” 233 and 234; also see 232 and 235. He also discusses the herdsman in *Ywain and Gawain* (235-237).

³¹⁰ Schiff, “Reterritorialized Ritual,” 234.

³¹¹ Harrison, *Forests*, 66.

³¹² I will discuss wooden weapons such as this in more detail later in this chapter, and in the following chapters.

However, the churl identifies himself clearly as “a man” (279), despite Colgrevice’s exclamation to the contrary (280). He also situates himself above the animals of the forest: “I kepe thir bestes ilkan” (284), and later “I am maister of tham all” (312). In fact, a significant seventeen lines is allowed for the churl to tell Colgrevice how he achieves this mastery (295-312). Thus, this man is at once part of the forest and separate from it; he is related to the non-human, but exists above it. Likewise, he sets up the possibility that the knights in this text could occupy a similar liminal space of association with, and separation from, the forest setting that is so integral to their identification; he shadows their characterisation according to the non-human.

In this poem, the aforementioned hawthorn tree also shadows – or overshadows – chivalric experience. The churl says that “The well es under the fairest tre / That ever was in this cuntre” (325-326). This superlative is soon repeated when Colgrevice himself sees the tree:

By than I come whare I sold be -
 I saw the chapel and the tre.
 Thare I fand the fayrest thorne,
 That ever groued sen God was born
 So thik it was with leves grene,
 Might no rayn cum tharbytwene;
 And that grenes lastes ay,
 For no winter dere yt may (351-358)

Colgrevice’s assertion here that he finds the tree where he “sold be” reflects the common romance literature trope that certain knights are meant for certain quests; Gawain tells Arthur that “Dis melly mot be myne” (342) in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and Galahad is born to complete the grail quest when Lancelot cannot do so in *Le Morte Darthur*, for example.³¹³ This trope is inverted here, because

³¹³ Morton W. Bloomfield discusses the motivation – the “vocation” – of romance heroes in his classic essay on the subject; see Bloomfield, “Episodic Motivation,” 106-125.

Colgrevice is not the knight that completes this quest; instead, his story of his failure inspires Ywain to set out and succeed in it. Perhaps Colgrevice's assurance that he was where he "sold be" relates to this; his role in the quest could be to fail, and return to court with the story. In any case, the point I would like to draw attention to here is that where Colgrevice "sold be" is with the tree (351-352). While this may be a convenient rhyme, this emphasis on the tree, which is deepened by the alliteration in the following line (353), highlights how it is central to Colgrevice's experience of this quest.

Before I expand on this experience, however, it is worth focussing on how the tree itself is characterised, especially within this introductory description, which prefigures its multivalent semiotic power. First, this is an exemplary, superlative specimen; that it is the "fairest" tree is repeated by both the churl and Colgrevice (325, 353). Furthermore, this excellence is rooted in biblical history, as it is the fairest "sen God was born" (354), implying – though not explicitly – that this tree is the fairest since that upon which Christ was crucified.³¹⁴ This tree is green – a colour deeply associated with the non-human world – and its leaves are thick and strong, again rendering it a superior natural being.³¹⁵ However, it is also *supematural*, in the sense that it goes beyond nature: its leaves are so thick and it is so green that it repels rain, and winter cannot harm it. Thus, the tree's hyperbolic greenness suggests that it is at once a symbol of the natural world, and at the same time distinct from it, just as the churl both embodies and rises above the non-human.

Second, the species of this tree, which could be indicated by its designation as a "thorne", further characterises it as liminal. The word "thorne" indicates that the

³¹⁴ Hawthorns were also linked to Christ through their association with the Crown of Thorns (Findon, "Female Friendship," 89; Leach and Fried, *Dictionary of Folklore*, 1:485); I will further discuss the symbolic connotations of the hawthorn below.

³¹⁵ I will further discuss the connotations of the colour green in Chapter Three.

tree is a hawthorn tree, though this word could also just mean “tree”. Although *Yvain and Gawain* faithfully retains most details of this section of *Le Chevalier au Lion*, in the latter the tree is specifically and repeatedly a pine tree.³¹⁶ The decision to change the species of the tree, or else to simply remove its species altogether, is one that shows how the tree is both important and, in some ways, marginalised. While simply neglecting to identify the species of the tree – if that is what the use of “thorne” suggests – shows this process of marginalisation more obviously – as it removes part of the tree’s identity – changing the species of the tree can be seen as a more indirect act of marginalisation. That is, this change could show that the specifics of this arboreal identity were simply not important, and subject to the whims of the Middle English author.

On the other hand, this shift could also paradoxically signal the salience of the tree in terms of its symbolic potential. Pine trees have strongly phallic connotations, while the hawthorn could be seen as a more feminine symbol, as it bears fruit.³¹⁷ Furthermore, pine trees had religious connotations in the Middle Ages, stemming from the fact that they point towards heaven and are evergreen, symbolising God’s eternal love.³¹⁸ On the other hand, hawthorn trees were more linked to fairies and the supernatural, and were associated with fertility; they were often used for grafting in medieval gardening practices, or as a symbol of carnal love in literature.³¹⁹ Alternatively, as Findon points out, the religious iconography of

³¹⁶ For the introduction of the fairest pine tree in *Le Chevalier au Lion*, see Chrétien de Troyes, *Arthurian Romances*, trans. William W. Kibler (Penguin Books, 1991), 300.

³¹⁷ Here I am using Neumann’s distinction between more feminine fruit trees and those that “are phallic in the accentuation of their trunks” (Erich Neumann, *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype*, trans. Ralph Manheim (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1955), 48-49).

³¹⁸ Emanuel J. Mickel Jr., “A Note on the Pine Tree in the *Chanson de Roland*,” *Romanische Forschungen* 88 (1976): 65.

³¹⁹ Susan S. Eberly, “A Thorn among the Lilies: The Hawthorn in Medieval Love Allegory,” *Folklore* 100, no. 1 (1989): 41-52; also see Leach and Fried, *Dictionary of Folklore*, 1:485-486.

thorns could relate this hawthorn to Christ's crown of thorns.³²⁰ This reveals how the hawthorn is rooted in a nexus of symbolic meaning that branches out more horizontally than that of the pine, entangling various, even contradictory, meanings.³²¹ Though the pine has a similarly multivalent symbolic potential, the hawthorn tree is therefore more "rhizomatic", to use Deleuze and Guattari's words.³²² Viewing the tree's change of species in these terms is, in some ways, anthropocentric, as it relies on human-assigned meanings for these opposing French and English tree/s. However, it also highlights how the author of *Ywain and Gawain* did more than simply copy this text, and how the tree might have been considered significant enough to merit attention in this sense. Alongside this attention, however, is the fact that the reasons for this alteration – if there were any – are unclear; the story of the tree's speciation is inherently absent. Therefore, in either case, if the pine tree was transformed into a hawthorn tree for symbolic reasons – or, indeed, for any reason – or if the species of tree was not important enough to retain, this tree occupies a liminal space of centrality on the one hand and one of marginality on the other.³²³ Just as it belongs to the natural world, but also exists beyond it, this tree is both imperative and ambiguous.

Indeed, although the hawthorn tree remains connected to Colgrevice's experience of this *aventure*, it also occasionally slips from view. After he finds the

³²⁰ Findon, "Female Friendship," 89; also see Leach and Fried, *Dictionary of Folklore*, 1:485.

³²¹ For other "contradictory" associations of the hawthorn, see the entry for "hawthorn" in Simpson and Roud, *A Dictionary of English Folklore*, <https://www.oxfordreference-com.ezproxy.is.ed.ac.uk/view/10.1093/acref/9780198607663.001.0001/acref-9780198607663-e-472?rskey=BsHyck&result=1>.

³²² Though we should use them carefully and without their derogatory treatment of the "arborescent", as discussed in my introduction. The relevant definition of a "rhizome" is that it "has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*" (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 25).

³²³ It should be noted that hereafter I will continue to refer to this tree as "the hawthorn tree" in order to identify it more easily, even if its species is questionable; that it is a hawthorn is more likely than not, considering "tre" is always used as the generic word for a tree with no species and "thorne" is only ever used to refer to this particular tree.

tree and triggers the storm, which was so terrible that he could scarcely “stand on [his] fete” (376), the tree is implicated but not entirely salient in his relief when it abates. This relief – which is emphasised in the lines stating he was “wonder fayne / For best comforth of al thing / Es solace efter myslikeing” (386-388) – is mirrored by the joy of some birds: “so merily than gon thai sing / That al the wode bigan to ring” (393-394). This simultaneous human and non-human expression of happiness includes both the animal and the vegetative, as the wood becomes almost vocal in its echoing of the joyful birdsong. However, although the hawthorn tree is involved in this description, especially as these birds use it as a roost, its presence also literally disappears underneath theirs: the birds “lighted so thik opon that tre / That bogh ne lefe none might [Colgrevice] se” (391-392). Despite the earlier emphasis on the thickness and greenness of the tree’s leaves, it is then rendered invisible beneath a similarly prolific avian presence.

Subsequently, the tree’s individual presence remains “covered up” as Salados and Colgrevice embark on their combat with each other. In pouring the water on the stone and calling up the storm, Colgrevice recounts how he also inadvertently challenged the lord of the land, necessitating the type of violent homosocial interaction that was central to chivalric, masculine identities. As Schiff puts it, “when a knight visits the fountain lands, he triggers not just a storm, but a crisis in the local constitution of power”.³²⁴ This crisis is reflected in the fact that Colgrevice has done real damage to Salados’ holdings; he narrates how, when Salados arrived to confront him, he asked “Whi I did him swilk despite ... And done him wrang in his forest” (410-412). This emphasises the tree-based setting of the action, and also highlights the link between Salados and this setting, as the “wrang” he speaks of being done to “him” was in fact enacted upon his land; he is here

³²⁴ Schiff, “Reterritorialized Ritual,” 241.

referencing the storm and the damage it has caused.³²⁵ In *The Lady of the Well*, this damage is emphasised through a focus on the tree: after the storm there is “not a single leaf on it”.³²⁶ However, in *Ywain and Gawain*, any potential damage sustained by the tree is not mentioned. While the “grete destrucciowne” (416) Colgrevice has wrought on Salados is still connected to “his forest” (412), and, presumably, the trees within it, they are collateral and largely unmentioned victims of the actions of these men.

Nevertheless, the combat between Salados and Colgrevice contains hints at the ways that the non-human, and trees in particular, also have the power to witness and encode masculine vulnerability. In response to Colgrevice’s intrusive and destructive presence, Salados threatens him physically: “thou sal aby!” (413), he tells him, and soon defeats him in combat. In fact, Colgrevice says “he bare me sone bi strenkith / Out of my sadel” (421-422) and recounts how “for mate I lay down on the grownde” (427). That Colgrevice is brought to the ground here can be seen to foreshadow the fact that Ywain brings Salados to the ground in a more sinister way soon afterwards, and it also serves to threaten Colgrevice’s chivalric, masculine identity. This is further emphasised in the phallic symbolism that Colgrevice’s “schaft [spear] brac out in the felde” (420); as his “weapon” is destroyed, so is his opportunity to prove himself. That this weapon is wooden implicates the non-human in this defeat, as does the fact that Salados takes Colgrevice’s horse: “a worde to me wald he nocht say / Bot toke my stede and went his way” (429-430). Salados’ refusal to acknowledge Colgrevice here mirrors

³²⁵ Though Schiff suggests that the “wrang” in *Ywain and Gawain* is much more ambiguous than the more explicit crime committed against property in *le Chevalier au Lion* (“Reterritorialized Ritual,” 241).

³²⁶ This is from the *Oxford World’s Classic* edition: Sioned Davies, trans., *The Mabinogion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 120. In this text, Salados also chastises Kynon (Colgrevice) for the damage he has done to his land: “what harm have I done to you, that you should do what you have done to me and to my kingdom today” (120).

how he is removing this important marker of his identity. Thus, the non-human is implicated in these homosocial manoeuvrings, which both reinforce and threaten chivalric and masculine identities in turn.

When Colgrevice's inset narrative ends, the hawthorn tree once more returns to the foreground, and participates more actively in this underlying narrative of knightly vulnerability through its relationship with Ywain. When Colgrevice finishes his tale, Ywain asserts that he will soon "have venged [Colgrevice] of that ilk knyght" (464); just as Salados was bound to avenge the damage to his land, so too must Ywain avenge his cousin. While he is delayed in setting off on the quest – as Arthur wishes to take the court on this *aventure* – Ywain "thoght to be wele on hys way" (549) and daydreams of finding "the tre with brides thareopon" (561). These thoughts of the tree drive him to leave alone before Arthur is ready, and it is thereafter essential to Ywain's experience of his journey. For example, he thinks of it again while travelling: "than was he seker forto se / the wel and the fayre tre" (601-602). Additionally, although the tree slips from view when Ywain finds the well soon after, its presence is emphasised when he summons the storm, as the image of the birds alighting on the tree to celebrate the passing of this storm is repeated: "The fowles light opon the tre; / Thai sang ful fayre opon that thorn, / Right also thai had done byforn" (626-628). In this instance, there is not the same link made between the birds' happiness and Ywain's own relief, which can be seen to reflect how this image is overlaid on its previous incarnations, of what came "byforn"; Ywain knows, as Colgrevice did not, that the passing of the storm does not mean that the danger has passed. This reinforces another key difference to this description: although the birds land "also thai had done byforn" (628), the image of arboreal disappearance – of the birds completely covering the tree – is not repeated.

Though this alone is not enough to suggest that Ywain's identity is more linked to the hawthorn tree, his repeated encounters with it throughout the text collectively do so. Notably, this tree is at the centre of Ywain's experience of another two, later episodes, both of which connect it to Ywain's fraught relationship with his wife. After his repeated internal imaginings of the hawthorn tree on his journey to the chapel, and its inclusion in his experience of the storm's aftermath, this tree silently witnesses his defeat of Salados.³²⁷ Though this allows him to grow his chivalric "flower" from the ground within which Salados' body lies, as previously discussed, it does so through the figure of Alundyne and through Ywain's replacement of Salados as her husband and protector. This allows him to occupy a position of power outwith his characterisation as a knight, as he also becomes both husband and lord.³²⁸ However, the side of Ywain's identity that remains a knight errant also threatens and is threatened by his new position, as Gawain's warnings against losing his renown result in Ywain's betrayal of his promise to his wife, who banishes him. This banishment precipitates a period of madness on Ywain's part, but also – once his madness is cured – necessitates that he wander the forest for *aventure*, as he cannot yet return to Alundyne. Tree-based settings are integral to both his period of madness, which will be addressed in more depth at the end of this chapter, and to his period of exile.

It is during this exile that the hawthorn tree appears twice more. First, it participates in an episode in which Ywain is reminded of Alundyne when he finds the chapel in his travels; it triggers an extreme physical and mental distress in him.

³²⁷ Interestingly, this time it is Salados that is connected to the avian presence, as Colgreance was: he approaches Ywain "Als fast so the fowl in flyght" (630).

³²⁸ Again, see Cohen's discussion of this in relation to *Le Chevalier au Lion* (*Medieval Identity Machines*, 62).

When he comes upon the well and tree that introduced him to his wife, he swoons and almost grievously injures himself:

Syr Ywayne come unto the well.
 He saw the chapel and the thorne
 And said allas that he was born;
 And when he loked on the stane,
 He fel in swowing sone onane.
 Als he fel his swerde out shoke:
 The pomel into the erth toke,
 And the poynt toke until his throte
 Wel nere he made a sari note!
 Thorgh his armurs sone it smate,
 A litel intil hys hals it bate (2060-2070)

The earth is therefore implicated in his resulting injuries, which are serious enough that “wen the lyon saw his blude, ... He wend wele, so God me rede, / That his mayster had bene ded” (2071-2076); this is the instance of injury that causes the lion to attempt suicide, as discussed previously. These unlikely physical injuries are also mirrored by an internal anguish that Ywain voices subsequently; when he sees that the lion was ready to commit suicide for him, he says “Than sold I, sertes, by more right / Sla my self for swilk a wyght / That I have for my foly lorn” (2099-2101). His loss of Alundyne has resulted in physical and mental turmoil, such that he believes “My gude dayes er now al gane, / My joy es done now al bidene, / I am noght worthi to be sene” (2094-2096).

It is this last sentiment that is especially relevant to the arboreal presence in this scene, as Ywain’s aversion to being “seen” is witnessed by the hawthorn, which is repeatedly present here, but slips from view at other points in the poem. Although here the “stane” directly triggers Ywain’s swoon, the existence of the tree is also vital. Indeed, its presence alongside the basin is repeated, this time in Ywain’s own voice: after he recovers from his swoon, he laments “Allas for dole how I may dwell / To se this chapel and this well, / Hir faire thorn, hir riche stane?” (2091-2093). The

use of the possessive “hir” here highlights what Ywain has lost in forsaking his wife; though Salados confronts Colgrevice over the damage done to “his forest” (412), here the hawthorn and the stone now belong to Alundyne, not Ywain.³²⁹ That this threatens Ywain’s identity is paralleled in the threat to his life, encoded in both his physical and mental anguish in this scene; he almost kills himself by accident, and then with more intent, though Lunet prevents him from emulating the lion’s suicide attempt. The ways that Ywain is “seen” as a knight, husband, and lord therefore also carry with them the potential for dissolution. The tree, which witnesses Ywain’s defeat of Salados, also casts its shadow over his subsequent loss and torment.

In the second episode in which the tree reappears, it once again marks the intersection of the vulnerability and strength that are both encoded within Ywain’s characterisation. At the end of the poem, Ywain interacts with the well for a final time, calling up the storm (3837-3846) and lending an urgency to Lunet’s persuasion of Alundyne to accept “the Knight with the Lion” as her protector (3855-3920). The tree is not mentioned when Ywain calls the storm, but the “great forest” it inhabits is once again threatened by the tempest: “Him thocht als al the grete forest / And al that was about the well / Sold have sonken into hell” (3844-3846). This sentiment is repeated when the perspective shifts from Ywain to Alundyne:

The lady was in mekyl dout,
 For al the kastel walles about
 Quke so fast that men might think
 That al into the erth sold synk.
 Thai trembled fast, both boure and hall,
 Als thai unto the grund sold fall (3847-3852)

The repeated emphasis on the earth and the ground here, within the setting of the castle beneath which Salados is buried, once again highlights the danger of

³²⁹ I will return to Alundyne’s ownership of the tree and its surroundings shortly.

masculine activity; Ywain first risks the tree-based setting of the forest he is in, and this threat that is then extended to Alundyne's dwelling. Here, then, the violence of the storm not only prefigures the violence enacted by knights upon other knights, as it did when it heralded the combat between Colgrevice and Salados, and then Ywain and Salados; it also here threatens Alundyne.

Consequently, when the tree reappears as Lunet goes to fetch "the Knight with the Lion" on Alundyne's orders – "Sir Ywain sat under the thorn" (3927) when she finds him – it once again marks a moment of triumph for Ywain, though not in a conventionally chivalric way. Just as the tree initially witnessed his defeat of Salados, an act which "won" him Alundyne, it here participates in the moment that allows him to reconcile with her. Notably, however, he is permitted to do this only through Lunet's intervention, just like when he had to rely on her to hide him from Salados' men at the start of the poem; then, her arboreal metaphor turned him into an invisible, tree-like figure. Similarly, the arboreal comes to the foreground here, and the well, chapel, and stone are not mentioned; the "thorn" is the only marker of Ywain's location at this point. While it does not quite identify Ywain, as Lancelot was identified by the apple tree in *Le Morte Darthur*, it does mark that Ywain is more entangled than ever with the non-human: immediately after the thorn is mentioned, "And his lyoun lay him byforn. / Sho knew him wele by his lioun" (3928-3929). The intersection of man, lion, and tree here flags the end of a narrative trajectory that has allowed Ywain to construct his identity in a new way, which I will explore more fully in the following section. Ywain triumphantly embraces both the lion and the feminine to reinstate himself into his position of power alongside Alundyne, as witnessed by the hawthorn tree.

Arboreal Absence: The Women and the Well

At this point, then, I will turn to a narrative that has so far been largely absent from this chapter: that of the poem's feminine presences. Lunet and Alundyne, as well as a nameless maiden that cures Ywain's madness, are integral to this poem, and occupy an unusual position of authority. Alundyne exerts a measure of control over the lands she holds, even if she must, for the most part, rely on a man to enact that control. Lunet slips in and out of the narrative with apparent ease, appearing and reappearing unexpectedly to influence both people and events. In this way, both women subtly subvert the patriarchal structures that they are working within. Moreover, this subversion is furthered by their relationship with each other; as Findon puts it, "[t]he friendship between Lunet and Alundyne emerges as the key to a type of female discourse that subtly challenges the chivalric male values of the romance text".³³⁰ In this section, I will explore how this discourse interacts, or does not interact, with the text's trees to ground my previous arguments about Ywain's arboreally-associated identity.

First and foremost, the hawthorn tree is entirely absent from Lunet and Alundyne's discourse with each other. Findon points out the importance of two conversations between Lunet and Alundyne, one after Ywain has killed Salados, in which Lunet convinces Alundyne to marry Ywain in his place (931-1096), and one at the end of the poem, in which Lunet convinces Alundyne to accept "the Knight with the Lion" as her protector (3855-3922); she argues that these scenes "constitute the

³³⁰ Findon, "Female Friendship," 73. Findon also convincingly argues that "Although a number of feminist critics have discussed the corresponding Laudine and Lunete of *Yvain*, the friendship between the aristocratic lady and her maidservant is both more important and more subtly nuanced in *Yvain and Gawain* than in the French romance" (74); she also provides a good overview of these previous approaches to these female characters (74, n. 7).

core of the feminine subtext of this tale”, which reveal “the destabilizing force of women’s speech”.³³¹ In these scenes, Lunet and Alundyne repeatedly lament that Alundyne now has no one to protect her land; in the former, for example, Alundyne agonises over the fact that “sho had na knight, / Forto seke hir land thorghout, / To kepe Arthur and hys rowt” (1022-1024). Although this plays into patriarchal discourses that painted women as weaker and inferior – Alundyne needs a man to defend her – the land also emphatically and repeatedly belongs to Alundyne (see 949 and 958, for example), and the responsibility for ensuring that it is protected falls to her.

However, the tree is excluded from Lunet and Alundyne’s considerations. When Lunet advises Alundyne to call her advisers and “ask tham wha sal yow defend / Yowre well, yowre land, kastel and towre” (1081), she makes no mention of the tree, even though the text focusses on it repeatedly during its description of the surroundings of the well up until this point of feminine discourse. While she mentions the more phallic “kastel and towre,” it is Alundyne’s more yonic “well” that most concerns her, at the expense of the tree, which is more tied to the masculine – and, specifically, to Ywain.³³² The tree is also notably absent during Lunet’s manoeuvrings to have Alundyne accept “the Knight with the Lion” at the end of the poem, as just discussed. In a scene that mirrors this earlier one, Lunet’s primary

³³¹ Findon, “Female Friendship,” 80; also see 81-84.

³³² Findon also argues that the well is a “potent emblem of Alundyne herself”, though it is in the context of her exploration of both the well and the hawthorn tree as religious and supernatural symbols that are related to the feminine (“Female Friendship,” 88; also see 89); I will return to this below. George L. Hamilton explores some other possible associations of the spring in *Le Chevalier au Lion*, in “Storm-Making Springs: Rings of Invisibility and Protection – Studies on the Sources of the *Yvain* of Chrétien de Troies,” *Romantic Review* 2, no. 4 (1911): 355-375; more recently, Schiff has also done so (“Reterritorialized Ritual,” 240-241) – he relevantly classifies the fountain space as a “nature-culture fusion” (241) that features both natural and man-made elements.

concern is, once again, Alundyne's "well", and the tree is not mentioned: "Ful wele I wate ye have no knight / That dar wende to yowre wel and fight" (3859-3860).

While this alone is not enough to suggest that the hawthorn is indelibly linked to the masculine, nor that its absence in these discourses reflects a desire on the part of these women to marginalise that masculine presence, this treatment of the hawthorn tree does occur at a turning point of feminine authority. While Alundyne continues to act within the patriarchal structures that were so central to medieval society – for example, when she decides to marry the knight who killed her husband, despite initially hating him, as she cannot protect her property alone – she does exhibit agency in the ways she acts within these structures. This is first indicated by the fact that both Lunet and Alundyne are given large sections of direct speech at this point in the text. For example, in the one hundred and eighty-six lines where Alundyne and Lunet negotiate and plan for Alundyne's wedding (932-1118), Lunet speaks for eighty-four lines, and Alundyne speaks for forty-seven. Even when Ywain re-enters the proceedings, it is Lunet that acts upon him: "by the hand sho toke the knight / And led him unto the chamber right" (1125-1126). In the subsequent scene, Lunet and Alundyne speak a total of thirty lines, to Ywain's thirteen, and Alundyne directs the action, ordering Ywain to "syt down" (1159) and securing his oath: "sho said, 'Dar thou wele undertake / In *my* land pese forto make" (1169-1170; my emphasis). Alundyne's ownership of the land is therefore extended to a powerful – if fleeting – control over Ywain; although she cannot keep Ywain with her once Arthur's court visits, here she manoeuvres him as she wishes.

In these manoeuvrings, Alundyne could be seen to exhibit a type of mimesis, as it is defined according to Irigaray. As mentioned briefly in my introduction, Irigaray explores the notion that patriarchal structures traditionally provide no space for feminine power, as "*the feminine occurs only within models and laws devised by*

male subjects”, meaning that “there are not really two sexes, but only one.”³³³ In response to this, Irigaray suggests that women can adopt a strategy of mimesis, or mimicry, through which they can “assume the feminine role deliberately” in order to “convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it”.³³⁴ Thus, Alundyne’s activity here can be seen to employ mimicry, as she actively uses Ywain as a tool to successfully inhabit the patriarchal world she lives in.³³⁵ In the last chapter, I discussed how Morgan le Fay and the queens appropriate spears as wooden tools of power that replace trees and suggest control over both the non-human and the masculine. Likewise, Alundyne’s temporary control over the discourse associated with the hawthorn encodes tree absence with subversive feminine power.

This subtext of alternative power even momentarily intrudes into the main masculine narrative, in relation to the tree; after Alundyne and Lunet overlook the hawthorn, it continues to slip in and out of sight. We have seen that the tree is a central aspect of the male experience of the well, as it is important in the churl’s description as related by Colgrevice (325), in Colgrevice’s own experience (353-358), and especially in Ywain’s initial encounter with the well; he imagines finding the tree twice (561 and 602), and then does so (626). However, after Lunet and Alundyne fail to reference the tree in their discourse, it is also absent when Arthur’s court travel to the well, even though the narrative again moves to a more masculine focus after Arthur pours water on the stone (1291). In the following scene, which details Ywain’s comical defeat of Sir Kay – and the fact that Ywain brings Kay to the ground, as previously discussed – the tree is a silent, unseen witness. Though it

³³³ Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, 86; emphasis in original.

³³⁴ Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, 76.

³³⁵ This can be viewed in terms of Jeanne de Montbaston’s nun, who similarly “picks” penises from a penis tree to actively inhabit a masculine world, as discussed in my introduction.

reappears once more when Ywain re-encounters the chapel again, also as previously discussed, even then it is a slippery image; it is absent when Ywain pours water on the stone for the last time, for example, but present when Lunet comes to fetch him. I suggest, then, that when Lunet and Alundyne overlook the masculine-coded hawthorn, they further imbue it with the kind of liminal power that opens up its potential as a signifier. As Lunet's ring has an uncanny power to hide Ywain "Als the bark hilles the tre" (741), Alundyne and Lunet "hide" the tree to exert this power alongside it.

Once again, the presence and absence of the tree at certain points could simply be a symptom of the way that *Ywain and Gawain* has been abbreviated, and reading the hawthorn in this way could be seen to place undue emphasis on it, or else – in ecocritical terms – to view it through a restrictive human framework. Nevertheless, I suggest that the "absent" narrative of this tree, however it came about, leaves us with a portrayal of arboreal power that is entangled with the human, despite its occasional invisibility, and, further, that this enmeshment of human and non-human transcends normative hierarchies of power. Just as the story of the spindles can be read as indicative of an underlying eco-subtext threaded through the feminine subtext of *Le Morte Darthur*, this tree – which is so connected to Ywain's masculine experience throughout the text – elides human/non-human and masculine/feminine boundaries, and, in doing so, comes to represent a new kind of identity formation.

This new identity is exemplified through the figure of Ywain, who learns to incorporate the non-human – most obviously in the figure of the lion – and must also embrace Alundyne and Lunet's role in shaping him as a man. At the very end of the poem,

Thus the Knyght with the Liown
 Es turned now to syr Ywayn
 And has his lordship al ogayn,
 And so sir Ywain and his wive
 In joy and blis thai led thaire live
 So did Lunet and the liown
 Until that ded haves dreven tham down (4020-4026)

Although ostensibly this counteracts Ywain's identification according to the non-human – he is no longer the “Knight with the Lion” – the almost parenthetical insertion of the fates of Lunet and the lion suggest that these animal and feminine presences continue to underpin Ywain's experiences, even if they now do so in the background.³³⁶ Like the trees of the text, and the earth – to which, these lines remind us, Ywain, Alundyne, Lunet, and the lion all eventually return in death – these women and the lion are marginal but integral participants in the construction of Ywain's identity. His “chivalric assemblage”, like Galahad's, necessarily includes non-human and feminine elements that could, I argue, also incorporate the arboreal, and especially the slippery hawthorn tree.

Indeed, the entanglement of these elements is encoded within the hawthorn tree itself. The symbolic potential of this tree has been discussed previously; it has a rhizomatic and multivalent semiotic function, and stands at an intersection of religious and folkloric associations that simultaneously link it to fairies, love, fertility, the feminine, and Christ. Moreover, Findon convincingly argues that its placement beside the well connects it to the feminine and baptismal properties of this spring; she argues that “each encounter with Alundyne or her spring re-enacts another death and rebirth on a number of symbolic levels”.³³⁷ If we consider that this process of death and rebirth facilitates the construction of a masculine identity that also

³³⁶ Findon also discusses these final lines as emphasising how “indispensable” Lunet is alongside the “devoted” lion, though she does not address the human/non-human entanglement this implies (“Female Friendship,” 79).

³³⁷ Findon, “Female Friendship,” 89; also see 88.

incorporates the feminine and the non-human, as embodied by Ywain, even more boundaries are blurred by the hawthorn. This is a tree that is associated with the masculine, that repeatedly witnesses masculine strength and masculine vulnerability, and yet also embodies how identities can be, to use Cohen's words again, "unstable, contingent, hybrid, discontinuous".³³⁸ The hawthorn, like Ywain, is a figure with both masculine and feminine associations, which is both human and non-human; this tree is inscribed with various human meanings, but also holds power beyond them, and slips in and out of view.

Conclusion: "Wodeness" and Woodenness

To conclude this chapter, I will consider another way that the arboreal is integral to Ywain's experiences, alongside a return to the power of "things", and especially wooden things, in this narrative. The trees that Ywain interacts with in his period of madness, as well as those that witness the supernatural and feminine intervention that heals this madness, stand as markers to the ways that his identity changes throughout this text to incorporate both the non-human and the feminine. Another episode later in the poem reveals how wooden objects stand in opposition to these living trees, but can also be seen to participate in the narrative as markers of identity that highlight once again how the arboreal can hold power, even if only in the background.

The trees that form the setting of Ywain's madness stand in opposition to the courtly setting in which his madness is triggered, and therefore occupy a liminal and ambiguous space. Just as Ywain remembers that he made a promise to Alundyne to

³³⁸ Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines*, 7.

return from Arthur's court after a year – "And right in this than toke he kepe" (1590) – a damsel rides into Arthur's court, apparently sent by Alundyne to draw attention to this betrayal – "He es ateyned for trayture, / A fals and lither losenjoure; / He has bytrayed my lady" (1601-1603), she says – and to take back the ring that Alundyne gave him (1630). Although this damsel is probably Lunet, here unnamed, her relationship to Alundyne and her actions once she leaves the court are another "absent" narrative of the text; after she leaves, "Ne no man wist where sho bycome" (1636).³³⁹ The damsel's actions catalyse a great change in Ywain, which causes him to "disappear" in a similar way:

An evyl toke him als he stode;
 For wa he wex al wilde and wode.
 Unto the wod the way he nome;
 No man wist where he bycome.
 About he welk in the forest,
 Als it wore a wilde beste;
 His men on ilka syde has soght
 Fer and nere and findes him noght (1649-1656)

That Ywain's men cannot find him reflects how he has abandoned his courtly, chivalric identity, and consequently slips from view, or at least from *their* view. The symbolic loss of his wife's favour drives Ywain into the tree-based settings of the wood and forest, and in doing so he becomes as invisible as the trees that occupy these spaces in the background of romance, but are similarly difficult to find. Indeed, Ywain is also explicitly rooted to trees during his period of "invisibility"; not only is he likened to a "wilde beste", but it is also said that "Thare he lifed a grete sesowne / With rotes and raw venysowne" (1667-1668). He ingests the roots of trees – as well as the raw flesh of the wild beasts – and thus becomes closer and closer to the non-human, both animal and arboreal.

³³⁹ This is in sharp contrast to the insight we are given into Lunet and Alundyne's thoughts and actions both before and after this point.

Moreover, the pun on “wode” (mad) and “wod” (wood) in lines 1650-1651 emphasises how madness in medieval romance is often connected to tree-based settings.³⁴⁰ This reveals a potentially reductive opposition between the uncivilised life Ywain leads while mad, on the one hand, and the culture of court life, on the other; the nature/culture binary here plays out in the disturbing descriptions of Ywain drinking blood (1669) and assaulting a man to steal his bow and arrows (1660-1663). At the same time, Ywain’s complete loss of his courtly identity can also be viewed as full of a more liberating potential. In the absence of the conflicting pressures of knighthood and lordship that pull him in different directions in the first part of the text, Ywain is able to foster a new identity in which there is space for the non-human. It is only after this period of madness that Ywain meets the lion, and is set on a trajectory towards his happy ending, which he shares with Alundyne, Lunet, and the lion, as previously mentioned.

Another tree acts as a marker for the beginning of Ywain’s identification in these terms. After he has spent “ful fele yere” (1707) in his state of madness, “Als Ywaine sleped under a tre, / By him come thare rideand thre / A lady, taw bourewomen alswa” (1709-1711). This lady recognises Ywain by a previously-mentioned scar on his face – “For in hys face sho saw a wonde” (1720) – supposedly a remnant of his previous chivalric life, with its accompanying violence and inherent tensions. Although she laments the effect that his wodeness has had on him – “It is grete sorow that he sold be / So ugly now opon to se” (1729-1730) – this lady decides to try to heal him, as he is “the best knyght that on grund mai ga”

³⁴⁰ Saunders discusses this in relation to *Sir Orfeo* (*The Forest of Medieval Romance*, 137), which I will address in Chapter Four. Schiff links the settings of Yvain’s madness to his sovereignty as lord, which he suggests is challenged by the equivalent episode in *Le Chevalier au Lion* (“Reterritorialized Ritual,” 237-240). More generally, madness in romance is explored by scholars such as Doob in *Nebuchadnezzar’s Children*, as referenced in my introduction.

(1735), again referencing the earth in relation to knighthood. The lady then sends one of her maidens back to Ywain with a magic potion given to her by “Morgan the wise” (1753); this maiden, after “hir hors until a tre sho band” (1776), heals Ywain beneath his own tree, though it is not mentioned again. Here again, however, trees are repeatedly present as witnesses to supernatural, feminine power, just as Morgan herself enacts this power beneath the apple tree, and Percival’s sister is associated with the uncanny tree that produces the spindles and sheath. This case is more akin to the latter, as this supernatural intervention cures Ywain of his madness and begins the process of his new, more inclusive identification, which incorporates an association with the arboreal alongside the animal and the feminine, as foreshadowed by his time acting as a “wilde beste” (1654) among trees, and the fact that he is healed by a woman beneath one.³⁴¹

Finally, then, I will consider once more how trees are “things” that come to participate in the narratives of romance, alongside the wooden objects that they produce, in the so-called Castle of the Maidens episode, which highlights the non-human aspects of Ywain’s characterisation. As Ywain and his lion are travelling, they come across a castle in which custom dictates that any visitor must fight two champions. These champions fight with “clubbes” (3200), not swords, and wood features heavily in their arms: “a mikel rownd talvace / And a klub ful grete and lang, / Thik fret with mani a thwang” (3158-3160). As with the churl that directs Colgrevice and Ywain to the well beneath the tree, the woodenness of these weapons can be seen to flag the less-than-chivalric nature of these opponents. Despite this, Ywain cannot defeat these champions, and only succeeds with help from the lion; this is the fight for which the lion was locked away, and only his

³⁴¹ Again, Galahad is a relevant comparison, as he must incorporate the feminine and non-human elements of the sheath and sword to complete the grail quest.

escape allows for these champions to be brought “to the erth” (3248). These wooden weapons are effective against Ywain, until the new non-human aspect of his own identity is allowed to join him, and facilitate his defeat of the champions.

Wood is also present elsewhere in this castle; the king that inhabits it is hiding a group of women that he is keeping prisoner behind wooden bars. Before meeting the champions, Ywain finds “a proper place ... enclosed about with a palis” (2963-2964), in which many maidens were being forced to work “silk and gold wire” (2967), and this “palis” is enclosed with wooden stakes: “he loked in bitwix the trese / And many maidens thare he sese” (2965-2966). The exploitative element here – that these women are being held against their will and made to work cloth – is juxtaposed with human use of the non-human; the use of the word “trese” to mean man-made wooden stakes reflects how trees are often implicated in anthropocentric discourses that view them according to their productivity, in this case in terms of their wood. That the king enacting these exploitations is introduced as sitting in an orchard, “under a tre” (3084), also highlights the power disparities at work here. While the maidens are enclosed within dead trees, the king sits beneath a living one, which is nevertheless enclosed within his orchard. However, when the lion allows Ywain to defeat the king’s champions, Ywain refuses his “prize” – the king’s daughter’s hand in marriage – and instead insists that “al thir prisons may pas fre” (3300). Ywain therefore liberates these women, who he encountered by looking through a wooden structure.

While his defeat of the champions in the Castle of the Maidens episode allows Ywain to fulfil norms of chivalric, masculine power, it also highlights the non-human aspects of his identity. Ywain’s victory in this episode allows him to rescue women and demonstrate his prowess, as is emphasised by the fact that he leaves the castle “With ful faire processiwne” (3348); the chivalric norms of undertaking

combat to achieve renown are fulfilled here. This is the case, even though, as Schiff points out, Ywain has “broken the law”, which dictated that he must defeat the champions alone; this emphasises how “teaming up with the feral predator, Ywain repeatedly goes against chivalric codes of honourable conduct”.³⁴² Though Schiff frames this in a negative sense, Ywain’s entanglement with the lion, and the fact that he does not return to a normative chivalric identity, allows him not only to rescue the maidens in this episode, but also live happily alongside the feminine and the non-human. In Harrison’s words, the lion “is a sign that Yvain’s metamorphosis in the forest has turned him into a *redeemed* version of the wild man who first showed him his way through the forest at the outset of his errantry”.³⁴³ Indeed, in *Ywain and Gawain*, when the lion is absent during the conflict between the eponymous knights – during which he stays “On Ywain’s bed” (3455) – this combat nearly ends in tragedy; when the lion is absent, disaster looms.³⁴⁴ The lion’s presence, and the more hybrid and balanced identity that Ywain consequently constructs, is productive, even if it operates beyond normative chivalric structures.

In these terms, the women that first precipitated a deconstruction of Ywain’s identification according to courtly, chivalric values – causing his madness – as well as the women and the animal that then allowed for his character to be reconstructed in a more inclusive way, have a certain power of their own. Though Harrison argues that Yvain’s experiences in *Le Chevalier au Lion* enable him “to realign his prowess and direct it against the inimical forces that threaten to pervert the social order”, Yvain’s reidentification at the same time subverts the usual “social order” of romance.³⁴⁵ Even if the feminine and non-human power in this text operates in

³⁴² Schiff, “Reterritorialized Ritual,” 244; also see 245.

³⁴³ Harrison, *Forests*, 68.

³⁴⁴ Findon discusses the almost-disastrous consequences of this conflict (“Female Friendship,” 73).

³⁴⁵ Harrison, *Forests*, 68.

relation to a male hero who ultimately overwrites these alternative authorities with his own narrative, once again this does not completely undermine the ambiguous and slippery influence of those authorities; Ywain is dependent on both women and his lion. This reliance can also be viewed through the lens of the trees that Ywain must interact with to construct his identity, including those largely invisible trees that make up the forests and woods he wanders through while mad and while seeking *aventure*, and the more salient hawthorn tree that witnesses key moments of both strength and vulnerability in his narrative. In this way, the arboreal features in the non-human aspects of Ywain's character; the trees that witness his "wodeness" prefigure his "woodenness", in the sense that he becomes tree-like throughout the narrative: through Lunet's ring metaphor, through his association with the hawthorn tree, and through the trees he interacts with while mad and while being cured of his madness.³⁴⁶ His liberation of the women in the Castle of the Maidens, whom Ywain views through "trese" that have been cut down, cements the ways in which trees in this text become things that participate in the narrative on multiple levels, and especially how they operate as markers of Ywain's hybrid identity.

As in *Le Morte Darthur*, then, the abbreviation of a longer French antecedent into *Ywain and Gawain* creates "absent" narratives that parallel how narratives of the non-human are largely absent from both. However, once again this occasional absence limits neither the text, nor its eco-subtext. As this chapter has demonstrated, *Ywain and Gawain* is a complex and worthwhile poem in its own right, and the non-human presence within it holds a marginal and ambiguous power that underlies the main narrative. Occasionally, the eco-subtext erupts through the "ground" of this narrative to highlight certain vulnerabilities or flag alternative

³⁴⁶ A similar movement from wodeness to woodenness is seen in *Sir Orfeo*, as I will address in Chapter Four.

discourses of power, and trees grow through human, masculine presences throughout the text. Even when trees slip from view, or seem to be restricted within anthropocentric structures, this entanglement of human and non-human allows them to retain their uncanny power to witness and influence chivalric identities, though they do so below the surface.

Chapter Three: Arboreal Knots in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, human and non-human knot together in a relationship that incorporates both growth and dissolution.³⁴⁷ Gawain's cyclical journey from Arthur's court to Hautdesert, from Hautdesert to the Green Chapel, and from the Green Chapel back to Camelot, is one of fear and loss. Gawain faces consistent difficulties in navigating the conflicting and untenable pressures of the chivalric ideal and this culminates in his failure at the Green Chapel, which horrifies and shames him. However, other voices – including that of the Green Knight and those that make up Arthur's court – insist that Gawain remains an honourable and heroic paragon of chivalry. Drawing attention to these seemingly contradictory perspectives – failure on the one hand, and triumph on the other – allows for an exploration of how *SGGK* depicts chivalric fallibility and human imperfection.

In this chapter, I will provide a new reading of these aspects of this complex poem by exploring how trees are entangled with its “knots” of power. Once again, the hero of this text is connected intimately with its trees, such that the arboreal comes to define and problematise masculine, chivalric identity. Gawain's vulnerability, which is figured by tree imagery, is exploited by the Green Knight, who also incorporates both human and non-human elements. This vulnerability is at the heart of the unsettling undercurrent of the text, which cannot be completely dispelled by its ostensibly happy ending and occasional moments of comedy. At the same time, the Green Knight creates a space of liminal and hybrid potential that extends

³⁴⁷ I will henceforth refer to this poem as *SGGK*. All references will be to the following edition: J.R.R. Tolkien and E.V. Gordon, eds., *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, 2nd ed, revised by Norman Davis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967).

to Gawain and is supported by the largely absent narrative of Morgan le Fay.

Through a focus on *SGGK*'s trees, both real and imagined, Gawain's "failure" can be refigured into a productive site of identity formation that extends beyond normative chivalric parameters and embraces the non-human.

SGGK is commonly considered to be one of the greatest works in Middle English, and its scholarly interpretations are as complex and varied as the poem itself. It survives in only one manuscript, British Library MS Cotton Nero A.x., which dates from around 1400 and features three other texts, commonly thought to have been composed by one author, the so-called *Gawain*-poet.³⁴⁸ Although this singular extant manuscript could imply a limited medieval audience, the existence of a later, shorter adaptation of the work, *The Greene Knight*, probably composed around 1500, could suggest a wider readership than *SGGK*'s immediate manuscript context indicates.³⁴⁹ Regardless, this poem is a work of great artistry, not to mention ambiguity, that has interested countless modern scholars. As Robert J. Blanch puts it, "exploring the dark forests of medieval literary conventions, sources, and background, scholars have hunted for *the* theme and meaning of *Sir Gawain*".³⁵⁰ However, reducing this multivalent poem to one reading has proven difficult, and, in any case, ignores "the essential complexity of the poem".³⁵¹ Instead, scholars have increasingly embraced *SGGK*'s "knottiness".

This "knottiness" is best introduced through a consideration of one of its central images: the pentangle that Gawain carries on his shield (626-654). This

³⁴⁸ Helen Cooper, Introduction to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, trans. Keith Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), x; Scala, *Absent Narratives*, 38. Most scholars agree that the poem was probably composed in the 1370s or 1380s.

³⁴⁹ Thomas Hahn, Introduction to "The Greene Knight" in *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances*, ed. Thomas Hahn (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995), 1.

³⁵⁰ Robert J. Blanch, "Games Poets Play: The Ambiguous Use of Colour Symbolism in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 20 (1976): 64. Emphasis in original.

³⁵¹ Blanch, "Games Poets Play," 64.

pentangle is referred to as the “endeles knot” (630) of chivalry, consisting of “fyue poyntez, / And vche lyne vmbelappez [interlaces] and loukez in oper” (627-628); these five points represent five elements of chivalry, including generosity, fellowship, piety, compassion, and courtesy (652-654). Alongside these elements, the five points also symbolise the five senses (640), a knight’s five fingers (641), and Christ’s five wounds (642-643). These components come together to collectively assign the pentangle as “In bytoknyng of trawþe” (626). *Trawþe*, in turn, is a complex Middle English word that means more than simply “truth”, but also “fidelity”, “honour, integrity”, “loyalty”, and “goodness”.³⁵² The overlapping meanings and associations of the pentangle exist in harmony together, where they are

fetled [fixed] on þis kny3t [Gawain]
 And vchone halched in oper, þat non ende hade,
 And fyched [fixed] vpon fyue poyntez, þat fayld neuer
 Ne samned neuer in no syde, ne sundred [separated] nouþer (656-659)

Gawain is therefore entangled with the pentangle, which form a flawless and interminable representation of the chivalric ideal.

However, Gawain’s attempts to keep the elements of the pentangle in balance are consistently thwarted throughout the poem, and the concept of *trawþe* is the ultimate source of conflict that drives the narrative. First, Gawain is bound by *trawþe* to find the Green Chapel and receive a blow from the Green Knight, because of the so-called Beheading Game; Gawain cuts off the Green Knight’s head after he agrees to submit to a reciprocal blow, mistakenly assuming that this beheading would result in the Green Knight’s death and therefore release him from the agreement. Second, during his stay in Castle Hautdesert, Gawain is obliged to share anything he receives with the lord of the castle, Bertilak, who is the Green

³⁵² See the *MED* entry for “trawþe” at https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED47016/track?counter=2&search_id=1296250.

Knight in disguise. These two agreements interact to cause various problems for Gawain, whose stay at Hautdesert is further complicated by Bertilak's wife, who attempts to seduce him, and whose kisses Gawain must in turn bestow upon his host to satisfy their agreement. This seduction is transgressive on multiple levels, as it is not only adulterous, but also subverts medieval gender norms and necessitates homosexual acts; Gawain is the passive recipient of the Lady's advances, and then must bestow those same advances on a man.³⁵³ Additionally, it is later revealed that these advances were in fact made on behalf of Bertilak, further reframing them as homosexual, though, at the same time, Bertilak himself is acting on the orders of Morgan le Fay, bringing active femininity into the picture once more.³⁵⁴ Finally, the layers of gender transgression inherent in this seduction culminate in Gawain's acceptance of an object that comes to signify his failure of *trawþe*; Bertilak's Lady gives Gawain a girdle that she tells him will protect him from death, and Gawain – who believes he is riding to his execution at the hands of the Green Knight due to the Beheading Game – hides it from Bertilak, violating their agreement. It is this concealment for which Gawain is punished at the Green Chapel, when the Green Knight cuts him on the neck on the third swing of his axe, symbolising Gawain's failure to hand over all that he received on the third day of his stay at Hautdesert.

³⁵³ Many scholars have explored the implications of this; see, for example Carolyn Dinshaw, "A Kiss is Just A Kiss: Heterosexuality and Its Consolations in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Diacritics: A Review of Contemporary Criticism* 24, no. 2 (1994): 205-226; and David L. Boyd, "Sodomy, Misogyny, and Displacement: Occluding Queer Desire in 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,'" *Arthuriana* 8, no. 2 (1998): 77-113. The term "homosexual" is used here for want of a better term; I acknowledge that modern ideas of heterosexuality and homosexuality differ from medieval understandings of sexuality.

³⁵⁴ Though only briefly and ambiguously, as explored by Geraldine Heng, "Feminine Knots and the Other *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*." *PLMA* 106, no. 3 (1991): 500-514; and Sheila Fisher, "Taken Men and Token Women in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," in *Seeking the Woman in Late Medieval and Renaissance Writings: Essays in Feminist Contextual Criticism*, ed. Sheila Fisher and Janet E. Halley (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1989), 71-105.

Thus, the girdle is implicated in the challenges that Gawain faces in the poem, and is entangled with the “endeles knot” of the pentangle. In preparation for his journey to the Green Chapel, Gawain ties the girdle over his armour – “Þenn dressed he his drurye double hym aboute” (2033) – literally tying it to his chivalric identity.³⁵⁵ Previous scholars have discussed how this disrupts the knot of the pentangle, and destabilises the chivalric structures that it represents. As Geraldine Heng puts it, “[w]ith the substitution of an imperfect knot, the Lady’s lace, for the pentangle, a signifier is produced that situates identity as more tenuous and incomplete – a fragile, uncertain prospect that is always on the verge of unraveling and reconstitution in infinitely varied sequences of possibility”.³⁵⁶ Likewise, Sheila Fisher argues that the girdle, like the poem’s women, holds some power to interrogate patriarchal structures, even if both are ultimately reduced to “appropriate tokens” that “can be managed within the economies of Christianity and feudalism”.³⁵⁷

Indeed, the symbolic function of the girdle is repeatedly re-assigned. Gawain sees it as a “token of vntrawþe” (2509), and the narrator emphasises its associations with his failure – “loken vnder his lyfte arme, þe lace, with a knot, / In tokenyng he watz tane in tech of a faute” (2487-2488) – while Bertilak sees it as a “pure [noble] token / Of þe chaunce of þe grene chapel at cheualrous knyȝtez” (2398-2399) and Arthur recasts it as a symbol of honour, decreeing that all his knights will henceforth wear it: “he honoured þat hit hade euermore after” (2520). These differing views of the girdle echo how Gawain himself is perceived, as he returns to Arthur’s court full of “schame” (2504) about his “vnleuté [disloyalty]”

³⁵⁵ Susan Crane discusses the heraldic implications of this in *The Performance of the Self: Ritual, Clothing, and Identity During the Hundred Years War* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 134-137.

³⁵⁶ Heng, “Feminine Knots,” 504.

³⁵⁷ Fisher, “Taken Men and Token Women,” 97; also see 88-89.

(2499), emphasising his “blame” (2506) and “losse” (2507), whereas the members of the court “comfotez” him (2513) and laugh away his experiences (2514). The Green Knight takes a similarly positive view of Gawain’s adventure, encapsulated in his insistence that “As perle be þe quite pese [pea] is of prys more, / So is Gawayn, in god fayth, bi oþer gay knyȝtez” (2364-2365). Like Gawain, then, the girdle represents both “vntrawþe” and honour, and it is at the centre of the text’s knottiness, entangled simultaneously with masculinity and femininity, failure and success, and protection and dissolution.

Most of interest to this chapter, though, is the idea that this girdle is a non-human object that comes to hold ambiguous and slippery, but nevertheless potent, power. If we view the story of the girdle as another “absent” non-human narrative, it also holds the potential to open up another level of subversion. Like Heng and Fisher, Rudd notes how “the green girdle is subject to several shifts of identity” and further emphasises that it is *green*, making it an “insignia of the natural world” and suggesting that “when he is wearing it Gawain, too, becomes a figure of regeneration and also of the assimilation of the natural world into the human sphere”.³⁵⁸ Like the text’s women, then, this object can be seen to represent how dominant human, masculine discourses subsume those components of patriarchal structures that are often subjugated – in this case, the feminine and the non-human.

On the other hand, we can also view the green girdle as an emblem that assimilates *the human* into the non-human world. As mentioned in my introduction, Richard Godden has convincingly applied Disability Studies to *SGGK* to re-figure the girdle as a “prosthesis” that facilitates the construction of Gawain’s identity: the “ecology of the prosthesis” is “an interdependent network of human and nonhuman

³⁵⁸ Rudd, *Greenery*, 123.

that makes selfhood and communities possible”.³⁵⁹ Etymologically, “prosthesis” can mean “the addition of a letter or syllable to the beginning of a word” and thus represent “a linguistic attachment or joining”, or else a more material meaning “in the sense of being a literal replacement, such as a prosthetic limb”.³⁶⁰ In *SGGK*, “the objects in the poem, specifically the armour, furs, and girdle with which Gawain is outfitted, which would suggest the second sense of the term” can also be viewed according to the former, as an addition.³⁶¹ The “thing-power” of the girdle, therefore, allows Gawain to go *beyond* the human: “The category of human is not only dependent upon the nonhuman, but is intimately enmeshed, intertwined with it”.³⁶² In this way, the girdle “supplies the deficiency, the lack at the core of Gawain’s being”, and viewing it in this way provides a new perspective on the poem’s exploration of human imperfection: “Despite all of the images of closure and perfection in the poem, the most consistent lesson afforded the reader is that we are all shaped by our dependence on objects, that we are all incomplete”.³⁶³ In this there is certainly “always there the possibility of failure and dissolution”, but at the same time it “enables a reading of chivalric bodies and subjects that eschews binaries of whole/broken in favour of a more thorough accounting for how the category of the human is fashioned through varied materials, both organic and inorganic”.³⁶⁴ Gawain, of course, does not appreciate the girdle in this sense – as Rudd puts it, “arguably it offers the possibility of non-combative, non-destructive interaction with the environment, but in fact this does not seem to be how Gawain himself views it” –

³⁵⁹ Godden, “Prosthetic Ecologies,” 1287.

³⁶⁰ Godden, “Prosthetic Ecologies,” 1277.

³⁶¹ Godden, “Prosthetic Ecologies,” 1277.

³⁶² Godden, “Prosthetic Ecologies,” 1278. Godden uses Bennett’s arguments about “thing-power”, which was discussed in my introduction; see Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 3-4.

³⁶³ Godden, “Prosthetic Ecologies,” 1286. It should be noted that care must be taken here to avoid implying that dependence on prosthetics means a person is “lacking”; the emphasis here is on the fact that *all* humans are dependant on the non-human, and that focussing on this dependence opens up what it means to be human in a more inclusive way.

³⁶⁴ Godden, “Prosthetic Ecologies,” 1286 and 1287.

but his voice is not the only one we hear.³⁶⁵ If we consider the girdle as an active “thing”, a participant in the narrative, Gawain and the girdle become one in their shared incongruities; just as the girdle is knotted around the pentangle in ways that both disrupt and add to it, Gawain is both heroic and flawed, perfect and imperfect, fractured and whole.

Gawain’s flawed but admirable characterisation has been understood in terms of the fourteenth-century context of the poem, and specifically in terms of contemporary attitudes towards the chivalric ideal. As Cooper puts it, for example, “the *Gawain*-poet, like his great contemporaries Chaucer and Langland, still believes in the ideals; but, like them, he is unconvinced that human beings can live up to them”.³⁶⁶ Boyd explores how chivalry was beginning to lose its relevance in fourteenth-century England, since mounted warriors were becoming obsolete due to advances in warfare, despite Edward III’s attempts to revive the ideal.³⁶⁷ He consequently argues that – since chivalry remained ideologically important – texts like *SGGK* attempted to counter this by holding external – in this case feminine – forces culpable for its failures.³⁶⁸

Though this is not the place to discuss the rise and fall of chivalry further, that *SGGK* might reflect these concerns about its tenability is supported by the fact that the texts already discussed in this thesis exhibit a similar impulse to recuperate this ideal. For example, Malory’s *Lancelot* and *Ywain and Gawain*’s Ywain both struggle to balance the conflicting pressures of knighthood, with their homosocial responsibilities on the one hand, and their courtly relationships with women on the

³⁶⁵ Rudd, *Greenery*, 124.

³⁶⁶ Cooper, Introduction, xxi; also see Scala, *Absent Narratives*, 57.

³⁶⁷ Boyd, “Sodomy, Misogyny,” 78; also see Armstrong, *Gender and the Chivalric Community*, 6.

³⁶⁸ Boyd, “Sodomy, Misogyny,” 78. Also see Scala’s argument that “Morgan also serves to explain Arthur’s world to itself” (*Absent Narratives*, 68).

other. In Lancelot's case, his failure to balance these elements catalyses Arthur's death and the fall of his kingdom. Likewise, Ywain's betrayal of Alundyne triggers his terrible madness, and his conflict with Gawain almost ends in tragedy. However, both remain paragons of chivalry, despite these problematic consequences of their actions, which – in both cases – stem from an inability to navigate the incongruous and contradictory aspects of an unrealistic ideal. In fact, it could be the case that they are heroes not *despite* their problematic elements, but *because* of them, as they provide models for navigating these ideals as successfully as possible. Similarly, *SGGK*'s Gawain represents a more attainable model of human excellence.

In this chapter, then, I will explore how this reading of Gawain can be furthered if we consider the arboreal non-human as another aspect of his model identity. Like Lancelot and Ywain, Gawain is associated with trees throughout his text, and, in the end, his identity becomes “hybrid” like Ywain's and Galahad's, inclusively incorporating binaries of human/non-human and masculine/feminine. In addition to the way that Godden views Gawain's identity as intermeshed with the non-human – through “things” like his armour and the girdle – I will argue that he is entangled with trees, both those that he interacts with physically, and those with which he is associated metaphorically. In this way, we can once again glimpse the eco-subtext of this romance, as in *Le Morte Darthur* and *Ywain and Gawain*, through its trees. In Heng's discussion of the “feminine knots” of *SGGK*, she argues “[i]n that moment when masculine discursive command falters – at the point where the sign slips away from the narrative in which it has been ambitiously embedded – the feminine text ineluctably emerges once again”.³⁶⁹ In much the same way, the power of the non-human, embedded as it is in this human narrative, also holds a power of its own, below the surface of that narrative, but occasionally breaking its ground.

³⁶⁹ Heng, “Feminine Knots,” 508.

Fisher argues that Arthur's attempt to re-appropriate the girdle as a masculine symbol of honour nevertheless implies that Gawain and the court can never completely escape the feminine, even if they re-figure it in their own terms.³⁷⁰

Likewise, the non-human is ever-present, in some ways ever-threatening, and in others ever-affirming. Thus, as with Lancelot and Ywain, I will explore how Gawain interacts with the non-human – and trees specifically – in ways that once again reveal both the strength and vulnerability of his masculine, chivalric identity. The arboreal presence in this text is both unsettling and productive, and the eco-subtext once again allows for alternative, more inclusive narratives of power, even if they are largely “absent”.³⁷¹

To interrogate this arboreal presence, I will address certain oppositions that exist within *SGGK*, such as dark and light, winter and spring, warmth and coldness, growth and decline. These opposing elements interact with each other in circular, cyclical ways, as day turns to night and seasons pass in inexorable and continuous movements. As Gawain moves within his own cycle – from Camelot to Hautdesert, on to the Green Chapel, and back to Camelot – a complex temporal and spatial web that combines and entangles systems of binaries is formed within the knots and cycles of the text. In the first section, I will employ Northrop Frye's theories about the archetypal trajectory of romance to frame Gawain's movements within these cycles according to the “idyllic” and “night” worlds that I referenced in my introduction. These worlds are linked to another cycle of oppositions involving the fluid gender dynamics in this poem, which I will also briefly highlight. I will then further my argument that Gawain remains within the “night” world, even when he returns to Arthur's court, by considering images of the seasons, and how they inform Gawain's

³⁷⁰ Fisher, “Taken Men and Token Women,” 98-99.

³⁷¹ Again, Elizabeth Scala's work on these narratives is relevant; she discusses the stories “lurking in wait” in *SGGK* (*Absent Narratives*, 56; also see 37-70).

identity, focussing on the trees that participate in the opposing but connected narratives of winter and spring in the poem. The third section will depart from Gawain momentarily to focus on the figure of the Green Knight, whose ambiguous characterisation can also be understood through the lens of the arboreal, and specifically through the wooden objects with which he is associated, namely the holly branch and axe he is holding when he enters Arthur's court. This has implications for Gawain's own arboreal identification; in the following section, I will explore how Gawain, like the knights of *Le Morte Darthur* and Ywain, becomes a tree through metaphor. This metaphor, as well as the repeated images of burning I will highlight, emphasise how Gawain is threatened throughout the text, in part through his association with the arboreal, which simultaneously encodes his heroism.

Finally, I will conclude by viewing *SGGK* through an EcoGothic framework, drawing together the diurnal and seasonal cycles of growth and decay by focussing on the ways that trees participate in the horror of this poem. In my introduction, I discussed the haunting discomfort of human/non-human entanglement; in this chapter, I will further this through a consideration of the EcoGothic, a strand of ecocriticism that embraces anxieties associated with the non-human. It originated with Simon C. Estok's 2009 article "Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness: Ecocriticism and Ecophobia", in which he questions why ecocritics had not previously addressed "ecophobia".³⁷² He defines this as the "irrational and groundless hatred of the natural world, as present and subtle in our daily lives and literature as homophobia and racism and sexism".³⁷³ Over time, the definition of "ecophobia" has been developed to more broadly encompass "fears stemming from

³⁷² Simon C Estok, "Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness: Ecocriticism and Ecophobia," *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 16, no. 2 (2009).

³⁷³ Estok, "Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness," 208.

humans' precarious relationship with all that is non-human".³⁷⁴ In his introduction to the special ecocritical edition of *Gothic Studies* about the EcoGothic, David Del Principe argues that "while such fears are not new, their expression today in increasingly apocalyptic terms can be traced directly to nineteenth-century industrialised society's uneasy reaction to ... the vehement reaffirmation of human primacy over nature and animals".³⁷⁵ In other words, the commodification of the non-human that occurred during the industrial revolution led to a shift in our relationship with nature that has resulted in our current environmental crisis, and the fear of human extinction that comes with it.³⁷⁶ However, EcoGothic understandings can also be explored fruitfully in relation to the Middle Ages, well before the industrial revolution that catalysed the start of the Anthropocene. Some medieval literature can certainly be considered to be "Gothic" if we are using Tom J. Hillard's definition of the Gothic as a literary mode that embraces extremes, such as of violence, pain, and fear; *SGGK* is a particularly apt example, as we will see in this chapter.³⁷⁷ Thus, alongside my exploration the dark and unsettling implications of the human/non-human entanglement in this poem, I will conclude by employing the EcoGothic in these terms, that is, in a way that considers violence and fear in *SGGK* as connected to its dark and powerful non-human presences.

³⁷⁴ David del Principe, "The EcoGothic in the Long Nineteenth Century" *Gothic Studies* 16, no. 1 (2014): 1.

³⁷⁵ Del Principe, "The EcoGothic," 1.

³⁷⁶ Del Principe, "The EcoGothic," 2.

³⁷⁷ Hillard defines the Gothic as "a literary *mode* rather than a genre" (Tom J. Hillard, "Deep Into That Darkness Peering': An Essay on Gothic Nature," *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 16, no. 4 (2009): 689), which is "typically concerned with extreme states, such as violence and pain, fear and anxiety, sexual aggression and perversion" (Hillard, "Deep Into That Darkness Peering," 690). In this way, he argues, we can trace the Gothic throughout history, both before and after generic Gothic fiction was being produced in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Hillard, "Deep Into That Darkness Peering," 689). He makes these assertions in response to his questioning of "what happens when we bring the critical tools associated with Gothic fiction to bear on writing about nature?" (Hillard, "Deep Into That Darkness Peering," 688).

Night and Day

At first, it seems that *SGGK* will adhere to Frye's archetypal trajectory of romance, which purports that romance heroes follow a cycle in which they move back and forth between the "idyllic" and "night" worlds. The "idyllic" world is one of "happiness, security, and peace; the emphasis is often thrown on childhood or on an 'innocent' or pre-genital period of youth".³⁷⁸ The "night" world, on the other hand, is "a world of exciting adventures, but adventures which involve separation, loneliness, humiliation, pain, and the threat of more pain".³⁷⁹ Gawain's movements seem to follow this trajectory, as he moves away from the "idyllic" Camelot and into the night world settings of Hautdesert and the Green Chapel, before returning to Camelot. This cycle is also figured structurally, as "the poem is written in 101 overlapping stanzas that give us a perfect, circular pattern".³⁸⁰

Indeed, this circular pattern mirrors Gawain's experiences throughout the poem, at least on the surface. The description of Arthur's court at the start of the text is "idyllic" according to Frye's definition, as it is full of images of youthful joviality: "for all watz þis fayre folk in her first age, on sille, / Þe hapnest vnder heuen" (55-56), for example. The only way in which the description of Arthur's court departs from Frye's definition is in the season. Frye states that in the "idyllic" world "the images are those of spring and summer, flowers and sunshine", whereas *SGGK* is set in the winter: "Þis kyng lay at Camylot vpon Krystmasse" (37).³⁸¹ Nevertheless, an atmosphere of celebration and festivity saturates the first one hundred lines of the poem, and Gawain's movement into the "night" world is similarly straightforward.

³⁷⁸ Frye, *The Secular Scripture*, 53.

³⁷⁹ Frye, *The Secular Scripture*, 53.

³⁸⁰ Scala, *Absent Narratives*, 42.

³⁸¹ Frye, *The Secular Scripture*, 53.

The adventure, humiliation, and violence that typify Frye's night world are present in Gawain's experiences after he leaves Arthur's court to find the Green Knight. In the next section, for example, I will discuss his miserable journey through the winter wilderness to Hautdesert, and how he is "hunted" alongside the animals of Bertilak's forest when he arrives there, not to mention the shame and pain he endures at the Green Chapel, which I will discuss at the end of this chapter.

However, for now I would like to highlight how *SGGK* could be seen to depart from Frye's trajectory by considering how Gawain remains in the "night" world, even after he returns to Camelot. Just as the perfect knot of the pentangle is disrupted by the girdle, the perfect circular structure of this poem is undermined by Gawain's inability to free himself from the night-world forces that entrap him. After the Green Knight reveals himself as Bertilak and explains how he has tricked Gawain, Gawain wants to atone for his failure, and tells the Green Knight "letez me ouertake your wylle" (2387). However, the Green Knight only laughs and assures Gawain that "I halde [consider] hit hardily hole [amended], þe harme þat I hade" (2390). He tells Gawain that he does not blame him because he only took the girdle "bot for ȝe lufed your lyf" (2368); as previously mentioned, he also describes Gawain as a "perle" among knights, suggesting that he sees Gawain as a paragon of chivalry. But Gawain is not convinced by these words, and states his intention to wear the girdle to signify his shame:

Bot in syngne of my surfet [transgression] I schal se hit ofte,
 When I ride in renoun, remorde to myseluen
 Þe faut and þe fayntyse of þe flesche crabbed,
 How tender hit is to entyse teches of fylþe;
 And þus, quen pryde schal me pryke for prowes of armes,
 Þe loke to þis luf-lace schal leþe [make humble] my hert (2433-2438)

This not only emphasises Gawain's continued distress at his failure, but also suggests that he will never forget this distress; he will consistently remind himself of it in a cycle of self-flagellation and penance.

Indeed, Gawain brings his horror back to Arthur's court. He shows the members of the court the scar he received from Bertilak – which he sees as indicative of his “vnleuté” (2499) – and presents the girdle, which he defines as a “token of vntrawþe” (2509), as previously discussed. Gawain's return to Arthur's court takes up only a little narrative space, but his shame and distress is repeatedly emphasised:

He tened quen he schulde telle,
 He goned for gref and game;
 Þe blod in his face con melle [rush],
 When he hit [his scar] schulde schewe, for schame (2501-2504)

Ostensibly this is Gawain's return to his idyllic world, and there are elements of his return to Camelot that reflect this, such as the aforementioned attempts of Arthur and the members of his court to comfort Gawain and laugh away his distress (2513-2514), as well as Arthur's re-signification of the girdle. However, despite their efforts to facilitate Gawain's return to the idyllic world, he remains distressed by his failure and is never able to move past it, as the narrative does not allow it. Though the rest of the characters are able to laugh away the implications of Gawain's journey, his reaction to the court's laughter and Arthur's decree is not given, so that the last we see of Gawain is his assertion that “For mon may hyden his harme, bot vnhap ne may hit, / For þer hit onez is tachched twynne wil hit neuer” (2511-2512). In other words, though on the surface he is returning to the idyllic court, on a deeper level he will never untangle himself from the night world.

In some ways, Gawain's inability to do this is related to the difficulties he faces in relation to the feminine, which is also a defining feature of Gawain's “night”

world. Though Guenivere is only mentioned in passing (74-84) in the description of Camelot, Bertilak's lady and her grotesque companion – later revealed to be Morgan – are described in detail at Hautdesert (944-969). Moreover, the revelation of Morgan's presence in Bertilak's castle occurs alongside his disclosure of the fact that she orchestrated the whole plot: she “wayned me þis wonder [turned him green] your wyttez to reue, / For to haf greued Gaynour and gart hir to dyze” (2459-2460). This motivation is never explained, and Gawain leaves the Green Chapel without speaking to Morgan, despite Bertilak's insistence that he “com to þyn aunt” (2467).³⁸² Scala discusses Morgan's story as another “absent narrative”: “Bertilak gives us a story we did not know we lacked. Morgan le Fay emerges at the end of the poem as a suppressed and deferred story”.³⁸³ Nevertheless, her story lies beneath that of the main narrative, and she holds sway beyond her physical presence, within the more feminine world of Hautdesert, and beyond.³⁸⁴

Indeed, though she does not succeed in scaring Guenivere to death, Morgan's plot has an indelible impact on Gawain, and to that end there is another “feminine” presence in this text: Gawain himself. I have briefly touched on the various gender transgressions that occur at Hautdesert, and I do not wish to re-tread ground that previous approaches to this poem have already explored in depth. However, it is worth emphasising once more that, according to patriarchal medieval

³⁸² The familial relationship here is prefigured by the familial relationship between Gawain and Arthur in this text; he is Arthur's nephew, and Arthur is Morgan's sister. This also strengthens the masculine/feminine opposition between the courts: as Rudd puts it, “as Camelot is the court of his uncle, so this other castle, it is now revealed, is that of his aunt” (*Greenery*, 112). Scala discusses how Morgan's motivations are an absent narrative, referencing Morgan's intertextual enmity with Arthur, which “infiltrates the poem” here (*Absent Narratives*, 67; also see 68); the poem assumes knowledge of this, alongside that of the relationships between the characters.

³⁸³ Scala, *Absent Narratives*, 41; also see her discussion of Morgan in *Absent Narratives*, 62-68. Bloomfield also discusses how this is a good example of a “backward motivated episode” that “raises more questions than it answers” (Bloomfield, “Episodic Motivation,” 109).

³⁸⁴ See Scala, *Absent Narratives*, 66: “Morgan can be there only in retrospect, and this retrospection articulates her absence as a detectable presence all along ... In this sense absence is her most significant feature”.

gender norms, Gawain is feminised by the Lady's advances, a process further problematised by the fact that she is the medium through which Bertilak's seduction of Gawain is mediated. Furthermore, at the Green Chapel, Gawain passively receives a "blow" from the Green Knight's "axe", which can be viewed as a metaphorical realisation of the homosexuality that is hinted at during the temptation scenes, when Gawain worries that "he schulde make synne" (1774) by engaging in intercourse with Bertilak's Lady.³⁸⁵ This ostensibly refers to the sin of adultery, but the terms of Gawain's exchange agreement with Bertilak imply that, in gaining a "receptacle for sexual activity", Gawain would also have to provide Bertilak with one, just as he has to mimic the Lady's kisses as part of this agreement.³⁸⁶ Furthermore, as scholars such as Boyd have also noted, the wound Gawain receives from the Green Knight can be understood to represent the height of his feminisation, as it is a "gash-like wound from which blood flows".³⁸⁷ Though this wound heals, it leaves the scar that he shows to Arthur's court to evidence his "vnleuté" (2499). Although this scar marks his chivalric failure – his failure of *trawþe* – it can also therefore be viewed as a reminder of his fluid gender identity.

That Gawain carries this mark and the girdle – with their various, but partly feminine, associations – with him back to Camelot once again suggests how he cannot completely return from his "night" world. He is literally and figuratively scarred by his *aventure*, and by the changes he is forced to undergo in terms of his chivalric and gender identities. I emphasise this point here because Gawain's feminisation at Hautdesert and the Green Chapel is paralleled by what I will term his

³⁸⁵ For the phallic connotations of the "axe," see Boyd, "Sodomy, Misogyny," 86.

³⁸⁶ Boyd, "Sodomy, Misogyny," 79; also see Dinshaw, "A Kiss is Just a Kiss," 206.

³⁸⁷ Boyd, "Sodomy, Misogyny," 90; also see Heng, "Feminine Knots," 505-506. Bettina Bildhauer's assertion that medieval beliefs about blood dictated that women were "not a closed container, but a permeable, leaking one" is relevant here: menstruation rendered women "less coherent" than men (Bildhauer, *Medieval Blood*, 93).

“non-humanisation”, that is, the process by which his identity shifts to accommodate an intimacy with the non-human. Just as Hautdesert and the Green Chapel are sites of feminine presence and power – a power that moves Gawain’s own gender identity towards the feminine – Gawain is surrounded and affected by the non-human world after he leaves Camelot. The “knots” of his identity, incorporating the chivalric ideal and gender fluidity, therefore also entangle him with the non-human. I am not suggesting that the processes of feminisation and non-humanisation are reliant on one another, and it would be reductive simply to argue that as Gawain becomes more feminine he also moves closer to the “nature” with which the feminine has been restrictively associated, as previously discussed. Instead, I suggest that these processes are linked, in that they both participate in the interrogation of Gawain’s chivalric, masculine identity. Just as the feminine and the non-human have both been subjugated within patriarchal structures, they both underlie those structures, and – in *SGGK*, as in *Le Morte Darthur* and *Ywain and Gawain* – occasionally act to unsettle them. When Gawain returns to his idyllic world of human, masculine power, he is still entangled with those feminine and non-human elements of the night world that he cannot completely escape. Though he is traumatised by this, Gawain emerges as a knotty and hybrid construction of human/non-human and masculine/feminine entanglement who once again suggests how marginal “things” can participate in the narratives of the centre, even if they must largely remain in the shadows.

Winter and Spring

Gawain’s journey into the night world, which is occupied by these dark non-human presences, is also entangled with another cycle: that of the seasons. Some

scholars view the Green Knight as “a descendant of the traditional vegetation or nature god, a god ‘whose death and resurrection are the myth-and-ritual counterpart of the annual death and rebirth of nature’”.³⁸⁸ His uncanny ability to survive beheading and his “rebirth” as Bertilak support this reading, though other forces are at work within his characterisation, as I will discuss in the next section. I mention this reading here, though, because the Green Knight’s arrival at Arthur’s court also triggers a series of “rebirths” in Gawain, related to his cycles of feminisation and non-humanisation; these are, I argue, a consequence of the “new growth” which Rudd asserts that the Green Knight brings into the court.³⁸⁹ Moreover, these rebirths are cyclically associated with images of winter and spring. These images accompany Gawain’s physical movements, and also flag internal changes of character. Additionally, trees are always implicated in the poem’s seasonal movements, and Gawain’s travels within them. For example, Gawain’s entrance into the night world is characterised by the cold and barren tree-based settings of the forest and wilderness, and their trees struggle through the winter alongside him. Furthermore, trees figure alongside the poem’s occasional references to spring, which are rendered unsettling when they are considered as additional markers of Gawain’s experiences in his night world, as this section will suggest. The cycle of the seasons in this poem therefore brings Gawain ever closer to the non-human, and his rebirths entangle him with the trees that witness those seasons.

When Gawain first leaves the safety of Arthur’s court to find the Green Chapel, his journey through the Wilderness of Wirral and Bertilak’s forest connects him to the arboreal non-human. This journey is characterised by Gawain’s struggle to survive in the wintry conditions: “Þus in peryl and payne and plytes ful harde / Bi

³⁸⁸ Blanch, “Games Poets Play,” 65; he is quoting John Speirs, *Medieval English Poetry: The Non-Chaucerian Tradition* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), 219.

³⁸⁹ Rudd, *Greenery*, 111.

contray caryez þis knyzt" (733-734). Saunders likewise highlights how this journey takes place in a setting that is "not simply a landscape of adventure shaped for the questing knight ... but also an immensely hostile, natural world far less pleasant than the court"; this is a landscape that carries more discomfort than affirmation.³⁹⁰ While this symbolises Gawain's struggle *against* the non-human, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen has also argued that Gawain is connected to the non-human world during this journey, as his struggles are embodied by the landscape: "his emotions *are* the landscape".³⁹¹ Indeed, though he "werrez" (fights) with a variety of creatures in the wilderness, including dragons, wolves, trolls, bulls, bears, boars, and giants (720-723), he has an affinity with the trees that also struggle to survive the winter. As Gawain leaves the wilderness,

Bi a mounte on þe morne meryly he rydes
 Into a forest ful dep, þat ferly watz wylde,
 Hiȝe hillez on vche a halue, and holtwodez vnder
 Of hore [grey] okez ful hoge a hundredth together;
 Þe hasel and þe haȝborne were harled [tangled] al samen,
 With roȝe raged mosse rayled anywhere,
 With mony bryddez vnblyþe [unhappy] vpon bare twyges,
 Þat pitously þer piped for pyne of þe colde (740-747)

Like Gawain, these oaks, hazels, and hawthorns are weighed down by the hardship of winter, and these birds echo his struggle with the cold. However, in symbolising

³⁹⁰ Saunders, *The Forest of Medieval Romance*, 149.

³⁹¹ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "Inventing with Animals in the Middle Ages," in *Engaging with Nature: Essays on the Natural World in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Barbara A. Hanawalt and Lisa J. Kiser (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 44. Cohen's consequent argument that *SGGK* "creates a space where embodiment is multiple and interspecies", since it "interweave[s] alien nature and human narratives" ("Inventing with Animals," 57 and 43 respectively) is also relevant to my argument that the "knots" of Gawain's identity incorporate the non-human. For the ways in which Gawain is "not solely human" in this part of the poem, also see Dinshaw, "Ecology," 358. The wilderness landscape has also been explored by Gillian Rudd in "'The Wilderness of Wirral' in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Arthuriana* 23, no. 1 (2013): 52-65 and *Greenery*, 118-128. In the latter, also see her argument that "[r]ather than being able to regard ourselves as the naturally dominant and successful species, we must alter our ways of being in order to enter the wilderness at all, for this conceptual wilderness has forms of life of its own, which themselves challenge the divisions between humanity and other species" (Rudd, *Greenery*, 93).

Gawain's hardship, these non-human elements also highlight his strength in enduring it; oak trees especially were associated with strength, as previously discussed in relation to *The Awntyrs of Arthure* and *Le Morte Darthur*. These same trees also reflect Gawain's relief when he spies Hautdesert, as the castle "schemered and schon purȝ þe schyre okez" (772): the grey oaks are now bright and fair.

Correspondingly, when Gawain arrives at Hautdesert it seems at first that his struggles through the winter wilderness will culminate in a spring-like period of new growth and rejuvenation. The castle appears as a response to Gawain's prayer to Mary (753-758) and upon his arrival he is led into the warmth and ostensible safety of the hall, finding the lord of the castle where "Þer fayre fyre vpon flet fersly brenned" (832), in direct contrast to the cold outside. Furthermore, an explicit reference to spring occurs during Gawain's subsequent disarming. When he arrives at Hautdesert, his horse is taken from him (823), followed by his helmet, sword, and shield (826-828), and finally, after reaching his bedroom, "Þer he watz dispoyled, wyth spechez of myrþe, / Þe burn of his bruny [mail-shirt] and of his bryȝt wedez [clothes]" (860-861). He is then given new clothes, "For to charge [put on], and to chaunge [change]" (863); the pun on "change" here emphasises how Gawain's identity is subject to change, now that he has been stripped of his chivalric accoutrements.³⁹² This "rebirth" is further highlighted a few lines later: "Þe ver [spring] by his uisage verayly hit semed" (866). The regenerative associations of

³⁹² The word "chaunge" is also used in Gawain and Bertilak's exchange agreement (1107); Boyd discusses how this verb can also mean "to substitute", which holds implications for the fact that Gawain "substitutes" himself for the Lady while kissing Bertilak, and must potentially provide "an equivalent substitute (i.e. himself as receptacle) in place of what he received from the Lady" if he were to accept more than kisses (Boyd, "Sodomy, Misogyny," 80; also see 79).

spring accompany the merry tone of this dressing scene, which signal that Gawain's movement into this new space will be accompanied by a shift in his character.

However, of course, things are not what they seem at Hautdesert, and this is not a place of safety for Gawain, who spends his time in the castle at the mercy of its inhabitants and their machinations. This culminates in his inability to leave this "night" world, with all its hardship and shame, even when he returns to Arthur's court. As Saunders puts it, "the narrative thus subverts the conventional pattern of quest within the forest: it is just when Gawain appears to have surmounted the physical obstacles of his quest through the forest ... that he falls into the greatest danger".³⁹³ There are some arboreal signs that point to this danger as Gawain approaches the castle. The aforementioned trees that Gawain encounters on his journey are "harled al samen" (744), tangled with each other and with the rough moss "rayled" (745) around them; the non-human world is as knotted as the pentangle here. Soon after, these images of gnarly trees are repeated when Hautdesert, viewed "purȝ þe schyre okez" (772), is described as being "loken [shut or locked] vnder boȝez [boughs] / Of mony borelych bole [tree trunks]" (765-766). The operative word here is "loken", which is also used in relation to the pentangle, where it means "joined" – "And vche lyne vmbelappez and loukez in oper" (628) – and in relation to the girdle, when it is "loken" around Gawain "in tokenyng he watz tane in tech of a faute" (2487-2488), as mentioned previously.³⁹⁴ Just as Gawain is "loken" (joined) with the pentangle and the girdle, he is "loken" (locked) within the

³⁹³ Saunders, *The Forest of Medieval Romance*, 151. Subsequently, she argues that that Hautdesert is within the forest landscape – "Hautdesert remains part of the larger forest" – to account for this (*The Forest of Medieval Romance*, 154). However, as Rudd argues, "Bertilak's castle is just as much a built and cultivated environment as Arthur's court" (*Greenery*, 112), and this emphasis supports my own forthcoming reading of the ways that Bertilak "cultivates" his surroundings.

³⁹⁴ See the *MED* entry for "loken" at https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED25943/track?counter=1&search_id=1296250.

castle, here by the arboreal non-human. Rudd argues that nature is often “regarded as a mere setting, or as correlative of Gawain’s state of mind rather than as an active force within the text”.³⁹⁵ However, viewing these trees as participants in the machinations that literally and metaphorically entrap Gawain in Hautdesert re-frames them as powerful actants.³⁹⁶

This entrapment is repeatedly emphasised through non-human imagery elsewhere. As previously mentioned, the three hunting scenes that parallel the three seduction scenes are commonly thought to symbolise how Bertilak and his Lady “hunt” Gawain.³⁹⁷ These scenes culminate in Bertilak’s capture of a fox “þat he folȝed longe” (1895), just as Gawain takes the girdle from the Lady and agrees to conceal it from her husband (1860-1864). Soon after, the word “tan” (taken) is used in reference to the fox’s capture: “And syþen þay tan Reynarde [the fox]” (1920). This word “tan”, first used by Bertilak’s Lady in the first seduction scene, when she tells Gawain “Now ar ȝe tan” (1210), is repeated by Gawain in reference to the girdle when he presents it to Arthur’s court: “þis is þe token of vntrawþe þat I am *tan inne*” (2509; my emphasis). Notably, this word is also used in relation to the girdle alongside the word “loken” in lines 2487-2488, which have just been discussed: “*loken* vnder his lyfte arme, þe lace, with a knot, / in tokenyng he watz *tane in* tech of a faute” (2487-2488, my emphasis). The repetition of the word “tan” in reference to

³⁹⁵ Rudd, *Greenery*, 115.

³⁹⁶ The effect is similar to that of the trees that Gawain accompanies after he leaves Hautdesert (see 2077-2078, for example), which Rudd argues can be seen to mirror imagery in “Walt Disney films such as *Snow White* in which the trees and rocks slip disconcertingly between being just inanimate things and having sneering faces and tugging fingers” (*Greenery*, 121). She also addresses the anthropomorphism inherent in drawing such parallels – “one thing that emerges from such descriptions of the landscape is our inability to let it be as it is” (121) – which is important to acknowledge.

³⁹⁷ See, for example, Boyd, “Sodomy, Misogyny,” 85; Dinshaw, “A Kiss is Just a Kiss,” 211; Saunders, *The Forest of Medieval Romance*, 152-153; Scala, *Absent Narratives*, 48.

both Gawain and the fox parallels how the use of the word “loken” can be seen to tie – “with a knot” (2487) – Gawain and the girdle to the trees that surround Hautdesert.

Another arboreal consideration, then, is that trees inhabit the settings within which Bertilak enacts his symbolically loaded hunts. That Gawain rides into a “forest” in line 741 signals that he has left the wilderness and entered a human-controlled park, a “fenced park”.³⁹⁸ Indeed, the trees that enclose the castle are arranged in “diches” (766) on a “launde” (765), which Twomey translates as “open hunting land”; these trees also enclose the park, which facilitates hunting.³⁹⁹ Twomey also argues that Hautdesert is surrounded by a well-maintained hunting park, and that *SGGK* encodes anxieties over the fact that such parks were becoming less common in England in the fourteenth century.⁴⁰⁰ This more human-controlled setting is also figured in the “borelych bole”, as they are described through an anthropocentric framework that removes focus from them; they are fragmented, only “bogez” (boughs) and “bole” (tree trunks), with no identified species, and are simply “mony”, unlike the specifically one hundred oak trees Gawain encounters on the outskirts of the castle (743). When trees are needed to convey the strength and endurance of the human protagonist, they are allowed a specific identity, but otherwise they are chopped up and miscellaneous.⁴⁰¹ These trees have been planted to serve a purpose, as fences to facilitate Bertilak’s hunts, and have thus been cultivated to participate in anthropocentric concerns; they are just as “loken” by Bertilak as Gawain becomes.

³⁹⁸ Rudd, *Greenery*, 121.

³⁹⁹ Michael W. Twomey, “How Green Was the Green Knight? Forest Ecology at Hautdesert,” *Arthurian Literature* 30 (2013): 41.

⁴⁰⁰ Twomey, “How Green,” 27-53. The nostalgia for Bertilak’s well-policed hunting park that Twomey reads into *SGGK* can be seen to parallel the text’s nostalgia for the chivalric ideal; human relations with the non-human can be seen to reflect multiple human anxieties in this text.

⁴⁰¹ Similarly, Rudd argues that viewing the wilderness as a “reflection of Gawain’s state of mind” means that it “fades out of focus” (*Greenery*, 119).

However, just as these trees also have the potential to foreshadow – and literally overshadow – Gawain’s plight at Hautdesert, there are other trees associated with Bertilak’s hunts that hold power beyond their brief physical presence. During the transition from the first hunting scene to the first seduction scene, Bertilak is said to be hunting near linden (lime tree) woods: “Pus laykez þis lorde by lynde-wodez euez” (1178). As with “thorne”, “lynde” could also simply refer to a tree, though Twomey argues that it is safe to assume it refers specifically to lime trees in *SGGK*, given that there are ancient lime woods in the areas of Britain that the *Gawain*-poet used as settings.⁴⁰² Underpinning these real trees, however, is the common medieval association between linden trees and erotic love.⁴⁰³ The couplet that references Bertilak’s hunting “by lynde-wodez” juxtaposes this hunting with Gawain’s seduction: “Pus laykez þis lorde by lynde-wodez euez, / And Gawayn þe god mon in gay bed lygez” (1178-1179). Thus, the linden tree’s allusions to erotic love are borne out here, as this is the bed within which the Lady attempts to seduce Gawain, and they also therefore flag Bertilak’s parallel “hunt” of Gawain.

I will return to the potentially homoerotic implications of the linden trees in this text, but first it is fruitful to highlight the other arboreal presences that inhabit the hunting scenes. The animals hunted in these three scenes – deer, a boar, and the aforementioned fox – are associated with different non-human elements – water, stone, and wood respectively. That Gawain is most directly linked to the fox, who is captured among vegetation, once again ties him to the arboreal in a potentially

⁴⁰² Twomey, “How Green,” 45. For the definitions of “lynde”, see the *MED* entry at https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED25646/track?counter=1&search_id=1298198. Saunders also discusses how “the poem is remarkable in its detailed identification of the usually vague *forest aventureuse* of the quest with the actual landscape of Britain” (*The Forest of Medieval Romance*, 149).

⁴⁰³ See A.T. Hatto, “The Lime-Tree and Early German, Goliard and English Lyric Poetry,” *The Modern Language Review* 49, no. 2 (1954): 193-209. Indeed, I will discuss how linden trees figure the erotic love between Tristrem and Ysonde in *Sir Tristrem* in Chapter Five.

unsettling way. First, this elision of human/non-human boundaries is prefigured by images at the start of the hunt that once again quite literally tie human and non-human together; the horses and dogs that enable the hunt are entangled by and with their masters. For example, after “þay busken vp bilyue blonkkez [horses] to sadel” (1128), they “lachen her brydeles” (1131). The dogs are also tied up, though this is only revealed as they are unleashed when the hunt begins: “couples huntes of kest” (1147). While these may not be equal human/non-human relationships, these animals participate in the ritual of the hunt alongside the human members of Bertilak’s court, and are thus entangled with the poem’s knots alongside Gawain.

Likewise, the animals that are hunted are entwined in the complex human/non-human relationships in the poem, and, furthermore, are associated with non-human, non-animal elements. Like Arthur’s retinue in the *Awntyrs of Arthure*, Bertilak’s men hunt does – female deer specifically – on the first day of Gawain’s stay, as “for þe fre lorde hade defende in fermysoun tyme / Ðat þer schulde no mon meue to þe male dere” (1156-1157).⁴⁰⁴ On the second day, the hunters’ quarry is a male boar. The descriptions of these hunts contain repeated images of water and stone, especially when the deer and boar are overcome: the hunt for the deer ends when they are “taysed to þe wattrez” (1169), whereas they find the boar “bitwene a flosche [pool] in þat fryth [wood] and a foo cragge / In a knot bi a clyffe” (1430-1431). Though this “knot” refers to a wooded knoll – that is mentioned again (1434) – and although the hunting on the first day takes place “vnder wande” (1161) and “by lynde-wodez” (1178), as previously mentioned, it is not until the third day, when the hunters are chasing the fox, that the presence of vegetation in these hunting scenes

⁴⁰⁴ This focus on female deer could be linked to the ways that Gawain is feminised by the Lady’s advances, which start at the same time as this hunt; in this first seduction scene, for example, the Lady threatens to “bynde” Gawain to his bed (1211), rendering him the passive recipient of her active advances and further knotting him up.

is emphasised. Though the ground is still rocky, the woodland setting is much more obvious: “Rocheres rounge *bi rys* [branches] for rurde of her hornes” (1698; my emphasis) just after the “hunteres vnhardeled *bi a holt* [wood] syde” (1697; my emphasis). They chase the fox “*purȝ mony tene greue* [thickets]” (1707) and “*bi heggez* [hedges] ful ofte” (1708), again emphasising the presence of vegetation. The fox “*lepez ouer a spenne* [fence]” (1709) – probably made of wood – and runs “*bi a strothe rande* [small wood]” (1710), hoping to escape the hounds: “Went [hoped] haf wylt [escaped] of þe wode with wylez fro þe houndes” (1711). This hunting scene is disrupted by the third seduction scene – the scene in which Gawain takes the girdle – but when narrative focus returns to the fox, vegetation is key again: there are other mentions of a hedge (1896) and a thicket (1898) just after the fox is finally caught (1895).

This relationship between the fox and vegetation, extended to Gawain through his own connection with the fox, is unsettling when viewed through the lens of the repeated references to fire during Gawain’s stay at Hautdesert. There is a strong emphasis on burning in the descriptions of Bertilak’s court, which could – especially in the poem’s winter setting – represent warmth and safety. The first detail given about Bertilak’s hall is that “*þer fayre fyre vpon flet fersly brenned*” (832), as previously mentioned, and “fire”, “fireplace”, or “burning” feature eight times during Gawain’s stay at Hautdesert, with every scene in which Gawain and Bertilak appear together featuring at least one reference to fire (832, 875, 1368, 1667, and 1925). Gawain is also often seated next to the fire (875-876, 1030, 1402, 1667, and 1925), which is a fitting position for him as an honoured guest at Hautdesert. However, given that this is not a place of comfort and safety for Gawain, it is worth interrogating these references to burning. Indeed, fire is conspicuously absent in Arthur’s court, Gawain’s “idyllic” world. In fact, the only mention of fire in Fitt One is

in association with the Green Knight: as he leaves, “þe fyr [sparks] of þe flynt flaze [flew] fro fole house [horse’s hooves]” (459). Thus, Gawain’s idyllic world does not contain any fire, except that which is sparked by the figure who triggers his departure into the night world; Hautdesert’s fires are endemic to this world. The wood that fuels these fires is presumably cut from the same forest within which Bertilak hunts, and which “locks” Gawain in Hautdesert. That it is burnt while Gawain is hunted by Bertilak and his Lady can therefore be seen in a menacing light; Gawain and the trees that entangle him are both threatened by Bertilak.

A focus on the final scene of exchange between Gawain and Bertilak adds another, more material, dimension to this argument, in relation to the fox. Bertilak finds Gawain near the fire immediately after he kills this fox: “fyndez fire vpon flet, þe freke [Gawain] þer-byside” (1925). This meeting near the fire also occurs just after Gawain has accepted the girdle, and it is in this scene that he fails to give it to Bertilak, thereby breaking their agreement. The fox skin that Gawain receives from Bertilak by the fire – “þis foule fox felle [skin]” (1944), as Bertilak refers to it – deepens the association between Gawain and the fox, who is likewise “caught” by Bertilak and his lady through the medium of the girdle, as previously discussed. Although the words are etymologically separate, the noun “felle” for skin here can be linked to the verb “fellen”, in that Bertilak has also felled (as in slain) the fox and felled (as in cut down) trees to make the firewood in this scene. This prefigures how he fells Gawain, both in the sense that Bertilak and his Lady make Gawain “succumb to temptation or sin” when he takes and conceals the girdle, and in the sense that Bertilak cuts Gawain at the Green Chapel, overcoming him; “fellen” can also mean “to knock, strike, cut, or shoot down (a man or beast) in combat; to fell

(an adversary); to overthrow, overcome, vanquish".⁴⁰⁵ Within this context, then, Hautdesert's fires symbolise the danger Bertilak poses to Gawain, entangled as he is with the non-human; the winter threatens Gawain as he rides through it, but also once he reaches the "safety" of Hautdesert – he is out of the frying pan and into the fire, as it were.

To conclude this section, I will return to linden trees, and to how they figure in the seasonal cycles of *SGGK*. In his exploration of the ways in which linden trees are connected to erotic love in medieval literature, A.T. Hatto argues that this is related to the fact that this tree is associated with "the coming of spring itself".⁴⁰⁶ If lime trees are traditionally associated with spring, though, the first reference to a "lynde" in *SGGK* signals just the opposite, as this lime tree participates in autumnal imagery: "Pe leuez lancen fro þe lynde and ly3ten on þe grounde" (526).⁴⁰⁷ The erotic "spring-time" associations of the linden tree are also complicated by two subsequent references to linden trees that connect them to the relationship between Gawain and Bertilak. As previously discussed, the reference to "lynde-wodez" (1178) witnesses both the erotic link between Gawain and Bertilak's Lady and the potentially homoerotic link between Gawain and Bertilak that it prefigures. Later in the poem, a linden tree appears once more, this time primarily in relation to Bertilak, as it stands outside the Green Knight's Green Chapel. In preparation to meet the Green Knight, Gawain ties his horse to a "roze branche" (2177) of a "lynde" (2176). As previously discussed, the climactic scene that follows this draws attention to

⁴⁰⁵ The above quotations are from the *MED* entry for "fellen" at https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED15536/track?counter=6&search_id=1296250. The entry for "fel" (as in skin) can be found at https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED15490/track?counter=2&search_id=1296250. Etymologically, "fellen" is linked to the Old English "ge-)fyllan" (in the West Saxon dialect) and "ge-fællan" (in the Anglican dialect), while "fel" is linked to the Old English "fel(l)".

⁴⁰⁶ Hatto, "The Lime-Tree," 198.

⁴⁰⁷ Rudd argues that this image personifies the leaves as "they do not just fall, they voluntarily loosen themselves from the trees" (*Greenery*, 118).

Gawain's chivalric failure, but also encodes the height of his feminisation at the mercy of the Green Knight's "axe". In this context, the linden tree's associations with eroticism and spring cast the idea of rebirth in a faintly threatening light, at least from the perspective of the patriarchal medieval discourses that infuse the poem. It could suggest Gawain will be "reborn" in problematic ways, just as the reference to spring when Gawain is re-dressed for Bertilak's court ironically reinforces the threat that Gawain's wintry journey more obviously encodes.

Thus, the non-human presence in the night-world, to which Gawain is both "loken" (joined/locked) with and "tan" (taken/trapped) by, can be seen to hold an insidious power in the eco-subtext, which is glimpsed through the text's seasonal cycles. Those cycles also snag Gawain, whose parallel narrative cycle maps his internal movements of character onto his physical body, which is increasingly enmeshed with the non-human. Gawain's winter journey to Hautdesert, which ends with an image of arboreal entrapment soon followed by one of spring, brings him further into the night-world, even if it is lit by warm fires. Those fires, in turn, suggest how Gawain's "rebirth" at Hautdesert threatens him alongside the non-human presences it connects him with; Gawain, the fox, and the vegetation glimpsed during Bertilak's hunts – and especially the final one – are all "felled" in various senses, both for sport and material gain. However, this does not completely burn away hints at arboreal power, a power that is glimpsed once more through the poem's various linden trees, which also figure into its seasonal shifts and further exemplify how Gawain is entangled with trees.

Growth and Destruction: The Holly Branch and the Axe

I will return to the ways in which Gawain's identity can be viewed in relation to trees in the next section, but the linden tree that stands outside the Green Chapel

provides a point of departure to consider the arboreal ramifications of the Green Knight's arrival at Camelot. The uncanny and unsettling power that this figure holds over Gawain throughout the poem, and especially during its climax, is prefigured by his introduction in Fitt One. This section will focus on how the cycle of growth and dormancy that is inherent in the movement of the seasons is also displayed in the opposing but connected holly branch and axe that the Green Knight is carrying as he enters Arthur's court. There is a clear association between these two objects, which are juxtaposed in the description of the Green Knight, and which mirror each other. Rudd has already insightfully discussed the uneasy balance between the holly and axe – evergreen growth in one hand and destruction in the other – as indicative of the anthropocentric rhetoric that infuses the poem.⁴⁰⁸ She convincingly argues that the axe has “nothing to do with the combat between humans, and everything to do with being a manmade tool contrasted with the naturally growing branch it is designed to hew”.⁴⁰⁹ At the same time, I will argue, these objects are another lens through which we can view human and non-human as entwined, so that the lines between violence amongst humans and violence against the non-human begin to blur.

To begin, it is first necessary to address the question of the Green Knight's greenness. As Rudd argues, the Green Knight is central to any attempt at a “green” reading of *SGGK*.⁴¹⁰ The *Gawain*-poet repeatedly emphasises this figure's alien greenness, asserting that he is “oueral enker-grene” (150; repeated 2477) and “al grayped in grene þis gome and his wedes” (151); from the outset, it is not only his

⁴⁰⁸ Gillian Rudd, “The Green Knight's Balancing Act,” in *In Strange Countries: Middle English Literature and its Afterlife*, ed. David Matthews (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), 26-27.

⁴⁰⁹ Rudd, “The Green Knight's Balancing Act,” 27.

⁴¹⁰ Rudd, “The Green Knight's Balancing Act,” 25; Rudd, “The Wilderness of Wirral,” 52; and Rudd, *Greenery*, 109.

clothes that are green, but the man himself. Outwith ecocritical approaches like Rudd's, scholars have provided various interpretations of this greenness that are sometimes contradictory.⁴¹¹ In engendering these contradictions, the multifaceted symbolic potential of the colour green can be seen to "camouflage the true meaning" of the text.⁴¹² In their attempts to pin down one "true meaning" of the Green Knight's greenness, critics of this poem therefore echo the members of Arthur's court, who, without success, "had meruayle [wondered] quat hit mene myȝ / þat a hapel and a horse myȝt such a hwe lach" (233-234). Green is life, fertility, spring, rebirth – whether it be in folkloric tradition or as associated with Christ – and nature. On the other hand, in the Middle Ages, the colour green was also associated with falsehood, unreliability, and even the devil; other scholars have interpreted the Green Knight's greenness as "an emblem of death".⁴¹³ Corinne Saunders reads this greenness as related to "the colour of the forest and of the faery", and it has also been explored through the "vegetation myth theory", within which the Green Knight is likened to a tree-god, or – more commonly – the Green Man.⁴¹⁴ Tenga discusses how the Green Knight evokes this aforementioned folkloric figure, "an ancient, pre-Christian man-plant hybrid that is traditionally associated with vegetative nature and rebirth", and which was assimilated into the Christian tradition.⁴¹⁵ However, Rudd rightly warns against simply viewing the Green Knight as a Green Man, as he is

⁴¹¹ For a summary of these interpretations, see Derek Brewer, "The Colour Green," in *A Companion to the Gawain-poet*, ed. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997), 181-190.

⁴¹² Blanch, "Games Poets Play," 64; also see 85.

⁴¹³ Blanch, "Games Poets Play," 65; Gillian Rudd, "Being Green in Late Medieval English Literature," in *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism*, ed. Greg Garrard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 30-34.

⁴¹⁴ Saunders, *The Forest of Medieval Romance*, 148; Blanch, "Games Poets Play," 64-66.

⁴¹⁵ Angela Tenga, "Seeds of Horror: Sacrifice and Supremacy in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *The Wicker Man*, and *Children of the Corn*," in *Plant Horror: Approaches to the Monstrous Vegetal in Fiction and Film*, ed. Dawn Keetley and Angela Tenga (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 59. I referenced other scholarship on this figure in my introduction.

repeatedly a green *man*, with few of the plant-like features of the folkloric figure: the Green Knight is a character “who has been pulled fully into human narrative, leaving his vegetative associations as mere hints”.⁴¹⁶

Indeed, the Green Knight’s greenness is both natural and alien. While addressing this alien otherness in terms of courtliness and chivalry, Greg Walker states that many scholars have seen the Green Knight as “an unsettling mixture of the monstrous and the decorous, the chivalrous and its barbarous, incomprehensible opposite”, and argues himself that “the idea that he represents an entirely alien code of values is nonetheless misleading”.⁴¹⁷ He also convincingly argues that the Green Knight is “‘half-etayn’, half-monster” and that “the qualification half is a vital one”; he is not wholly monstrous.⁴¹⁸ This is also true in terms of his relationship with the non-human more generally; the Green Knight is alien, but not wholly so. His greenness is compared with grass and enamel (235-236), comprehensible natural and man-made things. At the same time, it must be pointed out that he is *wholly* – not half – green: again, he is “oueral enker-grene” (150; repeated 2477). In fact, when the narrator compares him to grass and enamel it is in the sense that he is “grene as þe gres *and greener* hit semed, / þen grene aumayl on golde glowande *bryȝter*” (235-236; my emphasis). He is greener than anything in nature, even greener than what man can produce. Although there are other ways in which the Green Knight is both intelligible and uncanny, his greenness is at the

⁴¹⁶ Rudd, “The Green Knight’s Balancing Act,” 34; also see Rudd, *Greenery*, 110. These “hints” include the fact that his clothes are embroidered with birds and insects (166), which “invokes the figure of the Green Man, even if it does not quite fulfil his usual specifications” (*Greenery*, 111). This ekphrasis therefore functions similarly to that in *The Awntrys of Arthure*, as it is an artificial representation of the non-human that mimics it. Rudd also discusses how Gawain’s clothes also feature birds – specifically, parrots, which are “known not only for their display but also for their powers of mimicking human speech” – when he rides out of Camelot (Rudd, *Greenery*, 114).

⁴¹⁷ Greg Walker, “The Green Knight’s Challenge: Heroism and Courtliness in Fitt I of ‘Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,’” *The Chaucer Review* 32, no. 2 (1997): 112.

⁴¹⁸ Walker, “The Green Knight’s Challenge,” 112.

centre of his characterisation. It links him to aspects of the non-human world that are intelligible to humans, and also suggests that he exists beyond human parameters.

When Bertilak reveals that his greenness is a result of the supernatural intervention of Morgan le Fay (2446-2470), the insidiously unnatural features of his entrance into Arthur's court are foregrounded once more. This revelation also contains a reference to the horror of this intrusion into Arthur's court, when Bertilak reveals that Morgan's plot was intended to harm Guenivere, as previously discussed: Morgan "wayned me þis wonder [turned him green] your wyttez to reue, / For to haf greued Gaynour and gart hir to dyȝe" (2459-2460). The implication that Morgan intended for Guenivere to be literally scared to death by the spectacle of the Green Knight evokes a more sinister tone than his original intrusion causes, though his appearance is certainly unsettling, even without this. Guenivere's reaction is excluded from the narrative, except in the indirect reference to her fear implied by Arthur's "cortays speche" (469) to her: "dere dame, to-day demay yow neuer; / Wel bycommes such craft vpon Cristmasse" (470-471). This interjection is immediately preceded by another instance of laughter, which is emphasised by a pun on "green" and "grin": "at þat grene þay laȝe and grenne" (464). The members of Arthur's court subsequently declare the Green Knight a "meruayl" (466) and attempt to brand him as a sort of Christmas miracle. In contrast, the narrator interjects into the final lines of the Fitt One to warn Gawain directly: "now þenk wel, Sir Gawan, / For woȝe [danger] þat þou ne wonde [neglect] / þis auenture for to frayn / þat þou hatz tan on honde" (486-490).⁴¹⁹ Thus, the attempt to bring the Green Knight's appearance in

⁴¹⁹ It should be noted that the word tan for "taken" is once again significant here.

line with more understandable, accepted, and soothing discourses does not wholly dispel the sense of foreboding that he leaves behind.⁴²⁰

This sense of foreboding is also emphasised through the holly branch and the axe from the moment of their appearance. Both are introduced in a stanza that begins by suggesting that the Green Knight is not armed, which should, but ultimately does not, prefigure him as benign:

Wheper hade he no helme ne hawbergh nauþer,
 Ne no pysan ne no plate þat pented to armes,
 Ne no schafte ne no schelde to schwue ne to smyte,
 Bot in his on honde he hade a holyn bobbe [holly branch],
 Pat is grattest in grene when greuez [groves] ar bare,
 And an ax in his oper, a hoge and vnmete [monstrous],
 A spetos [cruel] sparþe [battle-axe] to expoun in spelle, quoso myzt (203-209)

From the outset, these objects are uncanny; Cooper states that the “rival meanings associated with the holly (peace) and the axe (war) are typical of the poet’s determination to keep the Green Knight’s significance undefinable”.⁴²¹ She refers here to the Green Knight’s assertion that “ȝe may be seker bi þis braunch þat I bere here / Pat I passe as in pes, and no plyzt seche” (265-266) while he is introducing the Beheading Game, and to the fact that holly was a conventional medieval symbol of peace and protection that would have been available in the winter.⁴²²

Indeed, holly bushes and trees had several positive associations in the Middle Ages, such that cutting one down was considered to be unlucky.⁴²³ Folk custom dictated that they acted as shelters for benign Otherworldly spirits, and holly

⁴²⁰ In this way, we can see how this figure is “‘green’ not only because of its hue and consequent connection to the vegetable realm but also because it hints at a creaturely way of being that refuses hierarchy”, as Dinshaw argues (“Ecology,” 357).

⁴²¹ Cooper, Notes to *SGGK*, 93, n. 10.

⁴²² See the entry for entry for “holly” in Simpson and Roud, *A Dictionary of English Folklore*, at <https://www-oxfordreference-com.ezproxy.is.ed.ac.uk/view/10.1093/acref/9780198607663.001.0001/acref-9780198607663-e-510>.

⁴²³ Simpson and Roud, *A Dictionary of English Folklore*.

was a symbol of a prosperous New Year.⁴²⁴ This holly additionally highlights the text's Christmas setting; although folkloric tradition dictated that holly should not be brought inside, this was encouraged at Christmas.⁴²⁵ Holly also had religious connotations, as the red berries were thought to symbolise Christ's blood and its evergreen nature represented the resurrection.⁴²⁶ Furthermore, Moore discusses how holly represents "the division of the sexes" in the medieval Holly and Ivy carols, as there are clear differences between the smooth "female" leaves and the prickly "male" ones.⁴²⁷

Despite these various and generally positive associations, the Green Knight's holly branch can also be seen to hold some more sinister connotations. The conjunction "bot" (meaning but, or except) in line 206 defines the holly branch as arms, equal to the axe. That is, he is not armed ("Ne no schafte ne no schelde to schwue ne to smyte", 205) *except* with the holly branch ("Bot in his on honde he hade a holyn bobb", 206) *and* the axe ("And an ax in his oper, a hoge and vnmete", 208). In fact, that the holly branch is mentioned first suggests that it is elevated above the level of the axe in this description of the Green Knight's "arms". The Green Knight's aforementioned insistence that the holly branch is a symbol of peace implies that he is carrying it as a token of his peaceful intentions in order to avoid violence, and it can thus be read as a protective emblem, akin to armour, perhaps. However, it soon becomes clear that he needs no such protection, as he has Morgan's supernatural power to keep him from death when Gawain beheads him. This protective power is retroactively assigned as a weapon when Bertilak reveals that Morgan wanted to scare Guenivere to death through the spectacle of the Green

⁴²⁴ Blanch, "Games Poets Play," 65, 72; Arthur K. Moore, "Mixed Tradition in the Carols of Holly and Ivy," *Modern Language Notes* 62, no. 8 (1947): 555.

⁴²⁵ Simpson and Roud, *A Dictionary of English Folklore*.

⁴²⁶ Blanch, "Games Poets Play," 71.

⁴²⁷ Moore, "Mixed Tradition," 554; also see Blanch, "Games Poets Play," 72.

Knight's miraculous survival of his beheading. This renders his insistence that he comes in peace ironic, as does the fact that his "peaceful" game ostensibly requires Gawain to lose his head.

Likewise, then, the supposedly peaceful and protective connotations of the holly branch could be viewed as threatening – it can be seen as more akin to arms than armour. The holly branch's associations with rebirth – it is "grattest in grene when greuez ar bare" (207) – could be seen to foreshadow the fact that Gawain is "reborn" in problematic ways throughout the poem, as discussed in the last section. Thus, though Blanch argues that the holly represents the Green Knight's resurrection, it can also be seen to represent *Gawain's* rebirth.⁴²⁸ In the same way that references to spring later in the poem signal Gawain's knotty re-characterisation, the seemingly positive associations of the holly branch with peace and rebirth are ironically more sinister than they first appear, and contribute to the ways in which the Green Knight and his greenness are threatening and frightening. In this sense, it is important that the gender of the holly branch is not provided – it is not clear whether it is smooth or prickly – reflecting the fluidity of gender identities in the poem. This holly has the potential to be either female or male, just as Gawain's identity extends beyond the masculine. This slippage between genders and the ambiguity of the holly branch's "meaning" is typical of this poem and its ambiguous uncanniness, which also allows for the holly branch to be read as a threatening metaphorical weapon, necessitating rebirth at whatever cost.

These more sinister connotations of the holly branch can also be viewed through the lens of the ghostly, unseen tree from which it must have been hewn. The fact that this branch has been cut away from its tree, perhaps using the very

⁴²⁸ Blanch, "Games Poets Play," 71.

axe that it mirrors, implies a narrative of discord between the human and non-human worlds in which the latter is subjugated. Additionally, the Green Knight's axe is specifically described as a "sparpe" (battle-axe) on line 209, which defines it as a tool of violence between humans.⁴²⁹ However, axes are not conventional chivalric weapons, unlike, for instance, the sword, and also have connotations of tree felling.⁴³⁰ Indeed, both the Green Knight and the *Gawain*-poet have "felled" the holly branch in order to use it as a signifier. Just as the trees that "loken" Gawain in Hautdesert are fragmented, this branch is only one part of the tree from which it was cut to act as a symbol – ostensibly of peace, though other interpretations are possible. The absent narrative of this slicing up of an overlooked holly tree, however, does not preclude the threat this battle-axe also poses to Gawain; though the Green Knight does not fulfil his implied threat to Gawain's life, Gawain nevertheless leaves the Green Chapel "cut down" and unable to return from the night world. The holly branch's narrative is therefore entangled with Gawain's, as this axe also threatens him, both physically and metaphorically, and blurs the lines between the violence humans enact on each other, and the violence they commit against the non-human. Both the unseen holly tree from which the branch was hewn and Gawain's chivalric identity are at risk from the Green Knight and his axe. The Green Knight's destructive power over the tree parallels his ability to threaten Gawain's life, alongside his identity.

That the narrative of the holly branch is largely "absent" strengthens its associations with the other non-human elements of the eco-subtext. To return to the

⁴²⁹ Indeed, Arthur "reads" it as such; Scala argues "while the Green Knight repeats 'game' over and over, Arthur hears only 'battle' and sees only the ax" (*Absent Narratives*, 55).

⁴³⁰ Elsewhere in Middle English romance, it is conventional for foes that are not knights to wield weapons that are not swords: I have already discussed the churl and champions of the Castle of the Maidens in *Ywain and Gawain*, for instance, and giants, such as the one in *Guy of Warwick*, usually wield axes (see line 3196 in Alison Wiggins, ed., *Stanzaic Guy of Warwick* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2004)).

girdle momentarily, Heng notes that it is a “slippery” signifier, implicated in the “reversals of hierarchy and priority asserted in the quick substitution of one construction after another (the Lady's, Gawain's, the Green Knight's, the Lady's again, then Morgan's)”.⁴³¹ Likewise, the holly branch does not have a linear trajectory of meaning, even if the Green Knight's definition is the only one that is presented. His insistence that it is a symbol of peace is complicated by its various other potential meanings, as just discussed. Additionally, as Rudd also notes, the holly branch physically disappears from the narrative after it is introduced: “the holly simply slips from sight – we do not know if it is left in Camelot or carried out by the departing knight”.⁴³² In the end, it is just as invisible as the tree from which it was cut. However, this invisibility does not straightforwardly imply the subjugation of the holly branch. In a text that consistently hides people and objects of power from view, the disappearance of the branch could be seen as its return to the subtext, where it can still hold power, just as Morgan holds the authority to drive the narrative from the background. Likewise, the Green Knight's removal of a branch from the invisible holly tree would not have killed it, and its potential to represent both growth and destruction live on with it, in the shadows of the narrative.

Though the axe, on the other hand, remains more of a focal point, it possesses a similarly ambiguous power. From the outset, this weapon is one of oppositions. Despite its partially anti-chivalric connotations, for example, it is at the heart of the text's central chivalric conflict. Similarly, the fact that it encodes threat to both human and non-human is mirrored in the way its description elides human/non-human boundaries. The first detail the narrator gives of the axe is that the blade is “al of grene stele and of golde hewen” (211). Once again, then, this is a “green”

⁴³¹ Heng, “Feminine Knots,” 508.

⁴³² Rudd, “The Green Knight's Balancing Act,” 38.

object, with all the potentially natural connotations of the Green Knight's own hue. However, just as with the Green Knight, this greenness does not necessarily imply a link to nature, and, in fact, the description of the axe emphasises its human-worked ornateness: it is "al bigrauen with grene in gracios werkes" (216) and "a lace lapped aboute" (217), with "tryed tasselez" attached (219). These man-made features render the axe impressive, and obfuscate its true purpose: although it is richly ornamented, it is also a very functional weapon with a blade "wel schapen to schere as scharp rasores" (213). However, as a language of entanglement and entwining intrudes once more into this description, the axe's ornately knotted decoration also obfuscates the fact that it is at least partially made of wood. The alliteration in the lines "þe stele of a stif staf þe sturne hit bi grypte" (214) draws attention to the fact that the Green Knight is – of course – holding the axe by its staff. Although this staff "watz wunden wyth yrn [iron] to þe wandez ende" (215), it is wooden underneath the iron: the alliteration in this line also emphasises the word "wandez", which can be translated as wand, or branch. This subtle reference to the fact that the axe used to be part of a tree incorporates the invisible, ghostly presence of another tree, felled by the very same type of tool it was cut down to make, and providing a further unsettling link to the holly branch in the Green Knight's other hand. The cycle of exploitation and threat that underpins human relationships with the non-human operates just beneath the surface of the narrative, covered up – as the shaft is covered by trappings of iron and lace – but nevertheless present.

In a striking image that captures the way the violence figured by the axe is incorporated into the life of the court, it is tied up over the festivities that resume when the Green Knight departs. Unlike the holly branch, the axe's fate is clear: the Green Knight leaves it behind when he leaves the court, and Arthur tells Gawain to "heng vp byn ax" (477). Now ostensibly Gawain's, the axe "watz don abof þe dece

[dias] on doser [wall-tapestry] to henge” (478), placing it in plain view and implying focus on it; indeed, it is hung in this way because “Per alle men for meruayl myzt on hit loke / And bi trwe tytel [evidence] þerof to telle þe wonder” (479-480). The axe therefore becomes material evidence for the Green Knight’s marvellous visit, to be used to spread word of his presence. However, we are also told that the knights “bozed [went] to a borde [table]” (481): they turn away from the axe to eat together, having just attempted to laugh away the horror of the Green Knight’s visit (464). The axe literally becomes part of the tapestry of courtly life, fading into the background alongside the other wood products that inhabit the court. The table that the assembled knights eat from, for example, would have been wooden, and wood would have been used to construct the castle within which this scene plays out, not to mention all the other wooden artefacts upon which life at court depended. The axe therefore hangs – hiding in plain sight – above the wood of the table and benches, which in turn support the weight of the animals consumed in the feast. The axe acts as a silent witness, while human anxieties are displaced by rituals that both focus on and marginalise the non-human. Nevertheless, the fact that the axe, presumably still bloody from severing the Green Knight’s head, literally overshadows the festivities suggests once more the fragility of the human identities constructed below it. Arthur’s court is built upon violence and combat, which, in turn, puts it at risk. Likewise, its relationship with the non-human Other is one in which the marginalised natural world nevertheless holds an uncanny power to threaten the human.

Thus, the intrusion of the Green Knight into Camelot is unsettling far beyond his jeering at the “berdlez chylder” (280) that he claims populate the court. His interrogation of the renown of Arthur’s knights prefigures the power he holds over Gawain’s life and identity, both at Hautdesert and at the Green Chapel. Alongside

this, the axe and the holly branch encode multivalent messages of human violence towards, and entanglement with, the non-human. The figure of the Green Knight is connected to both natural and supernatural elements, and is at once both a jolly marvel and a bloody threat. His holly branch figures this threat, despite his insistence upon its peaceful connotations, and it slips in and out of the narrative with an ease and potential power akin to that of Morgan and the girdle. Likewise, the axe embodies a complementary set of oppositions: it is both ornate and deadly, human and non-human, powerful and put aside. The “thing-power” of these objects is therefore entangled in the arboreal eco-subtext that lurks beneath the surface of the poem, and which in turn entwines itself around Gawain.

Decay and Renewal: The Tree Stump

To bring the implications of the holly branch and the axe together with Gawain’s hybrid identity, I will now turn to the tree imagery at climax of the poem. I have argued that human and non-human are entangled together in the figures of Gawain and the Green Knight: Gawain is joined to and trapped by the non-human world, and the Green Knight carries emblems from both worlds that overlap with each other. As Gawain embarks on his quest to find the Green Knight, he leaves behind the “dead”, invisible wood that would have made up the court setting and surrounded him in the idyllic world of Camelot. Instead, he enters a night world dominated by the living non-human. At Hautdesert, glimpses of the eco-subtext add to the unsettling atmosphere, both in the scenes of the hunt and those set within the castle; as Gawain and the fox are both “tan”, trees “loken” Gawain inside and burn alongside him. In this section, I will explore how Gawain is once more connected to and threatened by trees and wood at the Green Chapel.

This is first encoded by the reappearance of the Green Knight's axe. The sound of this axe being sharpened heralds Gawain's arrival at the Chapel, foreshadowing how it defines his experiences in this space. As he approaches, he hears the harrowing sound "as one vpon a gryndelston hade grounden a syþe" (2202). Though Gawain tells himself that he is not afraid of the noise (2211), there is something haunting in this song, especially as neither Green Knight nor axe are yet in view. Soon, though, the Green Knight emerges, carrying an axe "bi þat lace that lemed ful bryȝt" (2226). This repetition of the description of the axe at Arthur's court, where it is described as having "a lace lapped aboute" (217), suggests that perhaps this is the same axe, presumably restored to the Green Knight via further supernatural intervention. Even if this axe is a different one, the description is similar enough to allude to the one that the Green Knight left in Camelot, and once again its "lace" is emphasised. This suggests that the axe is involved in the interlacing "knots" of the narrative, and it becomes a microcosmic representation of the enmeshing of the human and the non-human that occurs elsewhere in the poem. Human metal and lacework covers the invisible wooden shaft of the axe, just as Gawain's prosthetic armour and girdle overlays his enmeshment with the non-human trees and animals he is connected to throughout the text.

Gawain must remove this armour in preparation for the Green Knight's blow in *SGGK*'s climactic moment of fear and violence, which is witnessed by other non-human elements. Since the Green Knight was "bare" (290) when he received Gawain's blow, Gawain must also meet his fate without armour. The nakedness of his neck is emphasised as he awaits the strike of the axe: "he lened with þe nek, and lutte, / and schewed þat schyre [flesh] al bare" (2255-2256). When the Green Knight's third swing cuts Gawain, the violence associated with the scratch implicates the non-human: "þe scharp [blade] schrank to þe flesche þurȝ þe schyre grece [fat],

/ Pat þe schene blod ouer his schulderes schot to þe erþe" (2313-2314). Although the cut is gruesome, it is the return of Gawain's blood "to the earth", and not the cut itself, that alerts him to the fact that the blow has been struck: "and quen þe burne seȝ þe blode blenk [gleam] on þe snawe, / he sprit forth" (2315-2316). This focus on the snowy earth also emphasises the winter setting once more, and the image of Gawain's bright blood on the snow is striking. Then follows a comic image of Gawain scrambling to re-arm himself: "he sprit forth spenne-fote [with feet together] more þen a spere lenþe, / hent heterly [quickly] his helme, and on his head cast" (2316-2317). These lines hold an echo of real laughter – the laughter of the courts to which this poem would have been performed – which mirrors the Green Knight's laughter after he lands his blow on Gawain (2389), and that of the members of Arthur's court when the Green Knight leaves Camelot (464) and when Gawain returns (2514), which all attempt to dispel the violent moments of tension that precede them. However, as before, this is not entirely successful, and, though comic, the image of Gawain jumping "more þen a spere lenþe" (2316) brings yet another wooden instrument of violence into the narrative, even if only figuratively.

That this metaphorical spear would be partially made of wood brings us back to the woodenness of the axe. When the Green Knight emerges with this axe, he is using it as a walking stick:

Saue þat fayre on his fote he foundez on þe erþe,
 Sette þe stele to þe stone, and stalked bysyde.
 When he wan to þe watter, þer he wade nolde,
 He hypped ouer on hys ax (2229-2232)

It should be noted that it is the steel of the axe that interacts with the earth and the stone – "Sette þe stele to þe stone" (2230) – and the wooden shaft is again invisible. It is encased by human-worked metal, and utilised not only as a weapon, but also to enable the Green Knight to more easily navigate and stand over the non-human.

However, this also strengthens the connection between Gawain and the axe, who is also, at the time, “covered up” by the metal of his armour. Indeed, with his armour removed, Gawain’s own “woodenness” is revealed. He flinches away from the first two swings of the Green Knight’s axe, but as he readies himself for the third and final swing, the narrator recounts:

Gawayn graypely hit bydez, and glent [flinched] with no member,
 Bot stode style as þe ston, oþer a stubbe [stump] auþer
 Pat rapeled [entwined] is in roché grounde with rotez a hundredth (2292-
 2294)

Here, Gawain is not a flourishing tree, but he is also not a rotten tree, not a tree that has reached a natural end.⁴³³ Instead, he is a tree stump, a tree that has – perhaps – been cut down *with an axe*. In this, we can see that Gawain’s identity has been “chopped down” and that he is no longer a perfect chivalric knight; here, he is preparing for the blow that represents his failure of *trawþe*. At the same time, this tree stump is a symbol of strength, intended to show Gawain’s endurance and bravery. Just as the hundred oak trees on his journey to Hautdesert symbolised his strength in adversity, the hundred roots here represent that Gawain is still a paragon; beneath the surface, he remains strong. The Green Knight sees him as a “perle” and Arthur re-figures the girdle as a symbol of honour. Likewise, Gawain here “becomes” a durable tree stump to symbolise his bravery as he prepares to receive the blow that punishes him for his failure in taking and concealing the girdle. This metaphor, then, sits at the central knot of the poem: Gawain is a flawed but exemplary hero.

Furthermore, his strength here is metaphorically linked with the “ground” that he is “rapeled” (entwined) with; the fact that Gawain is enmeshed with the non-

⁴³³ Unlike the “olde”, rotten trees that represent Gawain, Lancelot, and Lionel in *Le Morte Darthur*, as discussed previously.

human is reimagined as a strength. Although, as previously discussed, Godden argues that there is a vulnerability in relying on the non-human, here Gawain's affinity with it is reimagined as a true, helpful "prosthetic" addition that takes Gawain's identity beyond its human limitations. As with his armour, Gawain must incorporate other non-human elements, like the girdle, and – I would argue – an affinity with trees. The fact that the knot of Gawain's identity incorporates the arboreal non-human, even if only in metaphor, reflects that, as a knight, his identity depends on the tree-based settings within which he must seek *aventure*. That this arboreal presence is a stump, and not a tree – that it has been "felled" – encodes the threat and violence inherent in this *aventure*, which is also repeatedly witnessed by trees. As we have seen, for example, Lancelot is enchanted and attacked near the apple and elm trees and becomes a fruitless tree through his sinful relationship with Guenivere. Ywain must become invisible like a tree after the hawthorn witnesses his defeat of Salados, which prefigures how he later suffers a loss of identity among trees. In both cases, I have argued that the eco-subtext of these experiences allows for alternative discourses of power to be glimpsed. However, Gawain's metaphorical arboreal rebirth is best compared to Eve's intimacy with the Edenic tree she plants, as both Eve and Gawain "live on" through trees, even if those trees are mutilated. In both cases, this mutilation, though bloody – as Eve's tree and Gawain's neck wound both produce blood that carries a certain horror – is productive. In Eve's case, the wood that is mined from her tree is used to make powerful "things" in the form of the spindles and sheath, while in Gawain's, the cut-down tree figures his heroic identity.

In ecofeminist terms, Gawain's "non-humanisation" can again be linked to his feminisation; although both are overwritten, they remain essential. As previously mentioned, Fisher argues that Gawain and the rest of Arthur's court cannot

completely elide the girdle's feminine associations, despite their attempts to re-appropriate it as a masculine symbol of honour. That the girdle is incorporated into the chivalric identity of Arthur's knights suggests that the feminine – even if it is the subjugated feminine – is essential to the ideal, and to Gawain's new identity.⁴³⁴ Likewise, the fact that it is a human-manufactured object that is continually re-appropriated within human discourses does not remove its "thing-power". In both senses, the girdle represents how Gawain cannot escape his time at Hautdesert and the Green Chapel; he retains literal and figurative scars that mean he cannot leave the night world, as discussed previously. Gawain says of the girdle, "For mon may hyden his harme, bot vnhap ne may hit / For per hit onez is tachched twynne wil hit neuer" (2511-2512), in much the same way that the "endeles knot" of the pentangle can never be "sundred" (659). The knotty links between Gawain and the non-human – as well as the feminine – cannot be broken. Like the tree stump that represents him, Gawain's roots remain firmly entangled with the earth, even after he leaves the more natural settings of the poem and returns to Arthur's court.

It is worth emphasising again that this failure and transgression do not preclude Gawain's excellence. In fact, just as Ywain ends *Ywain and Gawain* by embracing the feminine and non-human aspects of his identity, and Galahad is allowed to complete the Grail quest through the intervention of a woman who also arms him with symbolically-loaded feminine and non-human things, Morgan's largely absent intervention allows Gawain to construct his identity in a more inclusive and tenable way. She allows him to be "cut down" by the Green Knight. Alundyne, Lunet,

⁴³⁴ Again, Boyd's argument that the feminine is necessary as a means to recuperate chivalry by holding women responsible for its failures is relevant (Boyd, "Sodomy, Misogyny," 77-113). In a more general sense, women are often used as markers of courtly and chivalric identities in medieval literature; Lancelot's relationship with Guenivere and Ywain's with Alundyne are good examples of the ways in which knights had to navigate associations with women.

and the lion are subordinate to Ywain's more central identity and the sheath that protects Galahad is largely invisible. Likewise, the feminine and non-human elements of Gawain's identity are repressed and overwritten by masculine, chivalric discourses. Nevertheless, that Gawain's identity is dependent on aspects other than those circumscribed by normative patriarchal power structures again allows for a subtle subversion of those structures. Likewise, there is a power in the tree stump metaphor that cannot be taken away from the non-human, even if it is only in relation to the human: this tree stump has the power to define Gawain's new, hybrid identity.

Conclusion: Fire and Water

The cycles addressed in this chapter are knotted together in many ways, but I will finish my discussion of *SGGK* through a focus on how they are connected by fear and horror. Gawain's wretched journey through the wintry wilderness brings him to a warmly lit castle that nevertheless forces him into a spring-like rebirth underpinned by dark undercurrents of shame and discomfort. Despite his return to the lighter idyllic world of Arthur's court, he is unable to fully escape these night-world experiences. Gawain's fraught relationship with the Green Knight's axe also connects him to the holly branch, which acts as more than a simple winter symbol of peace, and also prefigures Gawain's traumatic rebirth into a cut-down tree at the Green Chapel. Though this refigures his identity as hybrid, as I argued of Ywain's identity at the end of *Ywain and Gawain*, Gawain's is not a happy ending, despite the best efforts of Bertilak and the members of Arthur's court. The repeated emphasis on the darker side of medieval romance – which involves failure, defeat, and death – in *SGGK* suggests that it might be viewed through an EcoGothic

framework. This field explores how the non-human world participates in narratives of horror, and engenders an “ecophobic” fear of our uncertain, potentially dangerous, relationship with it. To conclude this chapter, I will gesture at how these ideas might be applied to *SGGK*, with a focus on the fires of Bertilak’s court, in comparison with the frozen wilderness.

The emphasis on ice during Gawain’s journey to Hautdesert brings water and its destructive potential to the foreground here. Water is also essential in *Ywain and Gawain*, not only in the well that accompanies the hawthorn tree, but also as a destructive element of the storms triggered when Colgrevice, Ywain, and Arthur pour water from the well on the nearby stone. Colgrevice’s description of the storm highlights the danger this provokes:

I was drevyn with snaw and slete,
 Unnethes I might stand on my fete.
 In my face the levening smate,
 I wend have brent, so was it hate,
 That weder made me so will of rede,
 I hopid sone to have my dede;
 And sertes, if it lang had last,
 I hope I had never thethin past (*Ywain and Gawain*, 375-382)

Water is also a dangerous feature of Gawain’s journey through the wilderness in *SGGK*:

For werre [fighting] wrathed hym not so much þat wynter nas wors
 When þe colde cler water fro þe cloudez schadde
 And fres er hit falle myȝt to þe fale [faded] erþe
 Ner slayn wyth þe slete he sleped in his ymes
 Mo nyȝtez þen innoghe in naked rokkez,
 Þer as claterande [splashing] fro þe crest þe colde borne [stream] rennez
 And henced heȝe ouer his hede in hard iisse-ikkles (726-732)

The images of water and stone here prefigure those in the hunting scenes, when the deer and boar meet their deaths among these elements, just as Gawain almost does.

There are also EcoGothic echoes in these descriptions, which both feature threatening non-human forces. In her chapter in *Plant Horror*, Angela Tenga compares *The Wicker Man* (1972) and *Children of the Corn* (2009) with *SGGK*, in terms of the ways in which they all engage with contemporary environmental anxieties, even if the *Gawain*-poet did not possess the scientific awareness available to the creators of these more modern narratives: “the poet’s lack of both modern vocabulary and knowledge of climatology surely did not prevent him from recognizing the menace of the natural world in his own time”.⁴³⁵ She then argues that anxieties over such phenomena as the Little Ice Age and the Black Death are reflected in *SGGK* in its representations of the non-human; the Little Ice Age, which began in the early fourteenth century, meant that by the time the *Gawain*-poet was writing, winters were often as hard and cold as the one that Gawain experiences in the wilderness.⁴³⁶ Furthermore, the Black Death reduced the population so drastically that the text “is connected with an era in which the natural world seemed bent on (and fully capable of) destroying the human population of Europe”.⁴³⁷ The suffering associated with Gawain’s travels through tree-based settings therefore encodes the same kind of ecophobic horror that we might read into more modern narratives of the threatening power of the non-human. Likewise, though the storms in *Ywain and Gawain* are not “natural”, in the sense that they are triggered by the actions of the knights that visit the well, they also evoke fear in the face of a powerful non-human force.⁴³⁸

⁴³⁵ Tenga, “Seeds of Horror,” 69.

⁴³⁶ Tenga, “Seeds of Horror,” 69.

⁴³⁷ Tenga, “Seeds of Horror,” 69.

⁴³⁸ That these men trigger this “climate change”, if I may employ this term, also holds weight in a modern EcoGothic sense; one of the things that makes plants horrifying, Keetley argues, is the potential “drama of vegetal life lashing back at the destroyer, exploiting the exploited” (Introduction to *Plant Horror*, 19). Though this is somewhat anachronistic, *Ywain and Gawain* can nevertheless be read in these terms.

The horror associated with the figure of the Green Knight can also be read in these terms, and his more courtly persona, Bertilak, can be read through an EcoGothic lens as well. Rudd notes that the wilderness landscape, such as the one Gawain travels through, is “assumed to be inhospitable more because it is simply indifferent than because it is explicitly hostile”.⁴³⁹ While Gawain’s perilous winter journey is therefore not one in which the non-human is actively assaulting him, the Green Knight continually and actively challenges Gawain, both in his green form and as Bertilak. It is the latter that I wish to focus on now, through further discussion of the fire with which Bertilak is associated. In *Ywain and Gawain*, the storm episodes contain cyclical periods of threat followed by relief; the birds that alight on the hawthorn to sing herald the “springtime” phase of reprieve within this cycle. Likewise, the birds that sing “unhappily” during Gawain’s winter journey (246-247) may soon sing with springtime joy again, and the trees that also reflect Gawain’s cold misery will bloom once more. Those trees that fuel Bertilak’s fires, however, will not; his castle is surrounded by unseen trees that are cut down for firewood. Although it was not common for whole trees to be cut down only to be used as firewood, the branches of felled trees were often used for this purpose, or trees were coppiced or pollarded (partially cut down) to encourage the stump or trunk that remained to produce rods or poles that could be used for firewood.⁴⁴⁰ Though these are renewable processes, and Bertilak’s management of his hunting park is therefore sustainable, that wood is continually burnt away to ash within his castle is typical of the threatening undercurrent of the poem: as wood is used up, Gawain’s identity is gradually “cut down”.

⁴³⁹ Rudd, *Greenery*, 127.

⁴⁴⁰ See the discussion of forest maintenance in my introduction.

This burning is especially threatening given Gawain's affinity with trees, and considering that he becomes a tree stump through metaphor at the Green Chapel. He therefore becomes like a coppiced tree; he is used by Bertilak, and parts of his identity are burnt away. Bertilak "cuts down" Gawain's chivalric identity in problematic ways, while at the same time maintaining a forest for hunting and – presumably – for firewood. Just as his pursuit and slaughter of the deer, boar, and fox parallels his "seduction" of Gawain, Bertilak's fires strengthen the affinity between Gawain and the arboreal. Likewise, the Green Knight's axe "fells" Gawain, and encodes violence towards the non-human; it is a wooden object, made from a tree that has also been felled. Furthermore, the axe is related to the holly branch that the Green Knight has also "cut down", reflecting how his machinations culminate in Gawain becoming a cut-down tree. What is EcoGothic about Bertilak, then, is that he represents how violence towards the non-human can also impact and endanger human life. Though I would not go as far as to suggest that Bertilak's control of the non-human world triggers an environmental crisis comparable to our post-industrial trauma, his destructive fire stands in opposition to the more "natural" watery dangers of *SGGK*'s wilderness. While the winter is certainly threatening, it holds within it a potential for thaw and renewal that Bertilak's fires burn away.

However, though Gawain's fate is tied to the trees that Bertilak cuts down to burn, his own process of renewal is encoded in what is left behind: a tree stump. Already dependent on tree-based settings for the *aventure* that constructs it, Gawain's identity is tied to trees throughout *SGGK*, culminating in this metaphor, through which he becomes one. Although his metaphorical tree-identity has been cut down, it is also strong, rooted in the earth. Perhaps, like a coppiced tree, he continues to grow new shoots. Consequently, he is not only like the tree stump, but also like the holly branch – which has been cut away from its tree, but also

symbolises rebirth – as he represents the fragmentation of a superlative identity that incorporates anxieties over the impossibility of human, masculine perfection. Thus, the tree stump can also be read as a metaphor for chivalry itself: although only a stump remained in fourteenth-century England, and although the ground was rocky, its roots were still strong. Gawain becomes entwined in a human/non-human knot that emerges as an integrated counterpoint to the pentangle.

Therefore, though I have structured this chapter according to the interweaving human and non-human cycles and oppositions in the text, I will end with the suggestion that Gawain’s narrative trajectory is less cyclical than it is tree-shaped. As Rudd points out, “although we tend to think of the year as a repetitive cycle, in fact no year is the same as any other, more precisely, it does not yield the same”.⁴⁴¹ Likewise, although this poem participates in the archetypal cycles of romance, and is, to some extent, restricted within sets of binary oppositions, it “yields” a hero that branches beyond the human. While Gawain’s physical body returns to Arthur’s court, his character grows past normative chivalric structures, through the “earth” of them, and out into another world, dark and cold as it may be. This tree-identity is gnarled and twisted – dark and knotty like the text – and also, in the end, cut down. This image is disturbing, as is the implication that Gawain remains in the night world forever. The threat encoded by Bertilak’s fires participates in this horror, and goes beyond that of the water that puts Ywain and the hawthorn tree at risk, and that of the ice and snow that Gawain faces in the wilderness. However, just as previous scholars have read this text as a recuperation of the chivalric ideal, reading Gawain’s identity through the lens of trees provides a new perspective on his human identity. If chivalry benefits from this narrative of exemplary human imperfection so, too, does the non-human, and those human

⁴⁴¹ Rudd, *Greenery*, 116.

identities that are tied to it. When these human identities become hybrid and inclusive – when they become, like Gawain, tree-like in their rootedness with the earth – the non-human holds power beyond simply supporting human identities, even if this power carries a certain horror. The non-human becomes a prosthetic addition that, in Godden’s words, “eschews binaries of whole/broken”.⁴⁴² Even a tree/human that has been “cut down” is powerful.

⁴⁴² Godden, “Prosthetic Ecologies,” 1287.

Chapter Four: Trees in the Middle English Breton Lays

We redeth oft and findeth y-write,
 And this clerkes wele it wite,
 Layes that ben in harping
 Ben y-founde of ferli thing:
 Sum bethe of wer and sum of wo,
 And sum of joie and mirthe also,
 And sum of trecherie and of gile,
 Of old aventours that fel while;
 And sum of bourdes and ribaudy,
 And mani ther beth of fairy.
 Of al thinges that men seth,
 Mest o love, forsothe, they beth⁴⁴³

As these opening lines from *Sir Orfeo* attest, the lay is a form of medieval romance that comes with certain expectations, and lays tend to contain common themes, such as love, minstrelsy, the supernatural, and adventure.⁴⁴⁴ However, not included in the list of features quoted above is a staple of the lay that is commonly overlooked: lays also contain trees that can be seen to define them. As is the case with the wider corpus of medieval romance, lays are reliant on tree-based settings, and the trees in these short poems are witnesses of “aventours” (*Sir Orfeo*, 8), markers of interactions with “fairy” (10), and backdrops for the feats and affirmations of love that they are, according to the *Orfeo*-poet, “mest” concerned with (12). In this chapter, I will consider the trees of the Middle English Breton Lays, including those of *Sir Orfeo*, *Sir Degaré*, *Lay le Freine*, *The Erle of Tolous*, *Emaré*, *Sir Gowther*, *Sir*

⁴⁴³ *Sir Orfeo*, 1-12. This and all subsequent references to the lays (unless otherwise indicated) are from Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury’s edition, *The Middle English Breton Lays* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995).

⁴⁴⁴ The features traditionally used to define the lays are discussed by A.C. Spearing, for example; see Spearing, “Madness and Gender,” 258.

Launfal, *The Franklin's Tale*, and *Sir Cleges*.⁴⁴⁵ These texts contain the usual romance reliance on tree-based settings, and, furthermore, they tend to mention individual trees at moments of heightened narrative tension. I will explore how the trees of these poems participate in the narratives of “wer” and “wo” mentioned in *Sir Orfeo* (5); as in *Le Morte Darthur*, *Ywain and Gawain*, and *SGGK*, trees are frequently associated with violence in these lays. They take part in this violence as spectators of danger, as protectors, as bridges to other worlds, and as wooden objects that also come to act as “things”. Through this, trees become markers of an underground eco-subtext that implants itself into the trajectories and identities of lay protagonists, entangling human identities in transgressive and powerful ways.

Trees and wood that are consistently and violently associated with human identities and struggles in the Middle English Breton Lays provide a new framework through which to view this group of texts. Defining the lays has long occupied those that wish to address them, and there is still debate about whether they should be considered related at all. As Shearle Furnish puts it, this grouping is “traditional and artificial”.⁴⁴⁶ Furthermore, as John Finlayson argues, “defining the Middle English lay is at least as slippery a business as attempting to define the romance”, which, as A.C. Spearing points out, is itself “fickle, evasive, hard to pin down in terms of genre or tone”, as discussed in my introduction.⁴⁴⁷ That said, this group of short Middle English romances share an affiliation with their Breton predecessors. In the strictest sense, the Breton lays can be defined as “any of the poems produced between approximately 1150 and 1450 which claim to be literary versions of lays sung by

⁴⁴⁵ Though *Sir Cleges* is not usually considered to be a lay, Laskaya and Salisbury make a convincing case for including it, as will be further discussed below.

⁴⁴⁶ Shearle Furnish, “Thematic Structure and Symbolic Motif in the Middle English Breton Lays,” *Traditio* 62 (2007): 83.

⁴⁴⁷ John Finlayson, “The Form of the Middle English ‘Lay,’” *The Chaucer Review* 19 (1985): 352; Spearing, “Madness and Gender,” 271.

ancient Bretons to the accompaniment of the harp".⁴⁴⁸ Marie de France, whose collection of twelve twelfth-century lais form the basis of the tradition, codified the genre in Anglo-Norman.⁴⁴⁹

In Middle English, there are commonly thought to be eight texts that are based on, or claim to be, Breton Lays: *Sir Orfeo*, *Sir Degaré*, *Lay le Freine*, *The Erle of Tolous*, *Emaré*, *Sir Gowther*, *Sir Launfal*, and *The Franklin's Tale*.⁴⁵⁰ They were all composed between the late thirteenth and the early fifteenth centuries, and while only *Sir Launfal* and *Lay le Freine* are adaptations of Marie's work, the rest reference Brittany, or a Breton source, and *Sir Degaré* and *The Franklin's Tale* are set there. In their collection of the Middle English Breton Lays, Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury also make a strong case for including *Sir Cleges* among these texts, due to its focus on minstrelsy.⁴⁵¹ Among the other similarities and differences that both connect and separate these nine texts, I will argue, trees emerge as a definitive element.

I will therefore address these nine lays as a specific case study that suggests how the readings of the last three chapters might be applied more widely to romance. This thesis has so far used trees as a starting point for its consideration of each text, but the lays provide an opportunity to investigate more fully how arboreal patterns form throughout the romance genre. I will start with a brief overview of some of the most important tree imagery in *Sir Degaré*, *Sir Gowther*, *The Erle of Tolous*, *Emaré*, and *Sir Launfal*, before moving on to the more in-depth case studies of *Sir Orfeo* and *Lay le Freine*, which both merit a more thorough exploration of their arboreal presences. In *Sir Orfeo*, we can once more glimpse a powerful eco-subtext

⁴⁴⁸ Laskaya and Salisbury, "General Introduction," 1.

⁴⁴⁹ Laskaya and Salisbury, "General Introduction," 1; Finlayson, "The Form," 352-353.

⁴⁵⁰ Finlayson, "The Form," 352.

⁴⁵¹ Laskaya and Salisbury, Introduction to "*Sir Cleges*," 3.

via a focus on the trees that interact with Orfeo, and which define his identity as fluid and hybrid. As a counterpoint, though we may expect *Lay le Freine* to feature further blurring of human/non-human boundaries – as its eponymous heroine is named for the ash tree in which she is found as a baby – its trees are more static and restricted. Nevertheless, their occasional presence provides further evidence for a tree-based classification of the lays. I will return to this proposed classification in the conclusion, in which *Sir Cleges* and *The Franklin's Tale* will be addressed. *Sir Cleges*, which is not traditionally considered to be part of the Middle English Breton Lay genre, features trees comparable to those found in other lays, but *The Franklin's Tale*, which is commonly considered to be a lay in name alone, does not. Though, in each case, care must be taken to allow the trees of these texts to grow as they will, without restricting them within anthropocentric patterns of human concerns, a tree-based reading of this romance form opens up our perspectives on the human and non-human relationships within the genre.

Trees and Violence in the Lays: A Brief Survey of Arboreal Imagery in *Sir Gowther*, *Sir Degaré*, *The Erle of Tolous*, *Emaré*, and *Sir Launfal*

In the Middle English Breton Lays, most references to trees accompany violence. This may not be especially surprising, considering that violence is inherent in romance, and bearing in mind that this thesis has so far shown that representations of the non-human are often associated with an unsettling tone, if not outright vulnerability and trauma. However, in the following examples – *Sir Gowther*, *Sir Degaré*, *The Erle of Tolous*, *Emaré*, and *Sir Launfal* – this association is more striking, as, in most of these texts, trees *never* occur except in relation to violence.

They lack the more benign and banal mentions of trees that often occur in other medieval romances, such as when horses are tied to trees, or when trees are mentioned in passing. This could be related to the structural features of the lays, which tend to be more succinct in their lyricism than the texts discussed thus far. In any case, the conflation of violence and the non-human seems particularly marked in these texts, and trees loom large within this association.

Sir Degaré and *Sir Gowther* are a suitable starting point, as both of these narratives begin with the conception of the eponymous heroes, and both are conceived beneath trees in acts of sexual violence. In *Sir Gowther*, this violence occurs as Gowther's mother is enjoying her orchard:

In hur orchard apon a day
 Ho meyt a mon, tho sothe to say,
 That hur of luffe besoghth,
 As lyke hur lorde as he myght be;
 He leyd hur down undur a tre,
 With hur is wyll he wroghthth (67-72)

The text soon reveals that this figure is a demon, a "felturd fende" (74), that has disguised himself as her husband.⁴⁵² As Laskaya and Salisbury point out, the description of the demon as "felturd" (shaggy or hairy) associates him with the figure of the wild man, which I will return to later in this chapter.⁴⁵³ However, his violation of Gowther's mother occurs "In hur orchard" (67), and thus not within a setting in which we expect to find a wild man; orchards are cultivated, usually feminine, spaces of enclosure, as I will discuss in more detail in relation to *Sir Orfeo*.⁴⁵⁴ The pronoun "hur" in line 67 gives Gowther's mother possession of the orchard, but – like the

⁴⁵² This phrase is repeated at the end of the text (line 748), and, as Laskaya and Salisbury note, it is also found in *Emaré* (line 540); see their note to *Sir Gowther*, line 74.

⁴⁵³ Laskaya and Salisbury, Note to *Sir Gowther*, line 74.

⁴⁵⁴ Orchards are also liminal spaces – between human and non-human – and are consequently sites of interaction with the Otherworld in the lays, as I will also discuss further below.

orchard's trees – she is enclosed within it. The subsequent anaphoric repetition of “hur” in the above quotation emphasises the violence enacted upon her, in the presence of a tree.

Though the tree under which this violence occurs is described no further in the version of *Sir Gowther* in NLS Advocates 19.3.1 (quoted above), the version in BL MS Royal 17.B.XLIII specifies it occurs “Undernethe a chestayne tree” (line 71).⁴⁵⁵ This specification could allude to the Christian overtones of the rest of the narrative, which tracks Gowther's atonement for his demonic birth and the problematic behaviour he exhibits in the first third of the text.⁴⁵⁶ George Ferguson notes that chestnuts are a Christian symbol of chastity, as they are “flesh” unharmed by the thorns that surround them.⁴⁵⁷ Indeed, Gowther ends the text in God's favour – “God was of hym feyn” (750) – and unharmed by his sinful acts at the start of the poem. Among other atrocities, for example, he hangs parsons “on knaggus [hooks]” (200); this sacrilegious act could involve a tree – these “hooks” could be branches of trees – which alludes to his conception, and again links trees with violence. Gowther also repeatedly uses fire to enact violence: he locks a group of nuns in their church and “brend hom up” (191), and later “To bren armettys was is dyssyre, / A powre wedow to seyt on fyre” (202-203). While Bertilak's fires only metaphorically “burn” Gawain, here Gowther literally burns people to death, alongside the wooden structures he locks them in.

⁴⁵⁵ For this alternative version, see Thomas C. Rumble's edition of *Sir Gowther*, in *The Breton Lays in Middle English* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1965).

⁴⁵⁶ This is explored in more depth by Emily Rebekah Huber, who focusses on how a greyhound that brings food to Gowther in the wilderness parallels his own “dog-like” identity, which must be redeemed and domesticated (“Redeeming the Dog: *Sir Gowther*,” *The Chaucer Review* 50 (2015): 284-314); also see Salter, *Holy and Noble Beasts*, 71-81.

⁴⁵⁷ Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols*, 34. In folklore, the nuts were also thought to have curative powers; see Leach and Fried, *Dictionary of Folklore* 1: 215.

The start of Gowther's penitence for acts such as these is marked by another mention of the chestnut tree beneath which he was conceived. After an earl accuses Gowther of being "sum fendys son" (209), he confronts and threatens his mother, who eventually tells him:

Son, sython y schall tho sothe say:
 In owre orcharde apon a day
 A fende gat the thare,
 As lyke my lorde as he myght be,
 Undurneyth a cheston tre (229-233)

Both manuscript versions include the species of the tree at this point.⁴⁵⁸ In contrast, trees are completely absent when Gowther starts to correct his demonic behaviour: there is not one mention of a tree after Gowther's mother references the chestnut tree in these lines. Thus, tree imagery in this text remains connected with the more anti-social, unchivalrous violence of its first section, and is largely absent once Gowther begins to adhere to norms of chivalric, righteous violence during his redemption. The chestnut tree therefore frames Gowther's problematic characterisation, as it first witnesses his violent, demonic conception, and is then mentioned again at the beginning of his atonement for it, before disappearing completely.

Alongside the religious associations of chestnut trees, they also commonly act as bridges between the human world and the Otherworld, which is often threatening. Though in *Sir Gowther* this Otherworld is represented by a demonic figure, in *Sir Degaré* it is a fairy knight that conceives the hero through an act of sexual violence involving a tree. While riding through the "thikke of the forest" (64), Degaré's mother, princess of Brittany, and her maidens come upon a "grene" (73) and decide to rest. Soon after, the maidens fall asleep "under a chastein tre" (74).

⁴⁵⁸ Rumble, "*Sir Gowther*," line 227.

Like the chestnut tree in *Sir Gowther*, this tree prefigures violence, though in this case it does not occur directly beneath this tree; while her maidens are sleeping, Degaré's mother wanders away to gather flowers and gets lost (77-84), eventually meeting a self-proclaimed "fairi knyghte" (100). The trees that witness the sexual violence that this fairy enacts against Degaré's mother (see 109-114) are unseen, and even the chestnut tree that her maidens sleep beneath disappears from the narrative; when she returns to find them "al slepend" (136), their surroundings are described no further. The dream-like quality of this episode, in which people and things move in and out sight, associates it with the Otherworld, which is first signalled by the chestnut tree.⁴⁵⁹ This tree, then, is implicated in the conception of Degaré, and the supernatural violence through which it comes about.

The relationship between trees and the Otherworld is, of course, not limited to chestnut trees. The simple presence of any tree often marks a place of connection between the human and fairy worlds, and acts as a precursor to supernatural intervention, as we have seen in Lancelot's encounter with the four queens in *Le Morte Darthur*, as well as in the magical healing of Ywain's madness while he is sleeping beneath a tree in *Ywain and Gawain*.⁴⁶⁰ As Saunders puts it, "sleeping under single trees is consistently associated with marvellous events in the romances".⁴⁶¹ Indeed, in another version of this poem, Degaré is conceived beneath a hawthorn tree, like the one in *Ywain and Gawain*, exemplifying how arboreal connections to the supernatural operate across species. In the version of this text that appears in the Rawlinson manuscript, "adown they lyght at a tre" (47) and soon

⁴⁵⁹ Saunders notes that "the time of day, the heat, the forest setting, the sudden sleepiness which descends on the company, all these signal the proximity of the otherworld or the unexpected to the reader" (*The Forest of Medieval Romance*, 136).

⁴⁶⁰ Other examples occur in *Sir Launfal* and *Sir Orfeo*, which I will address shortly.

⁴⁶¹ Saunders, *The Forest of Medieval Romance*, 134.

after her ladies fall asleep “unther a hawthorn tre” (66).⁴⁶² As discussed in relation to *Ywain and Gawain*, hawthorn trees were associated with eroticism and fertility in the Middle Ages, perhaps stemming from the fact that they were commonly used in grafting. This suggests that *Sir Degaré’s* hawthorn has symbolic potential beyond its Otherworldly links; in this case, these associations with fertility are borne out in the birth of Degaré.⁴⁶³ Furthermore, the fact that the tree switches species here signals its liminality, as its speciation is therefore at once both important and incidental. Just as the fact that *Le Chevalier au Lion’s* pine tree is changed to a hawthorn tree in *Ywain and Gawain* suggests the tree is subject to human whims *and* signals the tree’s uncanny and ambiguous power, the slippage between chestnut and hawthorn in these distinct manuscript versions of *Sir Degaré* draws attention to the mysterious nature of the tree/s in this episode.

This ambiguity soon gives way to the fact that Degaré’s violent conception in the presence of these trees foreshadows his own use of trees for violence. Fearful of her father’s reaction to her pregnancy, Degaré’s mother sends him away, and he grows up the son of a merchant. Eventually, his hermit mentor shows him the objects sent by his mother – a letter and gloves, which he eventually uses to identify her and himself – and he sets out to find his kin. Refusing the hermit’s offer of a horse and armour (322-323), Degaré arms himself through violence towards the non-human:

He hew adoun, bothe gret and grim,
To beren in his hond with him,
A god sapling of an ok;
Whan he tharwith gaf a strok,

⁴⁶² These references are to Rumble’s edition of *Sir Degaré*, also in his book, *The Breton Lays in Middle English*; he uses Rawlinson as a base manuscript, while Laskaya and Salisbury use the version from the Auchinleck manuscript quoted above.

⁴⁶³ In fact, this version of the manuscript is not as explicit about the knight’s supernatural status at this point; he says only “Y am com to the as a knyght” (Rumble, “*Sir Degaré*,” line 90), as opposed to the Auchinleck’s self-proclaimed “fairi knyghte” (100).

Ne wer he never so strong a man
 Ne so gode armes hadde upon,
 That he ne scholde falle to grounde (325-331)

Furnish argues that here Degaré “implicitly admits his unreadiness for knighthood by rejecting chivalric arms to choose instead an oak sapling, which both as weapon and as phallic symbol is more primitive than the sword or lance”.⁴⁶⁴ However “primitive”, Degaré’s violence towards the oak tree here mirrors the violence he will enact with his staff in the future.⁴⁶⁵ Degaré and this staff are so powerful that they can defeat men in even the best armour; once again, this defeat is communicated through reference to the “grounde” (331), as discussed previously in Chapter Two. Here the species of tree is also significant; as mentioned in relation to Arthur in *Le Morte Darthur* and Gawain in *SGGK*, oak trees were symbols of power and strength, and this one encodes Degaré’s inherent nobility.

Indeed, Degaré goes on to affirm his identity, much as Gowther does, and – as in *Sir Gowther* – trees are largely absent from the narrative after this point, despite frequent tree-based settings. Once again, trees mark both Degaré’s conception, and the beginning of his journey to construct his chivalric identity, but thereafter remain in the background. However, in *Sir Degaré*, there is one important exception: during an episode in which Degaré unknowingly battles his own grandfather, his opponent “taketh a wel gretter tre” (525) with which to attack Degaré.⁴⁶⁶ Here, the word “tree” is used to describe the king’s lance, which is elsewhere called a “schaft” (498, 511, 515, 533, 538, 560, 565, and 569). This word, “tre”, is used interchangeably for man-made wooden instruments frequently in

⁴⁶⁴ Furnish, “Thematic Structure,” 89.

⁴⁶⁵ Note that this passage in the Rawlinson manuscript (Rumble, “*Sir Degaré*,” lines 285-291) omits the implication that Degaré fells the tree himself.

⁴⁶⁶ A similar line occurs a little earlier in the Rawlinson manuscript (Rumble, “*Sir Degaré*,” line 483).

Middle English literature, but I highlight this instance because the lack of living “trees” in this part of the text renders this particularly striking. As in *SGGK*, the reference to the woodenness of this weapon draws attention – even if only briefly – to the fact that a tree had to be felled to produce it.

In turn, this cut-down tree has the power to put human identities and lives at risk, while also strengthening them. Though the phallic symbolism that the king has a bigger lance – a bigger “tree” – threatens Degaré, his defeat of the king confirms his own identity, both in the sense that it demonstrates his knightly prowess, and in that it leads to the revelation of his noble identity. As a reward for this victory, he is promised his mother’s hand in marriage, and she realises who he is through the gloves that he remembers to show her just in time to prevent incest. As in *Sir Gowther*, there is then an episode in which Degaré’s mother relates the story of his violent conception: “in a forest as I wes...” (686). This allusion to the trees that witnessed this violence draws a thread between them and the cut-down trees that form his staff and the aforementioned spears. Trees once again frame the violence of this lay, and their narratives are entangled with that of the protagonist.

While the next text I will turn to, the *Erle of Tolous*, does not feature the same framing narrative involving sexual violence towards the mother of the protagonist, it does again contain trees linked to violence. A short summary of the plot of this text is useful: the protagonist, Sir Barnard, falls in love with the wife of the Emperor of Germany, Beulybon, but has to leave her; while he is away, two knights proposition Beulybon, she rejects them, and they decide to accuse of her adultery in case she tells her husband; Barnard hears of this, returns to save her from the pyre, and marries her upon her husband’s death three years later. The first reference to a tree in this narrative is the only one that is not directly connected to violence: when

Barnard is gazing upon Beulybon, “hym thocht sche was as bryght / As blossome on the tree” (332-333). However, thereafter, the word “tree” signals threat, such as when Beulybon rejects the knights that proposition her: she tells the second knight “thou schouldest be honged, wythowt fayle, / Upon a galowe tree” (656-657). This reference to the use of trees as a means of execution foreshadows the death of the knight in question: during the trial by combat between Barnard and the two knights, Barnard smites the first knight with his spear, and when the second knight tries to flee, “the Erle ovyrtok hym undur a tre” (1119). Though not a gallow-tree, the appearance of this tree as the second knight is defeated alludes to Beulybon’s threat to execute him.

Subsequently, both knights are indeed executed; they are burnt to death, presumably on Beulybon’s pyre:

‘Therefore, traytours, ye schall brenne
 Yn thys fyre, bothe at onys!’
 The Erle anon them hente,
 And in the fyre he them brente,
 Flesche, felle, and boonys (1131-1135)

Here, the act of burning is emphasised by the repetition of *brenne/brente*, as well as the visceral description of the knights’ flesh, skin, and bones burning. The violence of this image is immediately followed by another reference to burning – “When they were brent bothe twoo” (1136) – further emphasising the viciousness of this execution. Although not mentioned, the unseen trees that burn along with these knights further connects arboreal imagery with violence, especially considering how trees are associated with execution elsewhere in the poem.⁴⁶⁷

⁴⁶⁷ This pyre imagery can also be compared to that of *The Knight’s Tale*, though in that text the pyre is a funeral pyre, and not a means of execution. I will reference Arcite’s pyre in more detail in the next chapter; see page 294, footnote 589.

In *Emaré*, this relationship between trees and violence is apparent once more, though in a more abstract sense. *Emaré* is a version of the so-called “Constance-saga”, a narrative structure in which a woman experiences exile as a result of her father’s attempts to rape her; in this group of narratives, the heroine subsequently marries in another land, and is accused of a crime, usually to do with her child, in her new husband’s absence.⁴⁶⁸ In this lay, *Emaré* refuses to marry her father, Emperor Artyus, who consequently sets her adrift in a boat. Although she washes ashore and marries the King of Galys, she is soon put to sea again, this time with her infant son, when her jealous mother-in-law intervenes to inform her husband that she has given birth to a monster, and forges a letter from him condemning her. She is eventually reunited with her husband and reconciled with her father, but only after much suffering; it is only in relation to this suffering that trees are mentioned.

Tree-based settings are referenced twice in the text. First, in the description of Emperor Artyus’ lands – “He hadde bothe hallys and bowrys, / Frythes fayr, forestes wyth flowrys” (28-29) – and second, in the description of the messenger’s journey to deliver the forged letter that condemns *Emaré* in Galys: “But rode hom mony a myle, / By forest and by fryght” (599-600). Both mentions of the forest prefigure moments of exile for *Emaré*, and, furthermore, in both periods of exile *Emaré* is forced into a position of dependence on the non-human world, though this dependency is not land-based like these settings: she is put to sea. When Sir Kadore finds *Emaré* after she drifts ashore at Galys, “Syr Kadore hadde gret pyté; / He toke up the lady of the see” (361-362). Here, *Emaré* is directly aligned with

⁴⁶⁸ Laskaya and Salisbury, Introduction to “*Emaré*,” 1. Another example of this narrative structure in Middle English in Chaucer’s *Man of Law’s Tale*; see *The Riverside Chaucer*, 87-103. Rudd insightfully discusses this text from an ecocritical perspective in her chapter on “Sea and Coast” in *Greenery*, 133-134.

nature; she has not just been to sea, she is “of the see.” This alignment is immediately reinforced, and linked back to the land, by the observation that “she was wax lene as a tre” (365). Thus, Emaré becomes a tree through metaphor, associating her suffering with the arboreal non-human, as well as with water. Moreover, the verb “wax” suggests natural growth, and the irony that she has “grown” to be diminished further emphasises how the non-human world marks the violence enacted upon her.⁴⁶⁹

Emaré’s second exile is similarly associated with the non-human. The corresponding mention of forests and woodland, “By forest and by fryght” (600), as quoted above, occurs in the midst of her mother-in-law’s plot, as the messenger is delivering her forged letter. Immediately after he delivers his letter, Emaré “toke leve of the londe” (642) to honour her husband’s supposed orders, despite the woe this causes her. Laskaya and Salisbury point out that instead of cursing those that mistreat her, Emaré curses the ocean: “Wele owth y to warye the, see, / I have myche shame yn the!” (667-668).⁴⁷⁰ This sea voyage is again accompanied by tree imagery, and this time they are even linked by a rhyming couplet: “she was aferde of the see, / And layde her gruf uponn a tre” (655-656). Here, the word “tre” is again used in the sense of “wood”: Rumble glosses this as “probably the keel – the hewn log running the length of the bottom of the boat”.⁴⁷¹ Thus, while previously Emaré herself grew “like a tree” as a result of her father’s attempt to sexually violate her and her subsequent exile, here she lies next to a tree that has also been acted upon violently. This tree has been shaped by man, cut down and fashioned for human use, and – like Emaré – must submit to the vicissitudes of the sea. While the story

⁴⁶⁹ For “wax” and natural growth, see the *MED* entry at https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED51942/track?counter=2&search_id=1311528.

⁴⁷⁰ Laskaya and Salisbury, Introduction to “*Emaré*,” 2.

⁴⁷¹ Rumble, “*Emaré*,” in *The Breton Lays*, note 213 to line 656.

eventually ends happily for Emaré, again we see how tree imagery and violence are linked in the lays, and how the lines between human and non-human can be blurred through this violence.

To draw this introductory section to a close, I will now turn to *Sir Launfal*, which features a tree linked with violence in a slightly different, and more indirect, way. At the start of the text, Launfal is impoverished and estranged from Arthur's court, ostensibly because he dislikes Guenivere's adulterous nature (44-48) and she, in turn, neglects him: "Everych knyght sche gaf broche other ryng, / But Syr Launfal sche yaf nothyng - / That grevede hym many a sythe" (70-72).

Subsequently, Launfal's reputation and social standing are threatened; he is not invited to a feast held at Arthur's court "for hys poverté" (187), for example, and he has to beg a damsel to loan him a saddle and bridle in order than he might ride his horse (205-210). As previously discussed, a knight's horse was essential to their chivalric assemblage, and Launfal's inability to equip his reflects the dire state of his chivalric standing. This is further emphasised when he does manage to secure riding apparel, and still cannot maintain knightly dignity:

He rood wyth lytyll pryde;
Hys hors slod, and fel yn the fen [mud],
Wherefore hym scornede many men
Abowte hym fer and wyde (213-216)

That Launfal's horse dirties itself by falling in the "fen" is somewhat comedic, in the sense that this is far removed from conventional descriptions of romance protagonists deftly handling their horses.⁴⁷² However, it also underlines the fact that Launfal's identity has been "dirtied" by his fall from grace, and reflects the grave implications of the fact that he can no longer provide for himself.

⁴⁷² Saunders explores this in more detail in relation to *Aucassin et Nicolette*, in which Aucassin has a similar fall (*The Forest of Medieval Romance*, 144).

Soon afterwards, Launfal's precarious position of poverty is witnessed by a tree, which also marks the start of his journey to regain his chivalric standing. After his horse falls in the mud, Launfal decides to ride into a forest "For to dryve away lokynge" (218), that is, to avoid the men that witnessed his fall, and scorned him for it. Soon after,

He lyghte adoun, and gan abyde
 Under a fayr forest.
 And, for hete of the wedere,
 Hys mantell he feld togydere,
 And sette hym doun to reste.
 Thus sat the knyght yn symplyté,
 In the schadwe under a tre,
 Ther that hym lykede beste (221-228)

Although this tree shelters Launfal from the hot weather – and although he likes it – it also witnesses his "symplyté" (poverty) and he sits beneath it "yn sorow and sore" (229). Saunders highlights how "Launfal's despairing flight is a poignant one, emphasizing the cruelty of his predicament and the failure of the chivalric ideal".⁴⁷³ Indeed, this tree inhabits the forest that hides him from the "lokynge" of the men that scorn him, just as the tree itself hides him from the sun.⁴⁷⁴ At the same time, its presence also overshadows his inability to regain his standing in their eyes. Instead, he must sit beneath it in shame, and this tree therefore participates in his sorrow and grief.

However, the dark and shadowy role that this tree plays in Launfal's narrative also has a lighter side. As Launfal sits in "yn sorow and sore, / He sawe

⁴⁷³ Saunders, *The Forest of Medieval Romance*, 143; also see 144 for her exploration of Launfal's "exile" in the forest.

⁴⁷⁴ As Saunders also notes, this is a departure from this poem's source text, Marie de France's *Lanval*, in which Lanval is in a meadow, not within a forest (*The Forest of Medieval Romance*, 142); the tree is not present at all in this version. See lines 43-52; this and all subsequent references to Marie de France's *lais* are to the versions in Robert Hanning and Joan Ferrante, ed. and trans., *The Lais of Marie de France* (Durham: The Labyrinth Press, 1982).

come out of holtes hore / Gentyll maydenes two" (229-231); these maidens take Launfal to their mistress, the fairy Triamoure, who is situated in a lavish pavilion that is richly described (265-285).⁴⁷⁵ The luxury of her surroundings, which are encrusted with precious stones (267-271) and lavishly-dyed fabrics (284-285), prefigure the central role Triamoure plays in re-establishing Launfal's wealth and power. Alongside gold and treasures (318-324), she also gifts him with a horse, squire, and banner (326-328) that he soon uses to defeat another knight in combat and re-establish his honour (505-615). The tree therefore signals the start of Launfal's regeneration back into a respectable and esteemed chivalric figure, as well as witnessing his distress. As Saunders puts it, "the forest becomes a landscape for wish-fulfilment".⁴⁷⁶ Here again, the concept of chivalric assemblages is a useful one, as Launfal's chivalric identity depends on the non-human components that Triamoure gives him, which reflects his dependence on the arboreal non-human for shelter and as a site of *aventure*.

Additionally, the tree that Launfal sits beneath marks a site of interaction with the supernatural; thereafter, his chivalric assemblage also includes the feminine fairy Otherworld. Indeed, although Triamoure facilitates Launfal's re-entrance into Arthur's court, she ultimately also removes him from it, as he follows her back to the Otherworld at the end of the poem. This physical removal of Launfal's person is foreshadowed by the fact that she metaphorically removes his identity by

⁴⁷⁵ Saunders discusses how Launfal's sojourn beneath the tree "set[s] the scene for an otherworldly occurrence", as I will discuss below, and also argues that "[w]hile Launfal reads the forest as the place in which he may escape the court and town, and express his desolation and grief, Tryamour appears to read the same landscape as the common meeting-ground for mortal and faery and thus for her own sport, setting up her pavilion there"; her argument that "the forest becomes a kind of alternative courtly world" is also relevant (*The Forest of Medieval Romance*, 145).

⁴⁷⁶ Saunders, *The Forest of Medieval Romance*, 142; also see 143.

withdrawing her gifts after he betrays her.⁴⁷⁷ She takes away the gold, horse, and squire she has given him, and the “hot sun” of misfortune beats down on Launfal once more: “All that he hadde before ywonne, / Hyt malt as snow ayens the sunne” (739-740). This metaphor subtly alludes to the position Launfal found himself in when he sat beneath the tree to shade himself from the hot weather before he met Triamoure; just as he was “dirtied” by his experiences at the start of the text, here he is again unable to fulfil his role as a knight.

Even when Triamoure re-enters the narrative, Launfal can no longer exist within Arthur’s court. Despite his betrayal, Triamoure rides into Arthur’s court to rescue Launfal from execution when Arthur intends to hang him, first for allegedly propositioning Guenivere, which is disproved, and then for the insult of unfavourably comparing her to his lover (761-804), which he cannot justify without producing Triamoure. After she ensures his acquittal, Triamoure returns to the Otherworld, followed by Launfal:

Thus Launfal, wythouten fable,
 That noble knyght of the Rounde Table,
 Was take ynto Fayrye;
 Seththe saw hym yn thys lond noman,
 Ne no more of hym telle y ne can,
 For sothe, wythoute lye.
 Thomas Chestre made thys tale
 Of the noble knyght Syr Launfale,
 Good of chyvalrye (1033-1041)

Thus, although Launfal is now once more “good of chyvalrye” (1041), he is also removed into the Otherworld – he “Was take ynto Fayrye” (1035) – no longer to be seen by men (1036). Just as he removed himself to the forest to avoid the men that

⁴⁷⁷ This betrayal is brought about by Guenivere, who propositions Launfal (676-681); when Launfal rejects her (683-684), she questions his honour, calling him a coward (685) and suggesting that he “lovyst no woman, ne no woman [he]” (689). In response, Launfal announces that he has “loved a fayryr woman ... Thys seven yer and more!” (694-696), breaking his agreement with Triamoure “to make no bost” (362) of her.

witnessed his “dirty” characterisation, here Launfal is removed from sight. However, on one day a year, Launfal’s horse can be heard neighing and “hym se wyth syght” (1026); he returns to joust in tournaments to “kepe hys armes fro the rustus” (1028).⁴⁷⁸ Thus, Launfal ends the text both visible and invisible, never seen again and seen every year. Saunders suggests that this is a positive ending, through which the faery world is “characterized as the only place where the courtly ideal can be sustained”; she also argues that “[w]hile the fact that Launfal remains in the otherworld offers a serious critique of Arthur’s court, his proximity and annual return allow for the possibility of a reinstatement of the chivalric ideal within the Arthurian world”.⁴⁷⁹ While this assessment is convincing, I want to emphasise how this reinstatement is, in some senses, violent. The uncanny and unsettling elements of Launfal’s disappearance, and occasional ghost-like re-emergence, can also be viewed as indicative of the kind of “violence” that Triamoure enacts upon the human world. She actively constructs Launfal’s identity, then ensures its dissolution when she removes her gifts, and finally rides into Arthur’s court to take Launfal away.

In the context of the other Middle English Breton Lays, these actions of a mysterious otherworldly force are somewhat threatening. Trees often mark sites of supernatural encounters, and these encounters are often violent; the trees that witness the conceptions of Degaré and Gowther exemplify this, as does the *ympe*-tree in *Sir Orfeo*, which I will turn to shortly. In *Sir Launfal*, the tree that Triamoure’s maidens find Launfal beneath is associated both with the violence that he enacts to recuperate his chivalric identity – a feat only possible through her supernatural intervention – and with the violence inherent in the fact that Launfal is eventually subsumed within the Otherworld. There is an insidiously unsettling element to the

⁴⁷⁸ This detail is absent in Marie de France’s *Lanval*, in which “no man heard of him again” (645).

⁴⁷⁹ Saunders, *The Forest of Medieval Romance*, 147.

supernatural forces in this poem, even if they also enable Launfal to adhere to normative constructions of chivalric masculinity for a time. In the end, he must construct his identity outwith human parameters, a process that begins beneath a tree that also witnesses the height of his suffering. This tree, like Launfal, slips from view as the narrative progresses. However, once again, its largely absent narrative does not preclude arboreal, non-human power. The violence associated with this tree is indirect and mysterious, but no less threatening than that which is connected to the arboreal in the other lays.

In these Middle English Breton Lays, then, we can see that trees once more provide glimpses of an eco-subtext that lies beneath the dominant narratives of romance. If we draw our attention to them, the trees in these poems are revealed as participants in those narratives, even if only briefly. Trees in the lays are often linked to the supernatural, and almost always to violence, whether it is performed by the supernatural presences associated with them, or by humans among and using trees. This violence is quite often enacted against women, as in *Sir Gowther*, *Sir Degaré*, and *Emaré*, in which sexual violence is committed beneath trees and female suffering is communicated through references to them. Gowther also targets women in acts of violence involving wood, though men are also threatened in this sense. Indeed, acts of violence against men are also associated with trees: Degaré cuts down an oak sapling to use as a weapon, which prefigures the use of wooden weapons in his combat with his grandfather, and trees are referenced repeatedly in relation to the defeat and execution of the two suitors in *The Erle of Tolous*. In this context, that Triamoure's maidens find Launfal beneath a tree is rendered threatening, and this tree once again marks a site of liminal non-human power. Though there are relatively few references to trees in these texts, and although they are often subordinate to the human narratives within them, they occupy spaces of

ambiguous authority and threatening violence that reinforce their shadowy but essential standing.

Grafted and Hollow: Trees in *Sir Orfeo*⁴⁸⁰

Often considered to be the most exemplary of the Middle English Breton Lays, *Sir Orfeo* begins with the prologue quoted at the start of this chapter, which enumerates the features traditionally associated with the genre.⁴⁸¹ However, among the references to “harping” (3), “aventours” (8), “fairy” (10), and “love” (12) there is no mention of the natural non-human world that is also essential to the text, nor of the trees that – as in the lays previously discussed – draw attention to its eco-subtext. Specifically, *Sir Orfeo* features trees that are not only central to the narrative, but also define the human in fluid and transgressive ways. Orfeo’s identity shifts as he moves through different spaces – from his kingdom, to the wilderness, to the Otherworld, and back again. While this once again exhibits the archetypal romance trajectory of loss and recovery, focussing on the arboreal “things” that Orfeo interacts with in these spaces allows for a shift in perspective that reveals the destabilising presence of the non-human, and troubles hierarchies of power that tend to privilege human, specifically masculine, concerns. As in the lays just discussed, trees in *Sir Orfeo* are continually associated with violence and the

⁴⁸⁰ A version of this section of the chapter has been accepted for publication as an article in a forthcoming special issue of the *Medieval Feminist Forum* entitled “New Approaches to Medieval Romance, Materiality, and Gender”. The article is entitled “Making it Through the Wilderness: Trees as Markers of Gendered Identities in *Sir Orfeo*”.

⁴⁸¹ That Orfeo is considered to be exemplary is referenced by, for example, Finlayson: “This poem is frequently regarded as the best of the Middle English lays and the paradigm of what a lay ought to be” (“The Form,” 358). Once again, I will be using Laskaya and Salisbury’s edition of the text; they use the Auchinleck manuscript – the earliest extant manuscript version – as their base text, but supplement some missing lines from other versions in British Library MS Harley 3810 and Bodleian Library MS Ashmole 61.

supernatural, and its characters are repeatedly threatened beneath them. However, the trees and wooden objects in this poem merit a more in-depth interrogation, as they are more present and crucial: Orfeo is repeatedly characterised by his harp, a wooden object, and trees witness and participate in every narrative transition. In these terms, Orfeo can be seen to mirror medieval romance itself. He is difficult to delineate, constantly crosses boundaries, and – as this section will argue – is defined by trees and wood.

The material object of Orfeo's harp is so central to the poem that it is possible to use it to track Orfeo's physical movements and shifting identities. Harping is referenced immediately after the prologue defines the text as a lay (3) and announces "Ichil you telle of 'Sir Orfewe'" (24): "Orfeo mest of ani thing / Lovede the gle of harping" (25-26). Though Orfeo's fate is far removed from his classical predecessor, this emphasis on music at the start of *Sir Orfeo* prefigures how the *Orfeo*-poet retains Orpheus' association with harping.⁴⁸² Orfeo is a king whose court is situated in Winchester, and whose queen, Herodis, is abducted by a fairy king. This abduction precipitates Orfeo's retreat into the wilderness, where the harp is the only aspect of his previous identity that he retains: he had "no nother gode, / Bot his harp he tok algate" (230-231). Subsequently, he "henge his harp opon his bac" (344) as he prepares to leave the wilderness and follow Herodis into the Otherworld; Orpheus' journey to the Underworld to save Eurydice becomes Orfeo's journey to regain Herodis from the fairy king. Unlike Orpheus, he is successful in saving her:

⁴⁸² *Sir Orfeo* is a Middle English adaptation of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. The emphasis on music and harping that so defined the classical Orpheus is retained in those texts through which he was transmitted to the poet of *Sir Orfeo* namely Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Virgil's *Georgics*, especially as they are retold in Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*. For this, and further discussion of how "classical, Celtic, and specifically English strands interweave" in *Sir Orfeo*, see Corinne Saunders, "Introduction," in *Cultural Encounters in the Romance of Medieval England*, ed. Corinne Saunders (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2005), 2 and 3-6.

he wins her as a reward for his harping (435-471). When he returns to Winchester with her, he “heng his harp his rigge opon” (500) to disguise himself as a minstrel and test the steward he left to rule in his place; the loyal steward recognises the harp as belonging to Orfeo (532-543), marking his transition back to king. The harp therefore situates classical representations of Orpheus within this English lay, and acts as a structural symbol that delineates the movements of the protagonist.⁴⁸³

That said, this harp becomes more than an object through which to view Orfeo, especially when its woodenness is acknowledged. Gillian Rudd highlights how Orfeo must use his harp to produce music: “Orfeo’s music is not song: it is not a sound produced using the performer’s body alone, but instead relies on an artefact”.⁴⁸⁴ The idea that the harp “speaks” for Orfeo aligns with the “prosthetic” potential of material objects discussed in relation to *SGGK*, and begins to suggest how this object becomes a “thing” that participates in the narrative, both as an instrument of power and as a remnant of the tree it once was. In these terms, the harp acts as a prosthetic that facilitates and furthers the construction of Orfeo’s identity, but also begins to speak for itself. Viewing the harp in this way, and situating it in relation to the living wood in *Sir Orfeo*, allows for a re-definition of the material in this text. The “material” of this section, then, will be the trees that Orfeo interacts with throughout the text; his masculine identities change as his relationship with the natural world transforms him in various ways, destabilising rigid gender binaries and entangling human and non-human. Just as the harp marks sites of

⁴⁸³ Previous approaches to the harp have also tended towards this view. Shearle Furnish, for example, has argued that the Middle English Breton Lays depend on objects to make meaning: “in the place of exposition is their elegant symbolism, the focussed intensity of attention to one significant object, such as Orfeo’s harp” (Furnish, “Thematic Structure,” 118). Joanny Moulin also notes how Orfeo is “strongly characterized by his harp” (Joanny Moulin, “Representations of the Self in the Middle English Breton Lays,” *Revue de littérature et de civilisation* 25 (2014): 2).

⁴⁸⁴ Rudd, *Greenery*, 99. She also notes that the harp is a wooden object (108).

transition, each stage of Orfeo's characterisation is witnessed by a tree: first, the *ympe*-tree in Orfeo and Herodis' orchard; second, the hollow tree in which Orfeo stores his harp during his self-imposed exile; third, the *ympe*-tree as it appears in the Otherworld; and finally, Orfeo himself, who becomes a metaphorical tree through a simile that likens him to a gnarled tree when he returns to his kingdom. The first *ympe*-tree links the human and fairy worlds and represents the way that Orfeo and Herodis are also connected; additionally, it observes the effects of her abduction, whereas the Otherworldly *ympe*-tree is implicated in Orfeo's recovery of her. In between these mirrored *ympe*-trees, the hollow tree stands as a representative of the trees in the wilderness, which re-birth Orfeo into the tree-like figure that returns to Winchester. Like the tree that was felled and fashioned into the harp, these trees are used to represent and safeguard Orfeo's identity, becoming extensions of this prosthetic instrument. This affords them the power to define the human, but they also participate in the story as bridges, witnesses, and markers, becoming actants in their own narrative.

The *Ympe*-Tree: Grafting Orfeo's Identity

The first tree that comes to act in this way is the *ympe*-tree, a grafted tree implicated in the fairy king's abduction of Herodis.⁴⁸⁵ The broad symbolic significance of Herodis has been debated by scholars; while she is linked to the classical figure of Eurydice, some have understood her in a Christianised framework

⁴⁸⁵ The exact meaning of *ympe*-tree has been debated, but it is most often understood to be a grafted tree, a tree containing material from two different trees, usually fruit trees, spliced together; see Curtis R. H. Jirsa, "In the Shadow of the Ympe-tree: Arboreal Folklore in Sir Orfeo," *English Studies* 89 (2008): 142. Saunders also points out that this tree could well be an apple tree, as it is "the commonest grafted tree" (*The Forest of Medieval Romance*, 134); I have previously noted the particular resonances of apple trees, in relation to Lancelot.

as being analogous to Eve, aligning her abduction with the Fall.⁴⁸⁶ While some see Herodis as powerless, others assert that she is nonetheless essential to the narrative; for example, Elizabeth Archibald emphasises the fact that Herodis is “hardly mentioned again” after Orfeo rescues her, while Ellen M. Caldwell states “Herodis’s actions and her character are at the center of the text’s meaning”.⁴⁸⁷ Both readings hold weight, in the sense that Herodis is both vital and marginal; the narrative hinges upon her, even if she often has little agency. Viewing Herodis in terms of her relationship with the *ympe*-tree, as I will do in this section, allows us to view her, and the tree, as entwined with Orfeo; his identity incorporates them such that they are overshadowed at times, but, through this process, masculine/feminine and human/non-human binaries and hierarchies are also challenged.

The first arboreal image in the text – “blosme breme on everi bough” (61) – participates in the establishment of the May-time setting of Herodis’ abduction: it is warm (58), the fields are “ful of flours” (60), and human and non-human alike are celebrating spring.⁴⁸⁸ There is a sense of new beginnings as morning dawns: Herodis “went in an undrentide / To play bi an orchardside, / To se the floures sprede and spring” (65-67). However, as focus is drawn to these diurnal and seasonal cycles, the *ympe*-tree casts a shadow over the narrative, suggesting that these new beginnings might bring the start of something other than the joy and rebirth that usually accompanies spring. Indeed, though the tree is described as

⁴⁸⁶ Doob, *Nebuchadnezzar’s Children*, 173-178; John Block Friedman, “Eurydice, Herodis, and the Noon-Day Demon,” *Speculum* 41 (1966): 24-26.

⁴⁸⁷ Elizabeth Archibald, “Love and Marriage in the Breton Lays,” *Revue de littérature et de civilisation* 25 (2014): 6; Ellen M. Caldwell, “The Heroism of Herodis: Self-Mutilation and Restoration in *Sir Orfeo*,” *Papers on Language and Literature* 43 (2007): 293, though Caldwell also acknowledges that in the end she does not “have the real power in the story” (299).

⁴⁸⁸ This is another example of Northrop Frye’s “idyllic” world of “happiness, security, and peace” as a starting point for the trajectory of romance (*The Secular Scripture*, 53).

“fair” when Herodis and her maidens move to sit beneath it (70), that Herodis falls asleep soon after (72) places her in a vulnerable position.

The tendency for trees to be associated with the supernatural – and especially with violent interactions with fairies or demons – has already been discussed as a common trope in medieval romance. Moulin asserts that “Herodis under her ‘ympe-tree’ literally grafts, or plugs, this world onto the realm of fairy”.⁴⁸⁹ The presence of trees is often enough to foreshadow supernatural encounters, and falling asleep beneath trees in romance literature is dangerous, as it renders the sleeper particularly vulnerable to them. Moreover, there is often an element of sexual violence in these encounters, as we have seen in *Sir Gowther* and *Sir Degaré*.⁴⁹⁰ In fact, as John Block Friedman points out, this trope was so established that Chaucer only needed to allude to it in his suggestion that friars have replaced fairies as the sexual predators that accost women beneath trees in the *Wife of Bath’s Tale*: “wommen may go saufly up and doun / in every bussh or under every tree / ther is noon oother incubus but he”.⁴⁹¹ In *Sir Orfeo*, the timing of Herodis’ interaction with the *ympe*-tree strengthens this threat, as noon was associated with the devil.⁴⁹²

The threat of sexual violence inherent in Herodis’ interaction with the *ympe*-tree is first prefigured by the violence she inflicts on herself upon waking, as a

⁴⁸⁹ Moulin, “Representations of the Self,” 2. Jirsa also explores the association of the *ympe*-tree with the supernatural, while arguing that it should be viewed in its folkloric context, in which tree shadows are related to the afterlife; see Jirsa, “In the Shadow of the Ympe-tree,” 141-149.

⁴⁹⁰ Arguably, Lancelot is also threatened in this way by the queens, and this casts an unsettling shadow over Launfal’s relationship with Triamour as well.

⁴⁹¹ See *The Wife of Bath’s Tale* in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 878-880; Friedman, “Eurydice, Herodis,” 27.

⁴⁹² Friedman, “Eurydice, Herodis,” 27-29; Saunders, *The Forest of Medieval Romance*, 134. In *Le Morte Darthur*, when Lancelot falls asleep underneath the apple tree, as discussed in Chapter One, Morgan le Fay and the queens arrive to enchant him “about the none” (1:256.19).

response to the fairy king's intrusion into her sleeping mind. As soon as she wakes, she cries (78), thrashes (79), and "crached hir visage - it bled wete - / Hir riche robe hye al to-rett" (80-81).⁴⁹³ The repeated images of tearing here are reinforced when Orfeo laments this violence soon after: "Thy bodi, that was so white y-core, / With thine nailes is all to-tore" (105-106). This emphasis highlights how Herodis' time beneath the tree is associated with violence towards her body, and this violence is soon linked to the fairy king when he is revealed as the source of her distress.

Herodis recounts how he showed her a vision of his lands,

And said to me thus afterward,
 'Loke, dame, tomorwe thatow be
 Right here under this ympe-tre,
 And than thou schalt with ous go
 And live with ous evermo (164-168)

Here, as Herodis relates the fairy king's direct speech, his words usurp hers, foreshadowing his ability to take her from beneath the *ympe*-tree the following day. Indeed, after she finishes voicing this threat, Herodis does not speak again in the text; the fairy king effectively silences her. His power is enacted lexically before he physically overpowers Herodis, and his intrusion in Herodis' speech can be seen to mirror his intrusion into Orfeo's kingdom.

These intrusions are both marked by the *ympe*-tree, as the fairy king's reference to it in his directive to Herodis prefigures its physical reappearance in the narrative. As the diurnal cycle moves forward once more – "Amorwe the undertide is

⁴⁹³ Caldwell suggests that this can be seen to parallel the actions of medieval saints and nuns, who are sometimes recorded as mutilating themselves to escape the threat of rape ("The Heroism of Herodis," 295-296); Saunders argues that Herodis' "disfigurement suggests the power and cruelty of the otherworld, and the apparent impossibility of escape from it" (*The Forest of Medieval Romance*, 135). Additionally, this can be compared to an episode of Chaucer's *Squire's Tale*, in which the heroine, Canacee, finds a falcon in a "tree for drye as whit as chalk" (409). This falcon has been wronged by her husband, a tercelet (male falcon), and has consequently wounded herself, much as Herodis does, and also in the presence of a tree: "Ybeten hadde she hirself so pitously / With bothe hir wynges, til the rede blood / Ran endelong the tree ther-as she stood" (414-416); again these references are to *The Riverside Chaucer*.

come" (181) – Orfeo takes up arms and surrounds the tree with "wele ten hundred knightes" (183). Despite this hyperbolic show of force, when "with the quen wenten he [Orfeo] / Right unto that ympe-tre" (185-186), he fails to prevent her abduction: "Ac yete amiddes hem ful right / The quen was oway y-twight" (191-192). The repeated emphasis on the *ympe*-tree as the site of this "snatching" of Herodis implicates it in the rhetoric of tearing that enters the narrative with the fairy king, and allows it to become a meeting-place, a place of convergence of the human and fairy worlds; the tree acts as a bridge between those worlds, and is rooted in both. It gives the fairy king a material point of access into the human world and witnesses the violence that this eventuates: Herodis injures herself beneath it; it participates in the fairy king's spoken and actual intrusion into Orfeo's kingdom; and it marks the site of her abduction. The *ympe*-tree can then be seen to "graft" the human and fairy worlds, but it also goes beyond this role to participate in the narrative.

The *ympe*-tree's potential to act in this way is related to its grafted nature, which places it on the threshold of the human and the non-human; it is a natural being that has been manipulated to grow in an unnatural way. Saunders asserts that "the peculiarly hybrid nature of the *ympe*-tree may associate it with the faery world, which is itself a mixture of artifice and nature".⁴⁹⁴ However, the *ympe*-tree's hybridity has the potential to incorporate more than just a relationship with the supernatural; as mentioned in my introduction, grafted plants had multivalent symbolic potential in the Middle Ages. Alongside the possibilities for imagining grafting as representative of the relationship between God and humanity, the grafting process has an erotic potential, since a part of one plant, a scion, is inserted into the rootstock of another.⁴⁹⁵ In this process, the two plants become dependent on one another and

⁴⁹⁴ Saunders, *The Forest of Medieval Romance*, 134; I will further discuss the nature of the Otherworld in *Sir Orfeo* shortly.

⁴⁹⁵ McAvoy, Skinner, and Tyers, "Strange Fruits," 3-5.

combine such that “the resulting genetically composite organism functions as a single plant”.⁴⁹⁶ Though grafting can occur as a natural process, it is most often artificial, and the placement of the *ympe*-tree in an orchard – a man-made space of control over the non-human – encodes human intervention that opens up the possibility of viewing this tree as both natural and unnatural, human and non-human, masculine and feminine.⁴⁹⁷

Given these overlapping delineations, the space that the *ympe*-tree occupies in the narrative – both where it grows, and the symbolic shadow it casts – can be linked to the relationship between Orfeo and Herodis. When recounting the story of her vision to Orfeo, Herodis states that she “slepe under *our* orchardside” (134; my emphasis). The plural possessive pronoun here works against the conventional designation of the orchard as a feminine space, representative of enclosure for both protection and control; this is a space that Orfeo occupies with Herodis.⁴⁹⁸ Though she excludes the *ympe*-tree from her narrative, stating only that she was sleeping in the orchard, that the tree grows in a shared space prefigures the ways that Orfeo and Herodis share their identities. Herodis voices this idea when she is explaining her distress to Orfeo – “Bot ever ich have yloved the / As mi liif and so thou me / Ac now we mot delen ato” (123-125) – and Orfeo replies in kind: “Whider thou gost, ichil

⁴⁹⁶ Mudge et al, “A History of Grafting,” 439.

⁴⁹⁷ See Mudge et al. (“A History of Grafting,” 445-449) for natural grafting.

⁴⁹⁸ Spearing also sees the orchard space as “both protective and constricting” (“Madness and Gender,” 267). He additionally references the fact that orchards are “usually inhabited by women” and symbolise “the delectable and vulnerable female body enclosed by a man for his proper use and cultivation” (268). Also see Amy Louise Morgan, “‘To play bi an orchardside’: Orchards as Enclosures of Queer Space in *Lanval* and *Sir Orfeo*,” in *The Medieval and Early Modern Garden in Britain: Enclosure and Transformation, c.1200-1750*, ed. Patricia Skinner and Theresa Tyers (London: Routledge, 2018), 97. Morgan also notes the queer potential of the *ympe*-tree in this space (97-99). Additionally, Saunders notes the “common associations of the garden and orchard with the idyllic love scene” in relation to *Sir Orfeo* (*The Forest of Medieval Romance*, 134) and argues that it also operates as “a tamed reflection of the forest” which “becomes a limen or passage to the otherworld” (135).

with the, / And whider y go, thou schalt with me" (129-130).⁴⁹⁹ Orfeo attempts to counteract the images of ripping and fragmentation that accompany the fairy king's intrusions into the orchard – when the emphasis on Herodis' tearing of her clothes and body mirrors this idea that they "mot delen ato" (125) – with these assertions that they are part of one whole, in which they are both equal and active.⁵⁰⁰ The *ympe*-tree, which grows in a shared space that is both natural and man-made, and combines two entities into one being, may be read as a physical, material metaphor for the bond between Orfeo and Herodis.

However, this shared, grafted identity is torn apart when Herodis is forcibly removed from beneath the *ympe*-tree. Despite Orfeo's assertion that "Whider thou gost, ichil with the" (129), and though "with the quen wenten he / Right unto that ympe-tre" (185-186), he cannot yet follow her to the Otherworld. Subsequently, he removes himself from the tree's presence to lament his loss – "The king into his chaumber is go / And oft swoned upon the ston" (196) – and begins to distance himself from the merging of worlds and identities that it represents. Against the wishes of his subjects – who beg him not to go (224-225) and weep when he does so (234) – he discards aspects of his kingly identity. Wearing only a "sclavin" (pilgrim's mantle) and "barfot" (228 and 232), he takes "no nother gode" with him (230), except his harp (231), and announces his intention to retreat from human society entirely:

⁴⁹⁹ These descriptions use similar language to that which Ywain uses to describe his relationship with the lion in *Ywain and Gawain*, as discussed in Chapter Two. Additionally, these words are similar to those that would have been used in medieval marriage ceremonies, and echo Ruth 1:16: "for whithersoever thou shalt go, I will go: and where thou shalt dwell, I also will dwell". Ruth speaks these words to her mother-in-law, not her husband, but they were associated with matrimonial vows in the Middle Ages; see H. Bergner, "Sir Orfeo and the Sacred Bonds of Matrimony," *The Review of English Studies* 30 (1979): 432-434.

⁵⁰⁰ Moulin likewise argues that Herodis and Orfeo form a "syzygy", referencing male/female pairs that were bound together in Valentinianism ("Representations of the Self," 4).

Never eft y nil no woman se.
 Into wildernes ichil te
 And live ther evermore
 With wilde bestes in holtes hore (211-214)

The juxtaposition and alliteration of “woman” and “wilderness” suggests how these ideas are linked: now that he has lost Herodis, he must orient his identity in a new way.

The *ympe*-tree therefore not only participates in Herodis’ abduction, but is also implicated in the consequent dissolution of Orfeo’s identity, reinforcing its multifaceted potential. Like the *ympe*-tree, Orfeo incorporates masculinity and femininity to become one with Herodis, and his identity exists in this balance before the fairy king disrupts their interdependent relationship. But when Herodis’ interaction with the *ympe*-tree unlocks its potential to bridge the space between the human and fairy worlds, and another male figure intrudes upon them to remove Herodis, Orfeo ceases to function; he cannot exist as the weaker, masculine “scion” on his own. Although this reading focuses on Herodis’ role as a function of Orfeo’s identity – as, indeed, the text seems to do – conceptualising Orfeo’s identity in terms of the *ympe*-tree both reinforces and collapses binaries: like Ywain and Gawain, Orfeo is masculine and feminine, human and non-human, fractured and whole. At the same time, the *ympe*-tree is more than its association with Orfeo and Herodis, and more even than a vector for the fairy king. It exists as all of those things, and as a “thing” apart from them, that consistently witnesses both the presence and permeability of human/non-human and masculine/feminine boundaries, until it slips from view as Orfeo retreats to the wilderness.

The Hollow Tree: Rebirth in the Wilderness

When Orfeo leaves his kingdom for the wilderness, he forsakes all other markers of his identity, “Bot his harp he tok algate” (231), as we have seen; his identity hinges on this material object now that Herodis has been taken from beneath the *ympe*-tree. While this retention preserves some aspects of his courtly identity, the displacement of both Orfeo and the harp into the tree-based setting of the wilderness signals a movement away from his previous identification, just as Ywain’s madness renders him “unseen” by his men in *Ywain and Gawain*.⁵⁰¹ Though his association with the *ympe*-tree is left behind, this nevertheless furthers his entanglement with the non-human and reveals the fluidity and liminality of his identity, again in relation to a tree. This time, the tree is not grafted, but hollow; during Orfeo’s time in the wilderness, “His harp, whereon was al his gle, / He hidde in an holwe tre” (267-268).⁵⁰² Like the *ympe*-tree, this tree can be read according to gender; just as one plant had to be inserted into another to graft the *ympe*-tree, here Orfeo inserts his harp – a symbol of his identity – into a receptive arboreal space. As the prosthetic harp penetrates the womb-like tree, Orfeo’s new wilderness-based identity is born. The idea of grafting is retained alongside this new conceptualisation of Orfeo in terms of the arboreal, as the mature tree, the “rootstock”, hosts the “scion” of Orfeo’s identity.

⁵⁰¹ Rudd also notes that, unlike Tristan (discussed in Chapter Five) and Lancelot, Orfeo’s retreat to the wilderness and his consequent transformation is premeditated: “there is no impassioned, headlong rush, but a clearly stated intention to cast off his current identity and take on a different one in order to enter new and deliberately chosen surroundings” (*Greenery*, 93); also see Saunders, *The Forest of Medieval Romance*, 137-138. It should also be noted, as Rudd points out, that Orfeo travels “Thurth wode and over heth” (237) to reach the wilderness; he purposefully crosses more human-controlled tree-based settings to enter an uncultivated one (Rudd, *Greenery*, 94).

⁵⁰² Rudd also notes this tree (*Greenery*, 108).

This tree therefore participates in the narrative in a way that goes beyond the active potential of the harp, a prosthetic “thing” that speaks for Orfeo. In ecofeminist terms, Orfeo’s use of the tree adheres to normative hierarchies, as he is acting upon it by penetrating it, in order to safeguard a part of his identity; where once he was reliant on Herodis for this, now he must depend upon the tree. Through this act he does retain his human position of power at times: “when the weder was clere and bright” (269), we are told, “He toke his harp to him wel right / And harped at his owen wille” (270-271). In response, the creatures of the forest gather around and listen to his music (273-278). This image of benign harmony is fleeting – “And when he his harping lete wold, / No best bi him abide nold” (279-280) – but allows Orfeo to retain some vestiges of his humanity, in the sense that the music he plays recalls his civil, courtly identity. At the same time, this identity is retained only because the tree allows it; unlike the harp, which is man-manipulated wood that has been felled and fashioned for human use, this tree is living wood. It incorporates the harp, bringing it inside itself and concealing this marker of human power, which it births again each time Orfeo retrieves it. In this sense, even as Orfeo seeks to preserve his human identity, he must further entangle himself with the non-human.

This entanglement is reinforced by the fact that the hollow tree also witnesses Orfeo’s suffering in the wilderness, and his intimacy with the natural world. At this point in the text, there is a certain violence associated with Orfeo’s retreat from his kingdom, emphasised by a series of images of his time as a king juxtaposed with his struggles in the wilderness (241-260). For example:

He that hadde had castels and tours,
 River, forest, frith with flours,
 Now, thei it comenci to snewe and frese,
 This king mot make his bed in mese (245-248)

Where once Orfeo possessed human, man-made structures, as well as non-human spaces, now he is at the mercy of the seasons. He must interact closely with the natural world, just as Ywain does during his period of madness, and as Gawain's journey through the wilderness requires. Another of these juxtapositions involves food; where once Orfeo had plenty "Of mete and drink, of ich deynté, / Now may he al day digge and wrote / Er he finde his fille of rote" (254-256). This image of Orfeo digging for roots like an animal not only associates him with the figure of the "wild man", but also brings him in closer contact with the vegetative non-human.⁵⁰³ This imagery becomes still more arboreal as these parallels progress: though he lives off fruit in the summer (257), in the winter he cannot find anything "Bot rote, grases, and the rinde [bark]" (260). The material markers of Orfeo's kingly identity have been replaced with this dependence upon plants to ensure his survival.

This reliance on roots and bark for food indicates further movement towards the non-human, a shift that is accompanied by the silencing of Orfeo while he is among the trees of the wilderness. Rudd notes that "we do not hear his voice from the moment he gives up his kingdom in line 236 until he exclaims at the hawking party in line 315", at which point he prepares to leave the wilderness for the Otherworld.⁵⁰⁴ This suggests how Orfeo's journey into the wilderness represents a suspension of his power; it is not only Herodis that is silenced by the fairy king. At

⁵⁰³ In the footnote to lines 255-260 in their edition of *Sir Orfeo*, Laskaya and Salisbury note how several scholars have attributed analogues for these lines that share details with other "wild men" figures, such as Merlin in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini*. Similarly, Saunders argues that "in the wilderness, Orfeo's characteristics are those of the Wild Man figure: he lives on fruit, roots, and grasses, his emaciated body covered with black hair, and his shelter a hollow tree" (*The Forest of Medieval Romance*, 137; also see 138). On the other hand, Rudd notes that Orfeo resists the expected image of a wild man as being clothed in animal skins and eating meat, as those acts are associated with his courtly life in this text (*Greenery*, 96-97); now, "he is living with wild beasts, not off them" (97).

⁵⁰⁴ Rudd, *Greenery*, 103. She goes on to argue "we can see how closely the lay has aligned Orfeo with the wilderness through this silence; like the rest of the non-human world, Orfeo has been spoken for and had views and significance attributed to him, but he has not been allowed to speak himself" (103).

the same time, the true power of the natural world is recognised here, since Orfeo is completely dependent upon the vegetative non-human for food and shelter, as all humans are reliant on the non-human. This mirrors his dependence on the hollow tree, which not only safeguards his harp – his only means to produce sound – but also returns it to him. We have seen that Orfeo's retention of the harp does not mean that the boundaries of his character remain intact – Orfeo in the wilderness is far removed from Orfeo as king – and when he inserts himself into the tree-based setting of the wilderness, and inserts his harp into the tree, both acts give trees the power to change him. Here again masculine/feminine and human/non-human binaries are interacting in complex ways, opening spaces for alternative identity constructions.

“He no spard noither stub no ston”: The Fragmentary Trees of the Otherworld

The power of the non-human is also apparent as Orfeo moves into the Otherworld, a journey that is framed by tree imagery. During his ten years in the wilderness, Orfeo catches fragmented glimpses of fairies hunting, marching to battle, and dancing (297-302), until he eventually catches sight of Herodis among “Sexti levedis on hors ride, / Gentil and jolif as brid on ris [bough]” (282-305). This simile, as well as the fact that the ladies are on horseback, again entwines the human with the non-human, and specifically with the arboreal non-human, once more. Just as Herodis and her maidens played in the orchard among the trees, these “birds” are happy on their “boughs”, and this arboreal metaphor is as fragmented as the image of “blosme breme on everi bough” (61) in the orchard: these are not whole trees, only metaphorical branches. The fairy ladies who

accompany Herodis are bound with nature, but are also controlling it: each has “a faucoun on hond bere” (307).⁵⁰⁵ It is Orfeo’s exclamation at recognising the “fair game” (315) of falconry that brings his silence to an end, and marks the start of another shift in his character.⁵⁰⁶

Subsequently, he moves closer to the ladies, sees Herodis, and resolves to follow her to the Otherworld. The hollow tree is not mentioned when he “henge his harp upon his bac” (344) to prepare for the journey, but tree imagery is present as he follows the ladies:

And had wel gode wil to gon -
 He no spard noither stub no ston.
 In at a roche the levedis rideth,
 And he after, and nought abideth (345-348)

The reference to the “stub” (tree stumps) that Orfeo traverses here is fleeting, but deepens the sense of distortion established by Orfeo’s fragmented visions of the fairies. Read in the context of all the other images of division and tearing in this text, that tree stumps – and not whole trees – mark the entrance to the fairy world highlights the fact that Orfeo’s own identity has been fragmented by Herodis’ abduction and his consequent exile, just as Gawain’s identity is influenced by the events of *SGGK*. At the same time, the repeated references to stone that accompany these tree stumps reinforce the idea that, although Orfeo’s identity has been altered, there is a certain strength in his affinity with the non-human world, also

⁵⁰⁵ David Salter notes that “the sight of the falcons hunting their prey actually enables Orfeo to recover or rediscover within himself his own aristocratic identity” (*Holy and Noble Beasts*, 105), as opposed to the spiritual, saint-like aspects of his nature, which are highlighted by his more peaceful musical encounters with the animals of the wilderness (101-103). This implies human use of the non-human; as Saunders notes, “while the forest represents for Orfeo the symbolic landscape of grief, loss, and, ultimately, vision and redemption” for the fairy king it “functions as it has once done for Orfeo himself, as the landscape of hunt, play, and sport” (*The Forest of Medieval Romance*, 138).

⁵⁰⁶ Saunders suggests that “only this engagement with the faery perception of the forest enables Orfeo to follow the hunt into the otherworld and rescue Herodis” (*The Forest of Medieval Romance*, 140); Rudd likewise argues that this “laugh and speech reassert his civilised, courtly mode” (*Greenery*, 107).

seen in *SGGK*. Just as Orfeo has survived the hardships of the wilderness, these tree stumps remain, despite the death of the tree that they used to be; they represent Orfeo's renewed strength and newfound determination to follow Herodis. Like Gawain, Orfeo has had to endure hardship in the wilderness, and both have had to incorporate an affinity with the non-human within their identities.

One can see other echoes of *SGGK* in *Sir Orfeo*, especially in its subsequent representation of the supernatural world as both natural and alien, which renders it as unsettling as the figure of the Green Knight. Having entered the fairy realm through a stone, Orfeo "com into a fair cuntray / As bright so sonne on somers day, / Smothe and plain and *al grene*" (351-354; my emphasis). The Otherworld is not only fair and bright, but – immediately – green.⁵⁰⁷ The supernatural and the natural are tied together here once more, but soon enough the unnatural is also emphasised:

Al that lond was ever light,
For when it schuld be therk and night,
The riche stones light gone
As bright as doth at none the sonne (369-372)

Though this description of the uncanny Otherworld holds a certain brightness that suggests an inversion of the natural cycle of day and night, and although Orfeo thinks he has come to "The proude court of Paradis" (376), soon the tone turns dark again. After he tells the porter that he is a minstrel (382) and is let inside the castle gates, Orfeo is confronted with people "thought dede, and nare nought" (390). The imagery at this point is hyperbolically violent and haunting, as the narrator lists how these people appear to have died: "Sum stode withouten hade, / And sum non armes nade, / And sum thurth the bodi hadde wounde" (391-393) – the list continues

⁵⁰⁷ As previously mentioned, Rudd has discussed the ambiguity of greenness in relation to the natural world, particularly in "Being Green in Late Medieval English Literature," 27-37. Saunders discusses how the Otherworld is a place of "space and light" (*The Forest of Medieval Romance*, 141).

to line 400. The bright, green fairy realm is troublingly juxtaposed with these visions of trauma, deepening the atmosphere of uncertainty and placing Herodis' self-disfigurement beneath the *ympe*-tree in a new, unsettling context.

An Otherworldly *ympe*-tree marks this shift in perspective, echoing the *ympe*-tree that participated in Herodis' abduction and encapsulated her relationship with Orfeo. At the end of the list of the graphic "deaths" within the castle walls is the feminine-focussed "Wives ther lay on childe bedde / Sum ded and sum awedde" (399-400). The unexpected lexical shift here, when lines 392 to 398 all begin with the anaphoric "And sum", followed by the cause of death, signals another change: moving away from physical injuries, the narrator now focusses on more mental conditions. The wives in childbirth are "Sum ded and sum awedde" (mad) and others – those that "slepe her undertides" (402) – have been brought there by enchantment (403-404). This is where Orfeo sees Herodis:

Ther he seighe his owen wiif,
 Dame Heurodis, his lef liif,
 Slepe under an ympe-tre -
 Bi her clothes he knewe that it was he (405-408)

Here we see that Herodis has almost ceased to exist except in relation to those objects that surround her; Orfeo knows her by her clothes, and the *ympe*-tree stands over her as a signifier. The coupling of references to feminine madness with this image of Herodis also suggests a movement away from her physical self, which is neither here nor there; Herodis is both beneath the *ympe*-tree *and* able to ride through the wilderness with sixty other ladies – she is both present and absent.⁵⁰⁸ The same can be said of the *ympe*-tree, here "*an ympe-tree*" (407; my emphasis) that is not necessarily the same as the one in Herodis and Orfeo's shared orchard,

⁵⁰⁸ Saunders also notes this: "Herodis sleeps within the castle just as she was captured ... but may participate in the hunt. The action thus appears as one suspended between two realities, the mortal and the faery worlds" (*The Forest of Medieval Romance*, 140).

and which exists as an Otherworldly version of it, outside the human world. It is also both present and absent, in the sense that it is not physically growing in the castle walls, but instead stands as a reflection of its twin, on the threshold of the material and the immaterial. Though Moulin rightly suggests that the tree is a “textual landmark looking back to the earlier scene of the abduction of Heurodis” it can be seen as – more than this – a reminder of Orfeo’s identity as it stood then, as well as how it has been altered.⁵⁰⁹

While the *ympe*-tree in the orchard participates in the narrative as a catalyst for the dissolution of Orfeo’s kingly identity, this Otherworldly tree is implicated in Orfeo’s attempt to regain it. To do so, he must first re-establish himself as husband by winning back Herodis. Now, more than ever, we see how she is reduced to an aspect of Orfeo’s own identity, and this is again suggested by a reference to the *ympe*-tree. After Orfeo has played his harp for the king, he requests Herodis as payment:

‘Sir,’ he seyde, ‘ich biseche the
Thatow woldest give me
That ich levedi, bright on ble,
That slepeth under the ympe-tree’ (453-456)

Where the fairy king used the *ympe*-tree as a point of reference for Herodis’ abduction, Orfeo uses it to identify her, though she is still in effect “snatched” away here. Aside from the brief mention of her “bright” complexion – the only time her physical body is referenced, except for when Orfeo takes her “bi the hond” (473) to remove her from the fairy world – the tree is her only identifying feature. This echoes how the “real” *ympe*-tree represented Herodis and Orfeo’s shared identity: here, she is almost erased except in relation to him. Like Herodis, the Otherworldly *ympe*-tree

⁵⁰⁹ Moulin, “Representations of the Self,” 3. Moulin argues that Orfeo sees himself in Herodis when he sees her beneath the tree, which can be extended to suggest that he sees himself – bound with Herodis – in the tree as well.

does not seem to exist outside of the machinations of Orfeo and the fairy king: they use it as a signifier, but it does not otherwise appear again. Herodis is only briefly mentioned after line 473 and the *ympe*-tree is similarly absent after it has been used to identify her as Orfeo's prize. Both Herodis and the tree retreat once more into the margins of the narrative.

However, once again this erasure does not wholly remove the active and symbolic power of the tree. Like the tree stumps that mark Orfeo's entry to the Otherworld, and the arboreal images in *SGGK*, this *ympe*-tree is fragmentary, only existing as a reflection of the *ympe*-tree rooted in the human world. But, as is also the case with those stumps, there is strength in this position. The Otherworldly *ympe*-tree also bridges the human and non-human worlds, both in terms of the natural and the supernatural non-human, and witnesses another transition in Orfeo's narrative trajectory. With the movement of the *ympe*-tree from the human to the non-human realm, Orfeo moves to and fro between identities; he is as liminal as the tree. As the role of the *ympe*-tree transforms, Orfeo regains his wife and his voice.

The Gnarled Tree: Orfeo's Arboreal Identity

Orfeo's final transition in the text, when he leaves the Otherworld and returns to his kingdom, is marked by one last reference to the arboreal non-human. As he re-enters Winchester, his subjects exclaim:

'Lo! thai seyd, 'swiche a man!
 Hou long the here hongeth him opan!
 Lo! Hou his berd hongeth to his kne!
 He is y-clongen also a tre!' (505-509)

Aside from the exclamation over his hyperbolic hairiness, another allusion to the figure of the wild man, Orfeo is “y-clongen” (gnarled) like a tree.⁵¹⁰ This simile reflects the idea that Orfeo moves between identities and further towards the non-human throughout this text; now, his associations with the arboreal – his connection to the *ympe*-tree and the hollow tree – are written on his body. As Rudd also argues, “if we accept the possibility that Orfeo is in some way representing the wilderness, it is significant that the analogy is with a tree, not an animal”.⁵¹¹ As with the Otherworldly *ympe*-tree, here there is movement away from descriptions of “real” trees, and instead an abstract tree is utilised for a human purpose: to describe human suffering and illuminate Orfeo’s material transformation. There is a certain violence in this metaphor that suggests suffering: as in *Emaré*, this is not a positive image and Orfeo’s subjects are reacting with dismay to his “destresse” (514). However, as with the tree stumps in *SGGK* and *Sir Orfeo*’s wilderness, this simile suggests an entanglement with the non-human that reworks Orfeo’s identity, but also represents strength: he has survived the wilderness, though he is changed by it in a way that transcends the material. Similarly, although this image once again aligns an arboreal object – this time an abstract one, only invoked through metaphor – with human concerns, it conjures the ghostly presence of the *ympe*-tree and the hollow tree, and remains a reminder of Orfeo’s ordeal, hinting at the power of the non-human world.

Sir Orfeo is a text in which trees are objects used by humans, both lexically and physically, as markers of identity, safeguards, and metaphors. However, there

⁵¹⁰ In her book on madness in the Middle Ages, Doob suggests that Orfeo is a “Holy Wild Man” and likens him to Christ (*Nebuchadnezzar’s Children*, 164-207). On the other side of the scale, Laskaya and Salisbury also note the connection between madness and hairiness in terms of the figure of the wild man in their notes to *Sir Gowther*, in which, as noted above, Gowther’s demonic father is described as a “felturd fende” (74) – see their note to that line.

⁵¹¹ Rudd, *Greenery*, 108. Also see 106.

is no simple hierarchy of human dominance in this poem, and these arboreal “things” participate in the narrative as more than mere markers. The uncanniness of the trees in this text is coupled with a troubling of boundaries, which become more malleable and permeable throughout the poem, though they seem to be closed off at its conclusion. Nevertheless, binaries of nature/culture, civilisation/barbarism, masculine/feminine, and human/non-human are dissolved and reformed in ways that entangle those elements that are usually opposed. Just as Saunders notes that “the forest has provided a marginal ground in which different readings co-exist”, the liminality of the trees in this text unlocks their potential.⁵¹² Although hints of feminine, non-human power are suppressed, and although Orfeo’s noble, masculine identity is restored, a focus on the tree imagery in *Sir Orfeo* opens up a space for non-human power and reveals how human, masculine identities are fluid and reciprocal. The elision of the boundaries between Orfeo and the trees that come to define him culminate in his metaphorical transformation into a tree, suggesting how trees in this text have the power to define the human, alongside wooden “prosthetics” like the harp. Through this, they also act as material bridges, witnesses, and creators, and come to possess their own agency, even if only in the shadows of the narrative.

Fire and Ice: Trees in *Lay le Freine*

I will now turn to the other Middle English Breton Lay that merits in-depth interrogation of its arboreal imagery, *Lay le Freine*, which somewhat deviates from the themes explored in this chapter and thesis thus far. As opposed to the fluid and

⁵¹² Saunders, *The Forest of Medieval Romance*, 140.

permeable boundaries of *Sir Orfeo*, *Lay le Freine* presents binaries that are much more fixed and repetitive. Though the non-human is represented in many of these binaries – winter/summer, hot/cold, fire/water, for example – the boundary between human and non-human remains more rigid, despite the importance of the ash tree for which Freine is named. The non-human remains more restricted throughout, and trees are less associated with violence than in the lays previously discussed. However, within this more structured framework, there is a sense of unending, unchanging cycles that can be seen as oppressive to both human and non-human alike.

This is a text that begins to open up possibilities for subversion or transgression of norms, but then immediately shuts down those possibilities. In some ways, this can be seen to go against the grain of the genre, as romance texts, and lays in particular, tend to open up spaces of alternative discourses – even if they do not stay open for long – as I have argued. Indeed, *Lay le Freine* is missing some of the generic features that define other Middle English Breton Lays. For example, although the prologue references harping (3) there is not the same sense of minstrelsy that is present throughout *Sir Orfeo*. Moreover, there is no supernatural presence in this text, even though the setting of the poem in the “west cuntré” (29) could be read as an indication that the fairy world might be involved; Laskaya and Salisbury note that “the West Country is often associated with Wales and the Celtic fairy world”.⁵¹³ This produces a sense of unrealised expectations that is unsettling and somewhat troubling, but the absence of any uncanny supernatural presence is also accompanied by a more clear-cut and less transgressive treatment of human/non-human binaries.

⁵¹³ Laskaya and Salisbury, Note to “*Lay le Freine*,” line 29.

Other binaries are also reinforced in *Lay le Freine*, in which there is a sense of doubling, even from the outset. After the prologue, the narrator turns to “tuay knightes” (29), who have two wives: “And aither of hem hadde wedded wiif” (32). The narrative proper begins with a messenger riding from one knight to the other to tell him of a birth. The second knight asks the messenger “And whether a maidenchild other a knave?” (53) and receives the answer “Tuay sones, sir, God hem save” (54). Here the binary between masculine and feminine – between maiden and knave – has the potential to be destabilised; with the arrival of twins, the answer could be both maiden *and* knave. However, as is the tendency of the text, the boy/girl binary stays intact; the first wife has two sons and, shortly afterwards, the second wife – Freine’s mother – has “To maidenchilder” (87). There is irony in this, since Freine’s mother accused the other knight’s wife of adultery after she gave birth to twins – referencing the medieval belief that twins meant “that tuay men hir han hadde in bour” (71) – and then has twins herself. Although one of the “tuay men” that are referenced here is non-existent – there is no indication that either wife is in fact adulterous – the doubling effect is further emphasised by this irony. The sense of doubling is also voiced by Freine’s mother when she states “Falsliche another y gan deme; / The selve happe is on me sene” (93-94). This repeated “twinning” could make space in the text for alternative discourses of power – and in fact it sometimes does, as I will acknowledge below – but more often it serves to reinforce binaries and restrict movement.

This is especially the case when considering the non-human presence in the text, to which I will now turn. While setting up an unrealised expectation of minstrelsy and the supernatural, the prologue to *Lay le Freine* also suggests that the non-human will play an important role: the poem is “Of an asche for sothe it is / On ensauple fair with alle” (26-27). This refers to the ash tree in which Freine is

abandoned as a baby, as I will discuss shortly. However, it also refers to Freine herself, who is named for this tree; again, I will discuss this further below. Here the boundaries between human and non-human seem to be blurred; this is a poem about a tree and a woman that are one and the same. However, despite this line in the prologue, *Lay le Freine* can be seen to resist the kind of entanglement with the non-human that I have discussed in the previous chapters, as well as in *Sir Orfeo*. Instead, the non-human presence is more consistently reduced within the strict dichotomies of the text.

This is the case even as Freine is abandoned in the tree at the start of the poem. This abandonment is prefigured by a departure from the pattern of doubling that characterises the first one hundred lines. After Freine's mother laments that she has been cursed with the same shame she brought upon the other wife, she considers her three options: accept that she will be seen as adulterous, admit that she lied about the other wife's adultery, or kill one of her daughters (95-104). The text emphasises that there are three options here – "On of this thre thinges ich mot nede" (103) – drawing attention to this deviation from the text's doubling. The third option – "to sle min owen child" (102) – also stands out in the sense that it is an unexpectedly violent option. However, this unsettling potential violence on the part of Freine's mother is not realised, first in the sense that she asks someone else to "this child fordo" (116); and second, in the sense that Freine does not die at all.

In fact, she is "saved" by a tree, which – despite its central role – is located within the closed-off spaces of the poem. The maiden who is tasked with killing Freine decides instead to leave her at a convent (130).⁵¹⁴ To do so, she must travel

⁵¹⁴ Note that lines 121-133 are missing from the Auchinleck manuscript, which is the only copy of *Lay le Freine* in Middle English. Laskaya and Salisbury supplement with text from Marie de France's *Lai le Fresne*, of which the Middle English version is "a relatively close translation" (Introduction to "*Lay le Freine*," 1). Although I will argue there are in fact some

through green spaces: she “passed over a wild heth / Thurch feld and thurch wode hye geth” (147-148) until “hye com bi a forest side” (151). However, here binaries are maintained; though the maiden passes through these tree-based settings, the narrator draws a line between the non-human and the human, and she emerges from the forest into a town with “Walles and hous fele hye seighe, / A chirche with stepel fair and heighe” (157-158). The sense that such binaries are locked in place, with the civilisation of the town being walled off from, and standing above, the non-human world, is emphasised by the image of a door that emerges soon after: the maiden “yede hir to the chirche dore” (164). Instead of acting as a portal, this door remains closed; the maiden goes no further and kneels to entreat Christ to “help this seli innocent ... For Marie love, thi moder fre” (170-172). The association of the maiden with Mary here could be seen to re-conceptualise the Eve/Mary dichotomy so central to medieval understandings of women; Freine’s mother – who is “A proude dame and an envieous, / Hokerfulliche missegging, Squeymous and eke scorning” (60-62) – could be seen as the opposing Eve figure.⁵¹⁵ Furthermore, the maiden’s invocation of Christ and Mary in front of the church doors – which would have been wooden – suggests that these doors act as a wooden substitute for the cross. However, this is a closed-off image, and the sense of impenetrable boundaries remains.

Soon after – and almost in response to this prayer – a potential site of human/non-human entanglement appears, as the maiden’s attention shifts from the closed wooden doors to a living tree. This tree is described as follows:

Hye loked up and bi hir seighe

significant differences – especially when it comes to the ash tree – the maiden’s decision to leave Freine at a convent in these ten lines is referenced later in the Middle English version when she journeys to do so (160-164), so it is safe to assume, in this case, that the editors’ substitution respects the integrity of the original Middle English narrative.

⁵¹⁵ I have discussed this dichotomy previously, in Chapter One.

An asche bi hir fair and heighe,
 Wele ybowed, of michel priis;
 The bodi was holow as mani on is.
 Therin sche leyd the child for cold,
 In the pel as it was bifold,
 And blisced it with al hir might (173-179)

The first thing to note about this description is the repetition of the phrase “fair and heighe”, which was used to describe the church on line 158. This further highlights the religious associations of the tree, which are first suggested by the fact that it appears immediately following the maiden’s invocation of Mary.⁵¹⁶ Additionally, as Laskaya and Salisbury note, Pliny claims that snakes have an aversion to the ash tree.⁵¹⁷ If we take the maiden’s invocation of Mary as a movement away from the Eve-like figure of Freine’s mother, this could be seen to allude to the Fall narrative; neither snakes nor sin have a place in this tree. This also introduces the gendered associations of the tree: Mary – who is invoked via her maternal relationship with Christ (172) – has given the maid a safe, feminine space in which to place the baby for protection, which is receptive and shielding.⁵¹⁸ This prefigures the maternal, womb-like connotations of the fact that the tree is hollow, which are, in turn, emphasised by the anthropomorphic assertion that the tree has a “bodi”. Like Orfeo’s hollow tree, this receptiveness in some ways renders the tree a passive vehicle of human identification, which is also suggested by the subtle undermining of

⁵¹⁶ Just as Hautdesert seems to appear in response to Gawain’s prayer to Mary in *SGGK*.

⁵¹⁷ Laskaya and Salisbury, Note to “*Lay le Freine*,” line 26: “The magical qualities of the tree are also recorded in Pliny who claims that snakes will not crawl over leaves from an ash tree and that a rod made from the ash tree, if it draws a circle in the dirt around a snake, will confine it so that it dies of starvation.”

⁵¹⁸ Indeed, Laskaya and Salisbury also note that “in English and Scottish folklore, the ash is said to have healing powers and its sap a protection against witchcraft” (Note to “*Lay le Freine*,” line 26).

the ash in this description: though it is fair and well-branched, it is one of many, “hollow as mani on is”.⁵¹⁹

On the other hand, the maternal connotations of the ash have the potential to grant it an unusual power in both “birthing” and defining Freine, though again this potential is largely not realised. Laskaya and Salisbury note that, in Scandinavian mythology, the ash tree is implicated in the creation – the “birthing” – of the first man: the gods create man from the tree of the world, Yggdrasil.⁵²⁰ However, in *Lay le Freine*, the potential for the ash tree to hold such power is removed, starting with the only other time that the tree is physically mentioned in the poem. In this instance, it is referenced only in relation to the *pel* (robe) that Freine is wrapped in: “The chirche dore [the porter] undede, / And seighe anon in the stede / The pel ligen in the tre” (191). Although the church door has now been opened – suggesting, perhaps, that some other boundaries will be crossed – the salience of the *pel* in this image foreshadows how the man-made symbols of the *pel* and ring given to Freine by her mother come to define her more fully than the tree. Indeed, there is no narrative space given to the act of removing Freine from the hollow of the tree; we are told simply that “Therto [the pel] he yede and it unwond, / And the maidenchild therin he fond” (195-196). The tree is not mentioned here, and – again – is not physically present for the rest of the text, though it is mentioned again when

⁵¹⁹ These elements seem to be original to the Middle English version. Marie’s poem does not contain the invocation of Mary, nor this subtle undermining, and in fact resists equating the tree with the feminine; it has more phallic connotations, being “broad-limbed” (167) and “thick” (168) instead of “fair and heighe”. Additionally in Marie’s version, the maid places Freine “in its branches” (173), not a hollow, resisting this more yonic image. Marie also specifies that “it had been planted as a shade tree” (170), which is well removed from tree’s maternal role of protecting the child “for cold” in the Middle English version. These and all subsequent references to the French *Lai le Fresne* are from Robert Hanning and Joan Ferrante, ed. and trans., *The Lais of Marie de France* (Durham: The Labyrinth Press, 1982).

⁵²⁰ Laskaya and Salisbury, Note to “*Lay le Freine*,” line 26; also see Leach and Fried, *Dictionary of Folklore*, 1:80 for this association, and for their exploration of the English belief in the “potency” of ash trees and their products in medicinal use.

Freine is named, as will be discussed shortly. Further, despite the tree's maternal associations, Freine seems to be "birthed" more from the *pel*.

Thus, the potential for the tree to act as a maternal identifier for Freine is resisted, and though the non-human is implicated in this resistance, it remains restricted. Indeed, there are other ways in which the ash tree is undermined as a potential caregiver or identifier for Freine. The maid places Freine into the hollow of the tree for protection from the cold (177); it should be noted that it is winter, and the maiden walked "Al the winterlong night" (149) with Freine. Despite the shelter of the tree, Freine almost dies of the cold, and she must be warmed before she can be nourished by the porter's daughter:

For sche was melche and couthe theran.
 Sche bad it souke and it nold,
 For it was neighe ded for cold.
 Anon fer sche alight
 And warmed it wele aflight.
 Sche gaf it souke opon hir barm,
 And sethen laid it to slepe warm (202-208)

The emphasis on warmth and comfort here depends on the burning of wood before maternal humanity can have an effect. That wood must be burnt to ensure that Freine survives indicates how the ash tree – Freine's arboreal "mother" – is not enough to keep her alive. Though Laskaya and Salisbury suggest that the ash tree "bears" Freine, and that its association with infertility – as it cannot bear fruit – is therefore ironic, in the end the tree's maternal potential is indeed not realised.⁵²¹ It is the trees that are reduced to ash in the fire of the porter's daughter, and not the ash tree, that saves her.⁵²² In contrast to the fire imagery in *SGGK*, this burning is not

⁵²¹ Laskaya and Salisbury, Note to "*Lay le Freine*," line 26. The ash tree's association with infertility will be discussed further below.

⁵²² Rudd notes the similarities between the Middle English "asshe" meaning ashes and "assh(e)" meaning ash tree when discussing *The Knight's Tale (Greenery, 51-52)*; also see the *MED* entries at <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english->

especially troubling of human/non-human boundaries, but instead keeps them in place, as the connection between Freine and the tree is superficial and cannot sustain her, and human use of the non-human is simply necessary and routine. Freine's association with the ash tree is "burnt away" before it even forms. The human/non-human dichotomy is also maintained if the tree's inhospitability is seen as a reflection of Freine's abandonment by her biological mother. Such a reading equates Freine's human mother with her arboreal "mother", in that both are unable – or, in the case of her human mother, unwilling – to nourish her.

While this reading brings the human figure of Freine's mother into alignment with the ash tree, this alignment is disrupted by the fact that, in the end, it is the *pel* and ring that come to define Freine most obviously.⁵²³ For example, when Freine eventually leaves the convent to follow her lover, Guroun, she "With hir tok hye no thing / Bot hir pel and hir ring" (299-300). This is similar to the comparable moment in *Sir Orfeo* in which Orfeo leaves his kingdom: "ne no nother gode, / Bot his harp he tok algate" (230-231). Here, both Orfeo and Freine take nothing with them except the most important markers of their identity. Indeed, both robe and ring are used to identify Freine at the end of the text – just as Orfeo's steward recognises his harp – when Freine's mother reveals her identity to Freine's father: "And this is sche, our daughter free; / And this is the mantyll, and this the ring / You gaf me of yore as a love-tokening" (396-398). Here, and when Freine leaves the convent, the tree is not mentioned as an identifier at all, not even as a signifier for Freine; her name is not referenced here. The tree is also not mentioned when the abbess tells Freine of the circumstances in which she was found; though she tells her "Hou hye was founden

[dictionary/dictionary/MED2599](#) and <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED2598> respectively.

⁵²³ Furnish likewise argues that Freine's "ring and mantle recur to mark the stages in the development of her character" ("Thematic Structure," 93).

in al thing” (247), the narrator only specifies that she “tok hir the cloth and the ring” (248).⁵²⁴ Once again, the tree’s potential as a non-human “mother” to and identifier for Freine is resisted.

Indeed, while the ash tree remains important in some senses through the rest of the text, it is not afforded the same type of shadowy power as some of the other trees I have discussed. It is mentioned when the porter tells the abbess that raises Freine how he found her – “A litel maidenchild ich founde / In the holwe assche ther out” (214-215) – which again references the hollow receptiveness of the tree. It also has a ghostly presence when Freine is named:

The abbesse lete clepe a prest anon,
 And lete it cristin in funston.
 And for it was in an asche yfounde,
 Sche cleped it *Frain* in that stounde.
 (The Freyns of the "asche" is a *freyn*
 After the language of Breteyn;
 Forthe *Le Frein* men clepeth this lay
 More than *Asche* in ich cuntray) (227-234)

However, the authorial insertion here explaining the name and relating it to the title of the lay draws attention away from the tree itself. Moreover, the act of christening can be seen to further sever the ties between Freine and the ash tree. The tree has religious connections, as previously discussed: it is associated with the “fair and heighe” church and appears in response to an invocation of Mary. However, it is the aquatic non-human that is important here, as the text specifies Freine is “cristin in funston” (228). Just as the water in the font has been taken from its natural source and contained within a man-made object, blessed by a man to perform a sacred human ritual, the ash tree is important only in that its name is taken by Freine.

⁵²⁴ In contrast, Marie’s version does mention the tree at this point (*Le Fresne*, 298)

Thereafter, this tree is mentioned only in relation to Freine's name, when Guroun is convinced to marry another woman – Freine's twin sister – in order to produce legitimate heirs: the guests at the wedding exclaim “Fairer maiden nas never seen, / Better than Ash is Hazle y ween!” (345-346).⁵²⁵ This refers to the fact that Freine's sister is called Codre, after the hazel tree: “For in Romaunce *Le Frain* ‘ash’ is, / And *Le Codre* ‘hazle’ y-wis” (347-348). In Marie's version, Guroun's men prefer Codre specifically because “The hazel tree bears nuts and thus gives pleasure; / the ash bears no fruit” (339-340). In his discussion of these lines, Lee C. Ramsey points out that it is “not that the mistress is infertile, but she cannot give him an *heir*”; this inability to provide legitimate and noble descendants means Freine is “socially ‘barren’”, as she is of “uncertain birth and parentage”.⁵²⁶ Hazel trees, on the other hand, produce edible nuts and have associations in Celtic folklore with knowledge and fertility; this choice of tree potentially emphasises Codre's ability to “bear fruit” for Guroun, unlike Freine.⁵²⁷ However, the text gives no explanation for Codre's arboreal name, and no hazel tree appears in the text. Likewise, the ash tree is now invisible. Though “ash” and “Freine” – as well as “hazel” and “Codre” – are used interchangeably – and we may expect a consequent entangling of human and non-human – instead “ash” and “hazel” are simply lexical, human signifiers, with little underlying non-human presence or power.

Indeed, the non-human is restricted in this poem, and there is even a sense of oppression and restraint in those spaces occupied by the non-human. Freine's journey as a baby through the winter night, and her potential entanglement with the

⁵²⁵ It should be noted that the Middle English version ends at line 341, so Laskaya and Salisbury have adapted this section from Marie's poem.

⁵²⁶ Lee C. Ramsey, *Chivalric Romances: Popular Literature in Medieval England* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 114.

⁵²⁷ Leach and Fried, *Dictionary of Folklore*, 1: 486-487. In the end, this association is also ironic, as it is Freine that marries Guroun, not Codre.

non-human ash tree, almost kills her and she must be revived through fire, the burning of wood. Soon after, water is used to christen her within a space of human ritual and control. The oppositions of warm/cold and fire/water are symptomatic of the way *Lay le Freine* strengthens boundaries. To conclude, I will refer to one more opposition that is emphasised: that of night and day. I have previously mentioned that the maiden that delivers Friene to the tree does so at night – she travels “Al the winterlong night” (149) – but now I would like to draw attention to the fact that morning breaks as she leaves Freine in the tree: “With that it gan to dawe light” (180). In some ways, this can be seen simply to reflect a sense of birth, and new beginnings. It is a somewhat benign and stereotypical image, as “the foules up and song on bough” (181), for example.

However, at the same time, the cycle of night and day can be seen to flag how movement is restricted in the text. As the birds begin their daily song, the “acremen yede to the plough” (182); this alludes to the repetitive, monotonous motion of ploughing. In itself, this image is one of cultivation and control of the non-human, but it is also traps the human workmen involved; they are restricted within the lines they repeatedly plough through the earth. This sense of repetition is emphasised in the next lines, as “the maiden turned ogain anon, / And toke the waye he hadde er gon” (183-184); she must also move in a linear trajectory, re-treading her own steps. The idea that the characters in this poem must move back and forth along strict lines is also seen in Freine’s restricted and repetitive movements. She must leave the convent in the same way that she came, as Laskaya and Salisbury note: her movements “happen in secrecy” and “just as she was illicitly taken away from the childbed and abandoned in the tree, so here, she is

illicitly taken from the convent to live as Guroun's mistress".⁵²⁸ Thus, though time has passed and Freine has grown – “This Frein thrived fram yer to yer” (235) – there is an oppressive sense of unchanging monotony in the cycle of the days and seasons. Likewise, as the ploughmen move back and forth, so too does Goroun when he is courting Freine: “Oft he come bi day and night / To speke with that maiden bright” (287-288). Though he has the freedom to come in night and day, this linear and repetitive motion reflects how both men and women – as well as the non-human – are confined within the restrictive cycles of the poem.

Although this confinement limits both human and non-human, *Lay le Freine* resists the type of human/non-human entanglement that I have argued is a feature of *Le Morte Darthur*, *Ywain and Gawain*, *SGGK*, and *Sir Orfeo*. There is a similar entrapment within cycles in *SGGK*, but *Lay le Freine* avoids *SGGK*'s accompanying breakdown of human/non-human boundaries and hierarchies. Instead of a more organic movement within overlapping human and non-human cycles, *Lay le Freine* traps its people and trees in mechanised, linear trajectories that maintain the separation of human and non-human narratives, just as Freine's town and convent are walled off from the forest. Human hierarchies are therefore more dominant in this text than in those previously discussed, and especially in contrast to *Sir Orfeo*, which features more permeable and animate human/non-human relationships. Instead, the mechanical back-and-forth movements of the ploughmen, the maiden, Freine, and Guroun, reflect how trees are more restricted and inert in this poem, which tends to strengthen binaries and resist potential for transgression and human entwinement with the non-human.

⁵²⁸ Laskaya and Salsibury, Note to “*Lay le Freine*,” lines 297-299.

Cherries and Stones: *Sir Cleges* and *The Franklin's Tale*

To conclude, I will now explore how the observations I have made in this chapter can potentially provide a new way to read the lays as a genre. I have explored trees as a common theme in *Sir Gowther*, *Sir Degaré*, the *Erle of Tolous*, *Emaré*, and *Sir Launfal*. Specifically, I have surveyed how trees are commonly linked to violence and human identities within them. I have now presented two case studies, *Sir Orfeo* and *Lay le Freine*; while the former is a strong example of human/non-human entanglement, the latter exhibits more restrictive and impermeable boundaries. Likewise, in *Freine* there is no hint of the Otherworldly power that intrudes into *Sir Gowther*, *Sir Degaré*, *Sir Launfal*, and *Sir Orfeo*. However, in both case studies, as in the other lays, there are elements of violence and threat associated with tree imagery. Herodis' violent "snatching" tears her away from Orfeo, and his experiences in the wilderness are imprinted on his body, as her body is implicated in her horror at the fairy king's vision, not to mention the hyperbolic images of pain and death that accompany the Otherworldly *ympe*-tree. In *Lay le Freine*, Freine's mother wishes to kill her, Freine almost dies of cold in the boughs of her tree "mother", and wood must be burned to revive her. In this conclusion, I will briefly focus on the final two texts that can be considered Middle English Breton Lays, and explore how one of them, *Sir Cleges*, adheres to the themes of the first sections, while the other, *The Franklin's Tale*, does not. The former is not traditionally considered a lay, but perhaps should be, and the latter is commonly considered to be mis-labelled as a lay, suggesting again that trees – and especially those that witness violence – are markers of this romance form.

Laskaya and Salisbury include *Sir Cleges* in their edition of *The Middle English Breton Lays*, despite the fact that it is not usually classified as such. They justify this by referring to its focus on minstrelsy, which is central to the genre.⁵²⁹ The start of the poem places emphasis on the opulence of the Christmas feasts Cleges held “In worschype of Hym, that all weld / And fore us dyghed upon the Rode” (56-57). Minstrels feature heavily at these feasts: “Mynstrellus wold not be behynd, / Myrthys wer thei may fynd. / That is most to ther pay” (46-48, also see 49-50). When Cleges eventually depletes all his resources and can no longer live comfortably – let alone hold his usual feast – he receives a “sonde” (111) from Christ in the form “Off dyverse mynstralsy” (99); he hears singing and music while he is lamenting his poverty (97-105). Further, just as Orfeo disguises himself as a minstrel to enter the court of the fairy king, as well as his own court, so too does poverty-stricken Cleges disguise himself as a beggar to gain access to King Uther’s court, meeting a porter, usher, and steward who screen his entry; these are stock characters in minstrel stories.⁵³⁰

The reason that Cleges disguises himself to seek an audience with Uther, however, is not to do with minstrelsy at all. Instead, he does so to deliver the fruit of an important tree. One day, on his way back from church, Cleges detours “Into a garthyn ther besyde” his palace (187) and proceeds to pray:

As he knelyd oune hys kne
 Undemeth a chery tre,
 Makyng hys praere,
 He rawght a bowghe in hys hond,
 To ryse therby and upstond;
 No lenger knelyd he ther.
 When the bowghe was in hys hond,
 Gren levys theron he fond
 And ronde beryes in fere (193-201)

⁵²⁹ Laskaya and Salisbury, Introduction to “*Sir Cleges*,” 3

⁵³⁰ Laskaya and Salisbury, Note to “*Sir Cleges*,” line 262.

After exclaiming over the unseasonable nature of this growth – "I have not se this tyme of yere, / That treys any fruyt schuld bere" (205-206) – he tastes one of the cherries (208-213) and cuts off a branch to show his wife, Clarys: "A lytell bow he gan of slyfe" (214). Cleges fears it is a bad omen (220-222), but Clarys says it is a sign "Off mour godness, that is comyng" (224) from God (227). She is right; the fruit from this tree allows Cleges to regain favour with King Uther and build up his fortune once more. As with the lays discussed in the first sections of this chapter, this tree is connected to violence, and to Cleges' identity.

Before I discuss this, however, it is important to note the iconographic importance of a cherry tree that blooms out of season. The "Unseasonable Fruit" motif involves fruit miraculously appearing in winter due to divine intervention.⁵³¹ That the fruit is from a cherry tree is also significant, as cherries were often understood as the "Fruit of Paradise" in Christian symbolism.⁵³² Furthermore, like *Freine's* ash tree, this cherry tree can be linked to Christ and Mary. Sherwyn T. Carr explores how the "cherry tree miracle" reached English vernacular literature through an episode in the Pseudo-Matthew, an apocryphal text accounting for the childhood of Christ, in which the Holy Family is travelling through the desert and Christ causes a cherry tree to bloom to relieve a weary Mary.⁵³³ Several Middle English versions of the Pseudo-Matthew retain this episode, and in other Middle English texts this motif appears in a nativity context, in which Christ enacts this power as an unborn child.⁵³⁴ This is seen, for example, in *Nativity*, from the so-called "N-Town Cycle," a collection of fifteenth-century mystery plays. Mary sees a tree full of unseasonable cherries on

⁵³¹ This is a folkloric motif that has its roots in hagiography; C. Grant Loomis explores its prevalence in a group of Celtic legends of saints in "Sir Cleges and Unseasonable Growth in Hagiology," *Modern Language Notes* 53, no. 8 (1938): 591-594.

⁵³² Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols*, 34.

⁵³³ Sherwyn T. Carr, "The Middle English Nativity Cherry Tree: The Dissemination of a Popular Motif," *Modern Language Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (1975): 135-138.

⁵³⁴ Carr, "The Middle English Nativity Cherry Tree," 137-144.

the way to Bethlehem and Joseph fails to reach them for her, stating “lete hym pluk yow cheryes begatt yow with childe” (39).⁵³⁵ Mary then exclaims “this tre bowyth to me down!” (42) and proceeds to pick the cherries, prompting Joseph to repent his “unkynde wurdys” (45).⁵³⁶

In *Sir Cleges*, a similar divine intervention occurs, though Cleges is more active in his acceptance of the fruit. In contrast to the image of the cherry tree bowing to Mary, Cleges uses the tree to stand: “He rawght a bowghe in hys hond, / To ryse therby and upstond” (196-197). Unlike Mary, who passively receives the fruit that the tree bends to give her, Cleges acts upon his tree, bringing it down to his level through physical force.⁵³⁷ It is through this force that he discovers the miracle of the cherries, which he must touch – and consume – to confirm (208-212). The fact that Cleges uses the branch to stand here foreshadows the fact that he will use the tree to regain his aristocratic standing, and acts as a neat metaphor for the action of the rest of the text. Here, then, we start to see how this tree becomes central to Cleges’ identity. There is also violence associated with this identification, which begins with Cleges’ treatment of the tree. He not only tastes a cherry from the tree, but cuts off a whole branch (214), again using force against the non-human, and soon after Cleges and Clarys strip the tree of its fruit to fill a basket for Cleges to take with him to court (230). The force associated with cutting the tree into fragments and harvesting its fruit can be compared to the violence associated with

⁵³⁵ I refer here and subsequently to the edition of the text in Douglas Sugano, *The N-Town Plays* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007).

⁵³⁶ Another example of this motif can be found in “The Cherry-Tree Carol,” a medieval ballad that features the same pre-natal actions of Christ (Carr, “The Middle English Nativity Cherry Tree,” 133 and 142-144). The Wakefield *Secunda Pastorum* also contains a reference to unseasonable growth related to the Nativity, as one of the shepherds gives a cherry branch to Christ as his gift (Carr, “The Middle English Nativity Cherry Tree,” 134).

⁵³⁷ Furthermore, Mary is not actually referenced in this text. Despite her associations with the cherry tree and the repeated references to Christmas, it is Christ’s sacrifice that is focussed on: there are several references to Christ and the cross throughout (57, 306, and 336), and Cleges repeatedly attributes the miracle of the fruit to God (275, 283, 285, 305, and 345).

the *ympe*-tree – and with Orfeo’s re-identification – as the removal of a branch from a tree such as this is the first stage of grafting, a pursuit associated with producing fruit for human consumption.

Though such grafting does not occur in this text, the theme of violence and identification with and against the non-human can be seen in *Sir Cleges*. As he sets off to take the basket of miraculous fruit to Uther, Cleges “than a staff he toke” (247). As in *Sir Degaré*, the fact that Cleges carries a staff – a wooden tool – further links him with the non-human world. Though the narrator explains that he takes this staff because “he had no hors ... Nether sted ne palferey, / Bot a staff was his hakney, / As maner in poverté” (248-252), Cleges in fact uses the staff as a weapon. In the second half of the text, he cleverly uses it to exact revenge on the porter, usher, and steward whom he meets on his way to see Uther. These characters are corrupt, each requesting one third of Cleges’ rewards from Uther as payment for letting him pass (285-288, 316-318, and 346-348). They also threaten him with violence if he does not agree, and the steward specifically tells Cleges that “with a staff I schall the twake / And bete thi ragges to thi bake / And schofe the out hedlyng!” (358-360).⁵³⁸ In response, when Uther offers to pay Cleges, he answers “I aske nothyng bot strokes twelve, / Frely now grante ye me, / With my staff to pay them all” (428-430), and proceeds to deliver them to the porter, usher, and steward in turn, fulfilling his promises to them with violence rather than gold. This violence is emphasised during this “repayment”: he “gafe the steward sych a stroke, / That he fell doune lyke a bloke” (451-452), for example, and when he confronts the porter “The fyrst stroke he leyd hym onne, / He brake atwo hys schulder bone” (475-476). The court finds humour in this situation – “The lordes lewghe, both old and yenge” (517) – and

⁵³⁸ The usher also holds a staff (294).

Uther rewards Cleges' cunning with clothes (542-543), a castle (544), a gold cup for Clarys (551-552), and – most relevantly – the title of steward of “Of all hys londys afterwerd, / Off water, lond and frythe” (548-549). Cleges now has control over water, land, and the tree-based setting of the forest, codifying the control of the non-human world he displayed in relation to both the tree and the staff.

Throughout the text, Cleges has cut and stripped a tree and used a wooden man-made object to exact violence against those who stood against him, and is rewarded with a position of power that re-affirms his human identity above the non-human. As with the ash tree in *Lay le Freine*, the cherry tree in *Sir Cleges* is therefore trapped within human hierarchies of power, though it is vital. This is in line with my discussion of the lays in the first sections of this chapter, in which trees are present and, at times, significant. Though none of the lays discussed thus far feature human/non-human entanglement comparable to that of *Sir Orfeo*, which is in turn analogous to that of *Le Morte Darthur*, *Ywain and Gawain*, and *SGGK*, trees are important markers, symbols, and gateways in this corpus. Moreover, in each case, trees and wood participate in violence, which is enacted against women, between men, and often in relation to the Otherworld.

However, there is one text that declares itself to be a lay, but does not share arboreal links with the rest of the genre. In the prologue to *The Franklin's Tale*, the Franklin defines it as a lay: “thise olde gentil Britouns in hir dayes ... Rymeyed in hir firste Briton tonge” (709-711).⁵³⁹ Additionally, the narrative is set in Brittany: “In Amorik, that called is Britayne, / Ther was a knyght” (729-730). However, as Ben Parsons discusses, this has long bewildered scholars, since the text does not display conventional features of the lay and is based on a story in Boccaccio's *Il*

⁵³⁹ This and all subsequent references are to *The Franklin's Tale* in *The Riverside Chaucer*.

Filocolo, which has no associations with the genre.⁵⁴⁰ Thus, “there is a puzzling disparity between the stated and actual genre of the Tale,” which instead incorporates elements of many other genres, and contains “patristic, classical, hagiographic, and historiographic material”.⁵⁴¹ Likewise, Furnish argues that “Chaucer plays with the conventions of his sources and influences by reversing them” in this “lay”.⁵⁴² Indeed, in addition to the lack of those elements that conventionally define Breton lays – minstrelsy, love, and the supernatural, for example – this text does not feature the type of tree imagery that I have highlighted in the other lays.

Despite the important tree-based settings of this tale, trees are barely mentioned at all. The main trajectory of the narrative begins in a garden when a squire, Aurelius, propositions Dorigen, a married woman. The garden is richly described as “ful of leves and of floures” (908). The narrator even likens it to Eden: “That nevere was ther gardyn of swich prys / But if it were the verray paradys” (911-912). However, the text does not refer to any trees, even in passing. Other non-human elements are present and important throughout the text; for example, Dorigen gives Aurelius the impossible task to “remoeve alle the rokkes” (994) from the coast of Brittany, “thane wol [she] love [him] best of any man” (997).⁵⁴³ Here, though, the arboreal non-human is specifically excluded, since in Boccaccio’s version, Dorigen instead asks Aurelius to make the garden bloom in winter.⁵⁴⁴ Even

⁵⁴⁰ Ben Parsons, “No Laughing Matter: Fraud, the Fabliau and Chaucer’s *Franklin’s Tale*,” *Neophilologus* 96, no. 1 (2012): 121-122.

⁵⁴¹ Parsons “No Laughing Matter,” 122.

⁵⁴² Furnish, “Thematic Structure,” 101.

⁵⁴³ Gillian Rudd discusses this and the garden from an ecocritical perspective in “Making the Rocks Disappear: Refocusing Chaucer’s Knight’s and Franklin’s Tales,” in *The Environmental Tradition in English Literature*, ed. John Parham (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2002), 125-129; she also discusses *The Franklin’s Tale* in *Greenery*, 139-148 and 166-167.

⁵⁴⁴ Another key difference is that Aurelius manages to “remove” the rocks by enlisting the help of a magician-clerk, who predicts an unusually high tide that causes the rocks to vanish;

when the garden is referenced again in *The Franklin's Tale*, no trees are mentioned; when Aurelius tells Dorigen she must meet him “in a gardyn yond” (1326) to fulfil her promise to “love” him, trees are not focussed on when she goes to this garden to do so. Here, the trees that so often accompany such instances of sexual violence in the Middle English Breton Lays – such as in *Sir Gowther* and *Sir Degaré* – are only implied.⁵⁴⁵

In fact, the only use of the word “tree” is not associated with violence, or the physical presence of a tree, at all. Lamenting Dorigen’s answer to his proposition, Aurelius prays to “Appollo, god and governour / of every plaunte, herbe, tree, and flour” (1031-1032); even here, the word is almost lost within this list.⁵⁴⁶ This does encode a brief association between the non-human and the male hero, as he is praying for Apollo to cast his “merciable eighe” on him (1036), as he does the plants: Apollo gives “to ech of hem his tyme and his seson” (1034). Furthermore, this association with the non-human world comes at a point in the text in which Aurelius is vulnerable: his unrequited love causes hyperbolic suffering, and he is “in languor and in torment furyus / two yeer and moore” (1101-1102). However, the threat or realisation of sexual or physical violence that accompanies almost all other tree references in the lays is absent here. Additionally, this use of “tree” does not refer to

unlike Boccaccio’s sorcerer, Tebano, “this magicien” (1184) in *The Franklin's Tale* actually uses science and learning to predict the tide (see Parsons, “No Laughing Matter,” 123-128). This also mirrors how the expectations associated with the lay genre – in which the supernatural is often vital – are further undermined in Chaucer’s text.

⁵⁴⁵ Indeed, the threat of sexual violence is also not realised, as Aurelius decides to release Dorigen from her promise upon seeing her “distresse” (1528) and recognising Arveragus’ “grete gentillesse” (1527).

⁵⁴⁶ Aurelius is here praying for Apollo because he needs his sister, Lucina, to influence the tides for him, in order that they might cover the rocks and satisfy Dorigen’s request. Just as the trees are lost in this list, then, Aurelius is requesting help to “lose” the rocks. Rudd discusses this prayer, and Aurelius’ anthropocentric treatment of the non-human, in *Greenery*, 143-144.

a specific tree that is physically present in the text, while almost every lay previously discussed features at least one “real” tree that witnesses violence.⁵⁴⁷

Chaucer frequently inverts and undermines tropes and genres, lending his body of work a sense of ambiguity that resists a monologic reading. Taking this into consideration, I do not wish to oversimplify *The Franklin’s Tale*, nor any of the other texts I have discussed in this chapter, as they are all complex works with multifaceted readings and meanings. Furthermore, their trees are varied and multivalent; though it is possible to see patterns in the arboreal presences of the lays, these presences are by no means uniform. *Sir Launfal* could be seen as an outlier, for example, as Launfal’s tree does not directly witness violence, and *Emaré* does not feature any “real” trees. However, it is still worth noting that there are important trees, or tree imagery, in all of the lays, except for *The Franklin’s Tale*. Moreover, *Sir Cleges*, which is not traditionally considered a lay, but which features many of the themes common to them, also contains an important tree, as well as wooden objects.

On the one hand, to propose that trees are generic to the lays is, in some ways, superfluous, as this thesis relies on the fact that they are essential to medieval romance. On the other hand, adding trees that are associated with violence to the list of generic features commonly used to define the lays – listing these trees among love, fairy, and minstrelsy, for example – opens up a space for the non-human to operate within them in ways that have not yet been considered. Whether this non-human presence has the power to infiltrate and define the human, as can be seen in *Sir Orfeo*, or participates in more restricted binaries, as in *Lay le Freine*, a focus on trees once again allows us to glimpse the eco-subtext that lies

⁵⁴⁷ The exception is *Emaré*, in which the trees that witness her suffering are metaphorical.

below romance narratives. The trees of the Middle English Breton Lays are, in some ways, as slippery and hard to pin down as a definition of the lays themselves, but they do participate in patterns that help us to explore them. Glimpses of the arboreal eco-subtext in this corpus are often as brief as the lays are short, but once again this does not preclude its liminal and ambiguous power.

Chapter Five: Hidden Arboreal Messages in *Sir Tristrem*

With the two of them it was just
 as it is with the honeysuckle
 that attaches itself to the hazel tree:
 when it has wound and attached
 and worked itself around the trunk,
 the two can survive together;
 but if someone tries to separate them,
 the hazel dies quickly
 and the honeysuckle with it⁵⁴⁸

The tale of the famous lovers Tristan and Isolde is entwined with the arboreal non-human, just as the lovers themselves are tangled with each other. This metaphor, through which they become hazel and honeysuckle threaded together, is from Marie de France's Breton *lai*, *Chevrefoil*, which is about the lovers.⁵⁴⁹ I argued in the last chapter that lays are dependent on trees, which is seen again in this French *lai*; this image also has similarities with those of human/non-human entanglement that I highlighted in *Sir Orfeo*. That Marie's Tristan and Isolde are so entangled that one would die without the other alludes to the process of grafting, which I related to the love between Orfeo and Herodis, figured in the *ympe*-tree.⁵⁵⁰ Furthermore, this image of potential plant death can be compared to arboreal images at the end of other versions of the Tristan legend, wherein the graves of the lovers sprout plants or trees that grow together; their dead bodies, lying

⁵⁴⁸ Marie de France, "*Chevrefoil*" in *The Lais of Marie de France*, ed. and trans., Robert Hanning and Joan Ferrante (Durham: The Labyrinth Press, 1982), 68-76.

⁵⁴⁹ Ewa Słojka discusses the implications of this image, within the context of *Chevrefoil*, in more depth (Ewa Słojka, "Nature and the Unnatural in Marie de France's *Chevrefoil*," *Neophilologus* 96 (2012): 17-31).

⁵⁵⁰ Although these plants are not actually "grafted" together, as the honeysuckle grows, vine-like, around the hazel, the idea that both would die without the other has parallels with the grafting process, within which two plants become dependant on each other.

underground, produce plants that allow them to “live on” together.⁵⁵¹ These images of entanglement unite love and death in another knot that brings together human and non-human. This provides a starting point from which to consider the Middle English versions of the Tristan legend, which – although they do not contain the same kind of human/non-human entanglement – feature trees that mark the existence of an eco-subtext that surrounds the lovers in threatening and protective ways. This chapter will explore how trees and wood in the Middle English *Sir Tristrem* are uncanny forces that participate in the narrative at key points as guardians, communicators, and facilitators.

The legend of Tristan and Isolde, a tragic tale of two adulterous lovers, was widely popular in medieval Europe. The various manuscript versions of the story attest to this popularity; there are several from across Europe, though some of them are fragmentary or lost. Thomas of Britain, for example, wrote a French version at the court of Henry II that is extant only in fragments, but can be reconstructed from the German *Tristram und Isolt* by Gottfried von Strassburg and the Norse *Tristrams Saga*.⁵⁵² Other versions include Bérουλ’s *Tristan*, a thirteenth-century prose *Tristan*, Marie de France’s *Chevrefoil*, quoted above, and two versions of the *Folie Tristan*, from Oxford and Berne; other smaller fragments exist as well.⁵⁵³ Most of these versions feature the same basic narrative: Tristan travels to Ireland to defeat a giant and a dragon in turn; after the latter, Isolde agrees to go with Tristan to marry King

⁵⁵¹ See, for example, Bédier’s modern version: “Outside a chapel, to the left and right of the apse he [Mark] he buried them in separate graves. But, during the night, there sprang from Tristan’s grave a bramble, green and leafy, with strong branches, with sweet-smelling flowers, that, growing up over the chapel, plunged into Iseut’s grave” (Joseph Bédier, *The Romance of Tristan and Iseut*, trans. Edward J. Gallagher (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2013), 104). Eleanor R. Long explores this “twining branches” motif in more depth, and contextualises it within post-medieval English ballads that contain this theme (Eleanor R. Long, “‘Young Man, I Think You’re Dyin’: The *Twining Branches* Theme in the Tristan Legend and in English Tradition,” *Fabula* 21 (1980): 183-199).

⁵⁵² Sigmund Eisner, *The Tristan Legend: A Study in Sources* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969), 30.

⁵⁵³ Eisner, *The Tristan Legend*, 30.

Mark, Tristan's uncle; on the journey, Tristan and Isolde drink a love potion intended for Isolde and Mark; they repeatedly attempt to hide their love from Mark, usually with a sojourn to the forest to escape him; Tristan marries another Isolde (Isolde of the White Hands), but will not consummate the union; eventually, he is mortally wounded and sends for Isolde, but his wife tricks him into believing she has forsaken him, so he dies of a broken heart; and Isolde does likewise when she arrives to find him dead.

In Middle English, this story is told in the poem *Sir Tristrem*, as well as in the "Book of Sir Tristram de Lyones" from Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*. *Sir Tristrem* is believed to be an adaptation of Thomas' *Tristan*, and exists only in the Auchinleck manuscript, which also features *Sir Degaré*, *Lay le Freine*, and *Sir Orfeo*, discussed in the last chapter. In fact, *Sir Tristrem* appears immediately before *Sir Orfeo* in the manuscript, and, although this does not necessarily prefigure similarity, the two texts do exhibit some parallels.⁵⁵⁴ For example, both feature minstrelsy; *Tristrem*, like many *Tristans* before him, is a harper.⁵⁵⁵ Malory's *Tristram* also plays the harp; the "Book of Sir Tristram de Lyones" is believed to be an adaptation of the thirteenth-century prose *Tristan*, though Phillipa Hardman argues convincingly that Malory could have drawn on *Sir Tristrem* as well.⁵⁵⁶ The presence of wooden harps in both Middle English versions of this legend suggests the importance of other wood and

⁵⁵⁴ A full digitisation of the Auchinleck manuscript, attesting to this ordering, has been published by the National Library of Scotland: <https://auchinleck.nls.uk/contents.html>.

⁵⁵⁵ Though she does not discuss *Sir Tristrem*, Morgan Dickson provides a detailed background of *Tristan* figures as harpers, and compares them with King David and King Horn (Morgan Dickson, "The Image of the Knightly Harper: Symbolism and Resonance," in *Medieval Romance and Material Culture*, ed. Nicholas Perkins (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2015), 199-214). A relevant example of *Tristan-as-harper* is Marie de France's *Tristan*. Marie Marie arguably characterises him as the original composer of her *lai*, *Chevrefoil*: "Tristan, who played the harp well, / composed a new *lai* about it / I shall name it briefly / in English they call it *Goat's Leaf* / the French call it *Chevrefoil*" (Marie de France, "*Chevrefoil*," 112-116; see Ewa Słojka's discussion of this attribution in "Nature and the Unnatural," 26-30).

⁵⁵⁶ Phillipa Hardman, "Malory and Middle English Verse Romance: The Case of *Sir Tristrem*," in *Arthurian Studies in Honour of P.J.C Field*, ed. Bonnie Wheeler (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004), 217-222. I will return to Malory's version in my conclusion.

trees within them. While neither *Sir Tristrem* nor “The Book of Sir Tristram de Lyones” contain the intertwined trees that grow over the lovers’ graves in other versions of the Tristan legend, both texts feature arboreal presences that suggest different kinds of human/non-human entanglement.

Indeed, though it is often considered to be a less sophisticated version of Thomas’ *Tristan*, *Sir Tristrem* is a complex and clever poem that uses trees in ways that have not yet been explored in this thesis. Trees and wood act as communicative devices within the poem, marking moments of sincere sentiment and exemplifying how trees can convey various messages, both literally and symbolically. They also participate in the parodic and comedic elements of the text, which are accompanied by violence and masculine vulnerability. To explore these themes, I will start by addressing *Sir Tristrem*’s various linden trees to introduce how trees are associated with humour in this text, and how Tristrem and Ysonde can communicate with and around them, by highlighting two episodes: Tristrem’s introduction to Mark’s court, and the famous “Tryst Beneath the Tree” episode, in which Mark hides in a tree to spy on the lovers. The following section will then explore how trees and wood participate in Tristrem and Ysonde’s relationship in more detail, with a focus on an episode in which Tristrem must save Ysonde from a harper who abducts her, and another episode in which Tristrem orders a forest to be felled to build a monument to Ysonde. I will then return to the ways in which trees and wood are implicated in the more comedic aspects of the poem, which are nevertheless underpinned by elements of violence and vulnerability, especially masculine vulnerability; before Mark uses a tree to hide himself as he spies on the lovers, Tristrem hides behind one when he fears for his life while fighting the dragon. In this way, I will explore how trees and their wood highlight not only physical but

also emotional movement within characters, and are implicated in the multifaceted contribution this text makes to the Tristan legend.

This contribution has been a source of scholarly dissent, as previous approaches to the poem have disagreed over the value of *Sir Tristrem*, which is – it must be said – a much abbreviated and, at times, incomprehensible version of this legend. Hardman argues that generic concerns are “central to the assessment” of this text and judgements of its value often depend on its classification.⁵⁵⁷ In the introduction to his edition of *Sir Tristrem*, Lupack suggests that it should be read as “a deliberate parody of the received version” that uses humour and satire to critique conventional romance.⁵⁵⁸ In this approach, he attempts to explain some of the stranger elements of the text – such as the fact that Tristrem’s dog shares the love potion with Tristrem and Ysonde – and responds to scholars such as Susan Crane, who describes the poem as “dismaying” and “erratic”, and asserts that it condenses Thomas’ text “faithfully, if not intelligibly”, with “extraordinary reductions and simplifications”.⁵⁵⁹ While it is true that this is a text full of omissions and irregularity, Phillipa Hardman points out that, “in medieval poetics *abbreviato* was as important a literary skill as the *amplificatio* that characterizes *Tristan*” and joins Maldwyn Mills in

⁵⁵⁷ Phillipa Hardman, “The True Romance of *Tristrem and Ysoude*,” in *Cultural Encounters in the Romance of Medieval England*, ed. Corinne Saunders (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2005), 87; Dana M. Symons provides a good review of scholarly judgements of the text, in “Does Tristan Think, or Doesn't He? The Pleasures of the Middle English *Sir Tristrem*,” *Arthuriana* 11, no. 4 (2001): 4-10.

⁵⁵⁸ Lupack, Introduction to *Sir Tristrem*, 147; also see 148-152.

⁵⁵⁹ Lupack, Introduction to *Sir Tristrem*, 147; Susan Crane, *Insular Romance*, 188, 193, 190, and 193 respectively. For further discussion of Hodain, Tristrem’s dog, see Symons, “Does Tristan Think,” 4. Symons also points out that Lupack’s “effort to rescue *Sir Tristrem* from its critical deadlock” (“Does Tristan Think,” 7) still paints it, in some ways, as a “bad” poem: “One implication of Lupack’s argument is that if the poem is this bad then its badness must be deliberate, self-conscious parody – a view that illustrates the way in which Lupack, although looking from a shifted vantage point, still sees the romance terms of the very aesthetic values that caused earlier critics to pan the poem” (“Does Tristan Think,” 8; also see 16-18). Although I will argue in this chapter that this text does feature some parodic and humorous elements, I acknowledge Symons’ argument that classifications such as “parody” must be applied carefully, so as not to limit *Sir Tristrem*.

viewing the text less as a chivalric romance, and more as an example of a biographical romance “life”, with a more hagiographical structure.⁵⁶⁰ Just as with *Ywain and Gawain*, then, the elisions and lacunae in *Sir Tristrem* need not solely be viewed as a symptom of the ways it is “unsophisticated”.⁵⁶¹

Indeed, attempts to classify the text work best when they embrace the difficulty of pinning down *Sir Tristrem*, and I will suggest in this chapter that – much as when we are trying to classify the non-human world – this text is best approached without restrictive definitions. Elements of chivalric romance, parody, and hagiography work together in this poem to produce meanings that go beyond these classifications. Embracing *Sir Tristrem*’s elements of confusion, while at the same time considering the non-human elements at work, again allows us to glimpse an eco-subtext that is otherwise unavailable to us; just as the narrative slips in and out of coherency at times, the trees in *Sir Tristrem* slip in and out of focus. This slippage is somewhat generic; as I have argued throughout this thesis, while tree-based settings are essential to the genre of romance, and to each text that has been discussed, they are often marginal and their narratives remain largely “absent”. Nevertheless, as Phillipa Hardman argues in her defence of *Sir Tristrem*, “small details can resonate with meaning” in this poem.⁵⁶²

Indeed, it is full of small arboreal details that do so. From its tree-based settings to the tree in which Mark hides to spy on the lovers; from the trees that are used as meeting points throughout the text to the linden branch Tristrem uses to message Ysonde; and from a giant’s wooden leg to the tree that hides Tristrem from

⁵⁶⁰ Hardman, “The True Romance”, 85 and 87-88.

⁵⁶¹ Similarly, Symons argues that “[t]he elisions in the Middle English poem need not be read as meaningless condensations because they allow more room for spectacle and episodic movement” (“Does Tristan Think,” 14).

⁵⁶² Hardman, “The True Romance,” 93. Likewise, Symons discusses how *Sir Tristrem* replaces Thomas’ more “thought-provoking components with episodic action filled with what often appears to modern readers as meaningless details” (“Does Tristan Think,” 12).

the dragon, these details participate in the muddy and intricate narrative of *Sir Tristrem*, and witness the ways that violence, humour, chivalry, and love work together and apart in this text. Viewing this eco-subtext is a way to work against Crane's conclusion that, in *Sir Tristrem*, the Tristan legend "has lost the significance developed for it by Thomas, and it has not gained a new one", as its trees can be used to define it in a new way.⁵⁶³ To borrow a metaphor from Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan and Isolde*, in which Gottfried likens German vernacular poetry to branches "grafted" onto a tree of tradition, *Sir Tristrem* therefore becomes a scion inserted into the rootstock of the Tristan legend.⁵⁶⁴ This results in a unique and uncanny grafted "tree" of a text that incorporates ostensibly absent, but nevertheless powerful, narratives of the non-human.

"And told him under linde": Linden Trees in *Sir Tristrem*

The eco-subtext in *Sir Tristrem* is best introduced using the text's linden trees as a model, as they exemplify the different aspects of the tree-based readings I will offer in this chapter. As discussed in relation to *SGGK*, linden or lime trees often mark eroticism in Middle English literature; here, this association is borne out

⁵⁶³ Crane, *Insular Romance*, 195. Lupack also attempts to disprove this conclusion (Introduction to *Sir Tristrem*, 146), and additionally quotes T.C. Rumble and Cedric Pickford, who also have more favourable views (146); Rumble's work is especially foundational for those attempting to recuperate this text (T.C. Rumble, "The Middle English *Sir Tristrem*: Toward a Reappraisal," *Comparative Literature* 11, no. 3 (1959): 221-228). Symons also usefully discusses the audience and value of *Sir Tristrem*, in comparison with its French antecedents ("Does Tristan Think," 3-22).

⁵⁶⁴ "I have never seen Heinrich myself; but I hear the best ... voice their opinion and accord him the glory of having grafted the first slip on the tree of German poetry. From this have sprouted branches whence the blossoms came from which they drew the cunning of their masterly inventions" (Gottfried von Strassburg, *Tristan and Isolde*, ed. and rev. Francis G. Gentry (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1988), 66). Liz Herbert McAvoy et al mention this metaphor in relation to the queer and multivalent power of grafted tree imagery ("Strange Fruits," 3); also see the discussion of grafting in my introduction and the last chapter.

in the relationship between the lovers and these trees.⁵⁶⁵ Linden trees witness Tristrem's entrance to Mark's kingdom and are implicated in carnal interactions between the lovers; Tristrem uses linden wood to communicate messages to Ysonde so that they may meet and lie together. The tree in which Mark hides to witness one such meeting is potentially also a linden, though this tree's relationship with Tristrem's linden wood messages is ambiguous in *Sir Tristrem*. A focus on this poem's linden trees therefore demonstrates the ways in which abbreviation obscures certain narratives within it. This section will explore how these "absent" narratives are connected to the erotic love that linden trees usually flag, and I will also highlight how these trees communicate violence and comedy, the other major themes of this chapter.⁵⁶⁶

Just before the first linden tree of *Sir Tristrem* appears, other arboreal presences participate in violence towards the non-human world, and prefigure the ways in which linden trees communicate in this poem. Although he arrives by sea, Tristrem's first experiences of Mark's kingdom are repeatedly and emphatically arboreal: he sees "a forest as it ware" (376) and "holtes that weren hare" (378), for example, and as soon as he has alighted from his ship and eaten a good meal, "the forest forth he sought" (417) and "he clombe tho holtes hare" (422), until he finds King Mark's men beside a "forest ... fair and wide" (441).⁵⁶⁷ Despite the repetition of these tree-based settings – and the repeated alliteration that accompanies them – no individual trees are mentioned until Tristrem joins Mark's men, and immediately

⁵⁶⁵ For the association between linden trees and eroticism, see Hatto, "The Lime-Tree," 198.

⁵⁶⁶ As also noted in Chapter Three, "lynde" can also be taken simply to mean "tree"; however, even if we put aside the association between lime trees and erotic love, the word "lynde" – as opposed to "tre", which is used elsewhere – is used sparingly, but at points that hold significance, especially in terms of the hidden eco-subtext of *Sir Tristrem*. For the definition of the word "lynde" as both specifically "lime-tree" and more generally "tree", again see the *MED* entry here: https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED25646/track?counter=1&search_id=1322776.

⁵⁶⁷ All references to *Sir Tristrem* will be from Alan Lupack's edition of the text, *Lancelot of the Laik and Sir Tristrem* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1994).

and violently begins to show them the correct way to treat the carcasses of the animals they have killed (452-510), in the presence of a tree. This tree is implicated in the violence of this episode: Tristrem throws the viscera he pulls from the corpse of a hart to a nearby raven that “sat on the fourched [forked] tre” (503). This forked tree is a fragmented image that reflects how Tristrem here reduces the “bestes” of the forest (452) to fragmented parts: “Tristrem schare the brest; / The tong satt next the pride; / The heminges swithe on est / He schar and layd beside” (474-477), for example – this description and listing of body parts goes on for another twenty lines. As Tristrem cuts up these animals, the forked tree stands as a witness to this violence, and is fragmented itself: it is bifurcated, just as the animals gutted beneath it are dissected.⁵⁶⁸ Thus, the events of the narrative are here represented in arboreal form; this tree “communicates” by physically overshadowing and metaphorically underlining Tristrem’s violence towards the animal non-human.

If we view this tree as an arboreal message that mirrors what is happening in the main narrative, the linden tree that accompanies it deepens the sense that trees are tied with communication within this poem. Apparently stunned by Tristrem’s display, the hunters find King Mark, “And told him under linde / the best, hou it was boun” (513-514); this linden tree acts as a meeting place and facilitates a movement of information. Furthermore, Mark grants Tristrem permission to join his court beneath it; Tristrem’s prowess at butchering animals seems to convince Mark of his nobility, even though his true parentage is not known at this point, and Mark does not know Rohand, who raised him (538-539). Lupack points out that this episode parodies the ways in which Tristan displays his courtly knowledge and skill in other versions of his story, as this scene is less about the intricacies of courtly hunting,

⁵⁶⁸ It can therefore be seen to echo some of the themes of tearing and fragmentation discussed in the last chapter in relation to *Sir Orfeo*, and there are similar scenes of butchering in the hunting scenes in *SGGK* (see 1328-1352, for example).

and more about Tristrem's beratement of Mark's courtiers: he accuses them of "folily", for example (462).⁵⁶⁹ The violence of Tristrem's butchery is therefore accompanied by a comedic irony; it demonstrates his courtliness, but this scene also highlights his blunt rudeness. This is witnessed by the linden tree, beneath which Mark's men recount the events of this scene, which are first observed by the forked tree. Both trees are therefore connected to the brutality and absurdity of Tristrem's first interactions with Mark and the members of his court. Thus, just as the forked tree embodies and highlights the butchering of the animals it witnesses, this linden tree stands on a nexus of meaning that situates the arboreal as a means of communication, linked to both violence and humour.

In the famous "Tryst Beneath the Tree" episode, trees again witness comedy and communication, and linden wood transmits hidden messages. This is one of the most important and humorous episodes in *Sir Tristrem*, in which Mark hides in a tree to catch Tristrem and Ysonde in their adultery. It features in several different versions of the Tristan legend, and can be summarised generally as follows: Tristan and Isolde often meet in an orchard under a certain tree; a member of Mark's court convinces him that Tristan and Isolde are adulterous, and that he should hide in this tree to witness their adultery; and the lovers notice that he is there and stage a conversation that disprove his suspicions, convincing Mark that they are innocent. The trajectory of this episode is repeated throughout most versions, as this cycle of suspicion followed by an event that seems to prove the innocence of the lovers makes up a large part of most Tristan texts. However, "no other episode in the *matière de Bretayne* is more often represented in medieval art".⁵⁷⁰ This attests not

⁵⁶⁹ Lupack, Introduction to *Sir Tristrem*, 150-151. He also suggests the same of the episode just after this, in which Tristrem rudely addresses Mark's harper, which will be discussed further below.

⁵⁷⁰ Helaine Newstead, "The Tryst Beneath the Tree: An Episode in the Tristan Legend," *Romance Philology* 9 (1955): 269.

only to the popularity of the Tristan legend, but also to the fame of this particular episode, and this particular tree.

I will return to how this tree is connected to linden wood, but first I wish to highlight how it is implicated in the humour of this scene. Mark is convinced to climb the tree by a dwarf, Meriadok, who “sat in the tre” (2063) beneath which Tristrem and Ysonde meet to “play” (2061), and is aware of their adultery. This tree is mentioned again in relation to Mark: “Sir Mark sat in the tre / Ther metten thai to” (2102-2103). There is no narrative space given to how Mark situates himself in the tree, but this image of the king hiding up a tree has an element of physical comedy nevertheless. This humour is compounded by the dramatic irony in the following conversation between Tristrem and Ysonde. Ysonde’s assertion that she “loved never man with / Bot him that hadde mi maidenhede” (2133-2134), for example, is true, though she is referring to Tristrem, not Mark: earlier in the text, the lovers organise a bed trick in which Ysonde’s maidservant, Brengwain, is brought to the marriage bed instead of Ysonde (1708-1718). Mark is convinced by this dialogue, and the tree is mentioned again when the narrator notes that “Markes hert was sare / Ther he sat in the tre” (2141-2142); he is ashamed of his previous lack of faith in Tristrem and Ysonde, a faith that was actually legitimately misplaced. There are also elements of fabliau at work here, and Helaine Newstead even suggests that this episode has its origins in the Enchanted Tree fabliau motif, in which a husband catches his wife in an act of adultery, but is convinced not to trust his senses, for example because he is told that the tree from which he witnessed the act is magical.⁵⁷¹

⁵⁷¹ Newstead, “The Tryst Beneath the Tree,” 278-279. A relevant example is the pear tree in *The Merchant’s Tale*; the lovers May and Damyan commit adultery in this tree, while Januarie, May’s husband, is tricked into believing that May’s actions are not adulterous (see *The Merchant’s Tale* in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 2132-2411).

However, this scene is underpinned by more than the erotically charged desire that is central to fabliau, as the parodic elements of *Sir Tristrem* do not completely erase the sincerity of the love between Tristrem and Ysonde. This scene in fact relies on Ysonde's ability to read Tristrem's signals, which she does seamlessly. When Tristrem spots the king – “the schadowe Tristrem gan se” (2104) – he alerts Ysonde through a “loude” (2105) speech (2108-2123), beginning with the assertion that Ysonde “no aughtest naught here to be” (2108), intending to ensure “That Ysonde schuld Mark se / And calle Tristrem hir fo” (2106-2107). This is immediately followed by Ysonde's direct speech in reply (2124-2134); there is no interjection by the narrator to explain that Ysonde has received Tristrem's message. Instead, her voice – and clever verbal manoeuvrings, referenced above – make it clear that she has understood. The “absent” narrative of Ysonde's experience of this scene provides an example of how truncated *Sir Tristrem* can be; it is not clear exactly how Tristrem and Ysonde manage to understand each other's signals, while hiding them from Mark. All we have is dialogue, which switches abruptly between Tristrem and Ysonde; here, the “quick-paced, action packed spectacle” that Dana M. Symons argues “distinguishes” *Sir Tristrem* is replaced by quick-witted and rapid dialogue.⁵⁷² While this does make this section of the narrative “erratic”, to use Crane's description of the text, here the effect of these terse exchanges is an emphasis on Ysonde's quick thinking, alongside the fact that Tristrem has been able to communicate their situation to her quickly and effectively, using hidden messages in his words.⁵⁷³ Their success in this scene is attributed to cleverness, and this cleverness stems from their love for each other: “Her love might no man felle, / So were thai bothe sleighe” (2172-2173). The use of the word “felle” here, used

⁵⁷² Symons, “Does Tristan Think,” 15.

⁵⁷³ Crane, *Insular Romance*, 193.

elsewhere in the text to refer to the felling of trees, alludes to the ways in which the love between Tristrem and Ysonde is connected to trees, especially when Mark casts his “schadowe” (2104) over them.⁵⁷⁴ The tree that comedically “hides” Mark therefore also overshadows this scene, witnessing Tristrem and Ysonde’s effective communication, which is both verbal and non-verbal, overseen and hidden.

Although the tree from which Mark casts this shadow is not explicitly a linden tree in *Sir Tristrem*, it is linked to linden wood that is once again implicated in the hidden narratives of this poem. Just before Meriadok hatches his plan to catch the lovers, we are told that they communicate using a piece of linden wood:

Tristrem was in toun;
 In boure Ysonde was don.
 Bi water he sent adoun
 Light linden spon.⁵⁷⁵
 He wrot hem al with roun [inscribed letters];
 Ysonde hem knewe wel sone.
 Bi that Tristrem was boun
 Ysonde wist his bone
 To abide.
 Er amorwe none
 Her aither was other biside (2036-2046)

Here, wood is used as a means of communication that incites action; Ysonde recognises Tristrem’s markings on the wood right away and they come together as a result. Some versions of this episode suggest that Tristrem uses wood from the very tree they meet beneath, and therefore from the tree in which Mark hides.⁵⁷⁶ It is not clear in *Sir Tristrem* how the linden message is connected to the orchard episode; once again, the truncated nature of *Sir Tristrem* creates a space of ambiguity within

⁵⁷⁴ I will further discuss the felling of trees and the ways in which Tristrem and Ysonde’s love is connected to them in the next sections.

⁵⁷⁵ A “spon” is “a chip or slip of wood, a sliver, splinter”; see the *MED* entry at https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED42318/track?counter=1&search_id=1339844.

⁵⁷⁶ For example, Newstead references Eilhart’s version, in which the lovers meet beneath a linden tree, and Tristrem takes pieces of this tree to send messages to Isolde by carving shapes like a five-pointed cross (“The Tryst Beneath the Tree,” 269).

which trees operate. However, despite this uncertainty, Ysonde reads Tristrem's signals beneath the tree just as quickly and easily as she reads the messages he carves into linden wood.

This linden branch is possibly removed from the tree in which Mark hides, which potentially connects the "Tryst Beneath the Tree" episode to linden trees as well. Regardless, this linden wood – and the erotically charged meeting it enables – is linked by an invisible thread to the "linde" that acts as a meeting place when Tristrem gains access to Mark's court through his display of violence beneath the forked tree. This introduces how trees are bound up with hidden things in this text: men, messages, and meanings are all both obscured and revealed by trees and wood. Indeed, these communicative trees and tree products are also "hidden" themselves, in the sense that they are only rarely visible. However, focussing on the "absent" non-human narratives in this poem once again allows for an uncovering of the multivalent and uncanny meanings they encode. Just as Ysonde can read the messages hidden in the linden wood, this text can be read according to its trees and the liminal spaces they occupy as essential but marginal things.

Instruments of Power: Tristrem's Harp and Rote

The linden branch that Tristrem uses to communicate messages to Ysonde provides a good starting point from which to consider how trees and wood are essential to Tristrem and Ysonde's relationship. The lovers struggle to endure the restrictions of Mark's court, and must retreat to the forest at certain points, sometimes of their own volition and sometimes as a result of banishment; as previously mentioned, the first part of the narrative constantly cycles between Mark's suspicion and exoneration of the lovers. In this section, I will explore how Tristrem

and Ysonde retreat to the forest after Tristrem has rescued Ysonde from a harper who abducts her from Mark's court, in much the same way as Orfeo "wins" Herodis from the fairy king. As in *Sir Orfeo*, a wooden harp participates in this narrative, alongside an ivory rote; these non-human instruments are human tools that become communicative and active agents.

Like Orfeo, Tristan is often depicted as a harper, and *Sir Tristrem* retains this depiction; in fact, as Lupack argues, this poem can be seen to parody the conventional association between Tristan and minstrelsy.⁵⁷⁷ Parodic elements are at work when Tristrem's skill at harping is revealed; for example, he rudely interrupts Mark's minstrel to berate him (552), much as he insolently accused the hunters of "folily" (462) underneath the forked tree. Once again, the text highlights a skill that should reinforce Tristrem's courtliness, but his demonstration of this skill is unconventional and somewhat comedic, especially as the description of it is so brief:

An harpour made a lay
 That Tristrem aresound [berated] he.
 The harpour yede oway [gave way to Tristrem],
 'Who better can, lat se.'
 'Bot Y the mendi may,
 Wrong than wite Y the.'⁵⁷⁸
 The harpour gan to say,
 'The maistri give Y the
 Ful sket [quickly].'
 Bifor the kinges kne
 Tristrem is cald to set (551-561)

What motivates the harper's capitulation to Tristrem is unclear, especially as Tristrem does not actually seem to play until the end of the next stanza (571-572), after Mark gives him a "robe of palle / And pane of riche skinne" (568-569), presumably in reward for the musical performance it is not yet clear he has given.

⁵⁷⁷ Lupack, Introduction to *Sir Tristrem*, 151.

⁵⁷⁸ Laskaya and Salisbury gloss these lines as "Unless I can surpass you / Wrongly then I blame you".

Again, the redacted nature of *Sir Tristrem* produces a certain incomprehensibility; its narrative moves as “ful sket” as the harper concedes to Tristrem. However, at the same time, a space is opened for humour here, as Tristrem’s abruptness is reflected structurally, emphasising the ways in which Tristrem’s characterisation clashes with those of the Tristans before him.

At the same time, this episode also opens a space for non-human power, as Tristrem’s characterisation is here bound up with a material object – a harp – however briefly. Tristrem’s harp is all but absent here; not only is it unclear *when* Tristrem is playing, but also *how* he is doing so. The narrative has thus far not mentioned that Tristrem owns an instrument, much less that he is carrying it, and it is not specified that he takes a harp away from Mark’s harper when he replaces him. As opposed to Orfeo’s harp, which is repeatedly physically present and symbolically salient, Tristrem’s instrument is entirely incidental here. However, once again, this does not preclude the potential for this object to hold power. Tristrem is here playing on a harp that is both present and absent, as his playing implies its existence, but it is not focussed on. When Tristrem’s status as a harper is referenced again, later in the poem, this liminality affords two other instruments – the harp of an earl who abducts Ysonde, and Tristrem’s own rote – the power to participate in the narrative more actively.

The episode in question takes place over a thousand lines after Tristrem first displays his musical skills. It proceeds as follows: an earl disguised as a harper comes to Mark’s court and secures a rash boon from the king, who agrees to give him whatever he asks for in return for his performance (1827-1830); the harper then demands Ysonde as his prize, and Mark allows him to take her; Tristrem, who has been away from court, hunting “at wode” (1845), returns and chides the king for this (1850-1852); and finally, he takes his rote with him, finds the ship upon which

Ysonde is being held by the earl, plays music to draw out the occupants of the ship, and rides away with Ysonde (1853-1914). Both the earl's harp and Tristrem's rote participate in this narrative as tools through which both men enact influence over Mark and Ysonde. However, they also become more than simple tools, and exhibit agency of their own.

The earl's harp does this, in part, through its liminality; as in the episode that introduces Tristrem's skill with the harp, this instrument is both present and absent. The harper who abducts Ysonde is introduced abruptly in the middle of a stanza – “Fram Irlond to the King / An harpour com bituen” (1809-1810) – and almost no other information is given about him, except that he has a harp “Swiche no hadde thai never sen” (1812) that he carries “day and night” (1815). In fact, he wears it around his neck (1818), hiding it from sight – “He hidde it evermare, / Out no com it nought” (1821-1822) – until Mark promises his rash boon. Thus, though the narrator tells us that “Richelich [the harp] was wrought” (1819), the harper keeps it hidden until he uses it to win Ysonde.⁵⁷⁹ Even then, it is not focussed on, as the description of his performance is restricted to one line, in which the harp is not mentioned: “A miri lay he bigan” (1832). This lay remains, in some ways, unfinished, as the text immediately moves on to describe the harper's demands (1833-1837), presumably – but not explicitly – when he has finished playing the lay. Likewise, the text never “finishes” its description of the harp, which remains largely hidden from view. Although the mysterious harper uses this object in much the same way as Orfeo uses his harp in the Otherworld – to secure a woman as a rash boon from a king – it is therefore a much less visible marker of his identity. Orfeo hangs his harp upon his

⁵⁷⁹ As with the sheath in the story of the spindles in *Le Morte Darthur*, the narrator's comment that the harp was “Swiche no hadde thai never sen” (1812) thus seems not only to refer to how luxurious the harp is – that is, it is not meant only in the sense that they have never seen a harp of this kind before – but also emphasises that the court literally does not see it until Mark promises the harper whatever he wants in return for playing it.

back in order to pass as a minstrel to enter the fairy king's court and only hides it away for safekeeping between uses during his time in the wilderness, but this harper covers up his finely wrought instrument.

If we view this harp through the same framework as Orfeo's – that is, if we view it as a marker of identity that also comes to participate in the narrative – the fact that it is largely absent can once again be understood in terms of its non-human, specifically *wooden*, power. Like Orfeo's harp, this is a material object that occupies a liminal space: it is man-made, but was once a living non-human thing. This mirrors how it is both present with the harper and out of human sight; it is a human tool, but acts outwith human parameters. When Tristrem later succeeds in taking Ysonde from the earl, he tells him “with thine harp thou wonne hir that tide; / Thou tint [lost] her with mi rote” (1913-1914). It is the harp that “wins” Ysonde, but the earl is unable to keep her when it is absent from the narrative. Instead, another non-human “thing”, the rote, emerges from the eco-subtext to exert its own power, through Tristrem.

This rote, like the harp, occupies a liminal space of human/non-human embodiment. It is more observable than the harp; when Tristrem is preparing to leave Mark's court to rescue Ysonde, “His rote, withouten wen, / He raught bi the ring” (1853-1854) – he carries it visibly. That Tristrem carries this object “bi the ring” also draws attention to the various components that construct its material existence; the word “ring” here is meant in the sense of “a metal ring attached to an object for fastening, lifting, etc”.⁵⁸⁰ At this stage, it is safe to assume that it is also partially made of wood; the rote is a different instrument to the harp, and is more guitar-like,

⁵⁸⁰ See the *MED* entry for “ring” here: https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED37591/track?counter=1&search_id=1342734.

but they were typically wooden, as harps were.⁵⁸¹ However, this rote is later described as being “of yvere” (1888), adding another dimension to its materiality, and implicating the animal non-human beyond the fact that the strings on both harps and rotes would usually have been made of gut.⁵⁸² Tristrem uses this assemblage of materials as a tool, and its non-human components have been mined and re-fashioned for human use; in some ways, this harp is as fragmented as the animals that Tristrem butchers at the start of the poem. However, like the earl, Tristrem is dependent on his instrument to save Ysonde, even if it, like the harp, is only mentioned briefly. Both of these instruments therefore come to participate in the narrative, alongside the men that carry them, as actants and “things”.

This is especially the case when the harp and rote are viewed in relation to the other liminal and powerful non-human presences in the poem, and, specifically, its living trees. After Tristrem rescues Ysonde, they “rade / Into the wode oway. / A loghe [dwelling] thai founden made / Was ful of gamen and play” (1915-1918). They stay in this wood for “seven night” (1921) before returning to court, and this sojourn begins to establish a trend through which Tristrem and Ysonde can only safely express their love in the presence of trees. This episode foreshadows a later one, in which the lovers are banished from Mark’s court and must live in the forest for almost a year (2456-2508). This setting is repeatedly mentioned as their banishment is described: they flee to “a forest” (2454), live in the “wode so grene / bi holtes and bi hille” (2457-2458), find “on erthe hous” (2469) in that “forest fede” (2474), and “under wode bough / thai knewen day and night” (2485-2386). Though no trees are mentioned specifically, the invisible trees that populate these settings witness the

⁵⁸¹ Henry Holland Carter, *A Dictionary of Middle English Musical Terms* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), 414. For the definition of a harp, see 185.

⁵⁸² Again, see Carter, *A Dictionary*, 414 and 185.

kind of love that Tristrem and Ysonde increasingly cannot display at court.⁵⁸³ Even the tree that they meet beneath in the orchard, cultivated as it is within the restrictive confines of Mark's territory, is no longer safe for them. They must conceal their love throughout the text, and – just as Mark hides within the tree and the harper hides his harp – Tristrem hides Ysonde after he saves her from the harper: “in wode he gan hir hide” (1909). This establishes a dichotomy between the court and the forest that goes beyond simple non-human/human, nature/culture, and barbarism/civilisation binaries: while Tristrem and Ysonde must hide their love at court, the text's trees hide the lovers. Likewise, the harp and rote that “win” Ysonde participate in the narrative to threaten and protect her in turn, and belong to a hidden eco-subtext that nevertheless exerts occasional authority.

Communicative Forests: Tristrem's Wooden Hall

That the harp and rote are communicative agents within the story also prefigures other instances of material, non-human communication that rely on trees and wood. I will explore one such instance in this section: in an episode towards the end of the text, after Tristrem flees to Brittany and marries Ysonde of the White Hand (2676-2679), he defeats a giant, Beliagog, and uses him and his forest to create a monument that conveys messages about his love for the Ysonde he left behind. The characters within the poem, as well as its audience, “read” the narrative of *Sir Tristrem* as it is represented by Tristrem in this monument. Furthermore, this monument is made up of the material components of the tree-based settings that

⁵⁸³ Saunders discusses in more detail how forests are spaces of refuge for Tristan and Isolde, though she does not address *Sir Tristrem*, and instead focusses on Thomas and Beroul's versions of the Tristan legend. She also draws attention to the ways in which they are also sometimes places of hardship for them (*The Forest of Medieval Romance*, 81-94).

were previously so integral to his relationship with Ysonde.⁵⁸⁴ In this episode, as in the one just discussed, this relationship is connected to the arboreal, both living and dead, and the marginal power of trees can be glimpsed once more.

The tree-based setting of Tristrem's combat with Beliagog is established immediately: after Tristrem is told of the giant (2722-2728) he goes hunting through a forest "with mani a selly tre" (2734). These marvellous trees soon become potential victims of Tristrem's plans to take the land; when he meets Beliagog, Tristrem tells him,

So hope Y the to sla.
This forest wil Y felle
And castel wil Y ma.
Her is miri to duelle;
Forthi this lond Y ta (2762-2767)

Just as Ywain's defeat of Salados allows him to marry Alundyne and share ownership of her lands, Tristrem's defeat of Beliagog allows him to "take" his land. Though Tristrem does not slay Beliagog, who pleads mercy once Tristrem has cut off his foot (2788-2789), he does follow through on his plans for land clearance and construction, and enlists Beliagog to oversee the work. The "castel" he vowed to make becomes a hall dedicated to Ysonde and her maidservant: "An halle to maken him bright / To Ysonde and Bringwain" (2804-2805). With the help of "masouns that were bald" (2811), Beliagog completes the construction of this hall, which becomes an important structural device within the narrative.

⁵⁸⁴ As previously noted, this sort of metapoetry – in which Tristrem tells the story of the poem within it – is also present in Marie de France's *Chevrefoil*, in which Tristan is characterised as the original composer of the poem (see page 273, footnote 555). This brings together the material wooden object of Tristan's harp, which is comparable to those instruments discussed in the last section, with the wooden hall, which also tells the story of their love.

Indeed, this hall is a monument not only to the two women, but also to the narrative itself. It is decorated with images that depict aspects of Tristrem and Ysonde's story:

Swete Ysonde was wrought;
Hodain and Pencru, to calle;
The drink hou Brengwain brought;
Mark yclad in palle;
And Meriadok ful of thought (2840-2844)

However, these are also more than images, as they are so “real”, the narrator tells us, that they do not seem to be images at all: “So liifliche weren thai alle / Yimages semed it nought / To abide” (2845-2847). Beliagog and the masons have created a visual simulacrum that acts as a rhetorical reminder of important plot devices, but also goes further than this to seem like life itself. There is irony in the fact that that these “liifliche” images abide within two layers of artifice, as they are painted images that re-tell the narrative within the poem, which is itself at times too abbreviated and confused to be considered “life-like”. This irony is emphasised by the relatively brief ekphrasis here. Unlike other famous moments of ekphrasis in Middle English romance – such as in *Emaré*, in which Emaré's robe is described in great detail – the description above is almost the only detail we are given about the images in Tristrem's hall.⁵⁸⁵ Indeed, the robe in *Emaré* features Tristan and Isolde, and more narrative space is given to the description of their one small corner of the cloth than *Sir Tristrem* spends describing the whole hall.⁵⁸⁶

However, again *Sir Tristrem*'s brevity can be read as more than clumsy abbreviation, as even this brief description drives the narrative forward. Tristrem brings his wife's brother, Ganhardin, to the hall, “Ysonde for to se” (2971).

⁵⁸⁵ I also discussed the ekphrasis of the pavilion and clothes in *The Awntyrs of Arthure* in Chapter One.

⁵⁸⁶ See “*Emaré*,” in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, ed. Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995), 133-144.

Previously angry at Tristrem's inability to consummate his marriage with Ysonde of the White Hands, Ganhardin immediately falls in love with the image of Brengwain, "reading" the story of the love potion in the process: "Ysonde he seighe thore / And Brengwain fair and gode. / Brengwain the coupe bore" (2984-2986). As a result, Ganhardin absolves Tristrem and the two travel back to England, where Tristrem sees Ysonde for the last time.⁵⁸⁷ Ganhardin's ability to "read" these life-like images elevates the hall to another level of narrative significance as a text within a text. In his discussion of the ekphrasis in *Emaré* and *Sir Eglamour of Artois*, Nicholas Perkins argues that:

Such descriptions signal important contexts for narrative romance, and reinvent those contexts as part of the romance's own imaginative landscape ... each of these acts of narrating and describing works rhetorically to bring the narrative before the mind's eye of the audience and suggests how natural was the integration of the visual and verbal/textual to a late-medieval public, who encountered narratives in painting, carving, stained glass and embroidery, clothing, dramatic performance and manuscript imagetexts.⁵⁸⁸

We can therefore assume that even the brief ekphrasis in *Sir Tristrem* might be "read" by the audience as easily as Ganhardin processes these images, emphasising the importance of this monument both within the narrative and on an interpretive level. It acts as a monument to Tristrem's love, rhetorically repeats salient aspects of the narrative, and communicates these aspects to other characters.

That this communication occurs in a tree-based setting is perhaps unsurprising, since the importance of forests and wood to Tristrem and Ysonde's relationship has already been established. However, here the forest does not

⁵⁸⁷ Trees also mark this meeting, as Tristrem and Ganhardin are abiding "under a figer tree" when they first see Ysonde and Brengwain on this trip (3082) and Ysonde spots Tristrem "under leves light" (3130).

⁵⁸⁸ Nicholas Perkins, "Ekphrasis and Narrative in *Emaré* and *Sir Eglamour of Artois*," in *Medieval Romance, Medieval Contexts*, ed. Rhiannon Purdie and Michael Cichon (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2012), 60.

conceal the lovers, but is instead cut down in order to facilitate a public announcement of their love. Just as Tristrem cut off a branch of a linden tree to communicate with Ysonde, here he orders Beliagog to fell a forest to share his love, which we have previously been told cannot be “felled” (2172). There is no narrative space given to the felling of the trees that Tristrem mentions in his first speech to Beliagog, as there is in *The Knight’s Tale*, for example.⁵⁸⁹ However, when Tristrem returns to the forest, “Swiche castel fond he thare / Was maked of ston and tre” (2964-2965). The use of “tre” for wood here suggests how trees are being used, both lexically and as building materials within the narrative.

To add another dimension to this, when Beliagog enters the narrative once more he does so “on a stilt” (2956); he now has a wooden leg to replace the one that Tristrem cut off during their battle. Lupack discusses the humour of this detail, stating “the scene has a comic effect lacking in the Norse version, where Tristram makes a wooden leg for the giant immediately after the combat so the giant can follow and serve him”; he suggests that the unexpected appearance of the wooden leg later in the Middle English version is parodic, because it is unexplained.⁵⁹⁰

⁵⁸⁹ In *The Knight’s Tale*, Theseus orders Arcite’s funeral pyre to be constructed from the trees of a grove in which he fought with his cousin, Palamon, earlier in the text: “And leet comande anon to hakke and hewe / The okes olde, and leye hem on a rewe / In colpons [slices], wel arrayed for to brenne” (2865-2867). Later, the trees that been felled to build this funeral pyre are listed at length: “ook, firre, birch, aspe, alder, holm [holm oak], popler / Wylugh [willow], elm, plane, assh, box, chaseyn, lynde, laurer, / Mapul, thorn, bech, hasel, ew, whippeltree [dogwood]” (2921-2923), for example. This emphasis on the arboreal products that are burnt alongside Arcite highlights Theseus’ control over the natural world, which is also evident earlier in the text when he orders the construction of an elaborately constructed and decorated amphitheatre for Arcite and Palamon to fight in; this amphitheatre stands in contrast to the uncivilised space of the grove in which they fought beforehand, and which is cut down to make Arcite’s funeral pyre. Especially relevant is the fact that this amphitheatre features temples to Mars, Venus, and Diana, upon the walls of which their stories are painted (see 1914-2088), much as the hall in *Sir Tristrem* tells the story of its lovers. See Rudd, *Greenery*, 50-67 and Rudd, “Making the Rocks Disappear,” 117-125 for her discussion of *The Knight’s Tale*; she examines these temples, and the trees within these images, alongside the other arboreal imagery in this text. Also see Shawn Normandin’s chapter on *The Knight’s Tale*, in his book *Chaucerian Ecopoetics: Deconstructing Anthropocentrism in the Canterbury Tales* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 51-84.

⁵⁹⁰ Lupack, Introduction to *Sir Tristrem*, 149.

Indeed, this episode is unusual if compared with other giant fights in Middle English romance; this is a common trope that does not conventionally end with the giant in indentured servitude, working around his injuries to serve the knight he fought in battle.⁵⁹¹ Furthermore, whether or not the wooden leg suggests parody, another tree has been cut down here. This wooden object, along with the hall – at least partially made of wood – replace the earlier image of the “selly” forest (2734). Here, more than ever, we can see how trees are used to communicate, both on the level of narration and within the narrative itself.

Thus, *Sir Tristrem* offers a perspective unique among the texts discussed in this thesis thus far. While I have argued that trees are used to communicate certain messages on a symbolic level in all of my chosen texts, this level of communication with and use of trees is unusual. Perhaps the closest we have come to this is in the repeated images of harps, which I have argued are wooden things that have symbolic value and also allow communication through music. *Tristrem*’s linden branch messages and the lovers’ associations with and around trees throughout the text prefigure the complex imagery of Beliagog’s hall, which relies on the wood from which it is comprised. As discussed throughout this thesis, using wood in this way suggests a certain violence towards the non-human; here, a whole forest has been felled for its wood. This violent deforestation is also underpinned by violence towards a giant, which seems to be intended as humorous. It is this merging of violence and comedy that I will turn to in the next section, which will further explore how trees are embroiled in the complexities of this text.

⁵⁹¹ I previously mentioned this trope in Chapter Two.

“Stirt under a tre”: Wooden Humour and Violence in *Sir Tristrem*

Another way in which trees come to participate in the overarching themes of this poem is in their presence at moments of heightened tension. In his introduction to the text, Lupack briefly mentions two episodes (among others) that he uses to support his argument that *Sir Tristrem* is a parody: the episode just mentioned, in which Beliagog reappears with his wooden leg, and another in which Tristrem hides behind a tree during his fight with the dragon.⁵⁹² This section will explore how the latter forms a basis for connecting trees with the satirical humour of this text. Moreover, this is an instance in which masculine identity is challenged, again displaying the tendency for trees to act as non-human witnesses to violence and masculine vulnerability.

Tristrem's altercation with the dragon is introduced according to conventional chivalric norms. He notices people fleeing “for doute of o dragoun” (1413) and learns that the man “that may him sle or can / Ysonde schal have to mede” (1418-1419). As with killing a giant, defeating a dragon was a rite of passage for young knights; even within the texts already discussed in this thesis there are a few examples of this, such as Ywain's defeat of the dragon in *Ywain and Gawain* (1987-1998) and when “wyth wormez he [Gawain] werrez” (720) in *SGGK*. Likewise, the possibility of “winning” a woman as a reward for feats such as this was common; when Ywain defeats the champions at the Castle of the Maidens, for example, he is offered the hand of the king's daughter (*Ywain and Gawain*, 3289-3291), and Degaré “wins” the right to marry his mother when he defeats his grandfather in battle (*Sir Degaré*, 594-606), as mentioned previously. Less conventionally, Tristrem responds to the threat

⁵⁹² Lupack, Introduction to *Sir Tristrem*, 149 and 150 respectively.

of the dragon by asking for volunteers among the knights who accompany him (1420-1423) and only decides to fight when “durst non himselven kithe [no one dared come forward]” (1425), declaring “for nede now wo is me” (1426). After this unusual reluctance to fight, however, the following altercation seems to adhere to more stereotypical displays of chivalry, at least at first, as he begins to attack the dragon “with a spere feloun” (1446). The use of a spear instead of a sword brings the arboreal non-human into this episode for the first time: as previously noted, spears and axes bring together human and tree, as they are partially made of wood.⁵⁹³ Using a spear, as opposed to a sword, proves ineffectual at piercing the dragon’s hide (1448-1450), which “was hard so ani flint” (1452), but Tristrem perseveres in true chivalric fashion: “Tristrem, al in tene [rage], / eft [again] that spere tok he” (1454-1455).

However, after this wooden weapon breaks – “it [the spear] brast on peces thre” (1456) – the fight takes an unusual turn involving a tree. Instead of drawing his sword straight away, Tristrem “withouten wene [doubt], / Stirt [leapt] under a tre / Al stille” (1459-1461), and hides there to pray. This somewhat humorous image – akin to Gawain’s panicked recovery of his helm at the Green Chapel (*SGGK*, 2316-2317) – also has some serious undertones. Like Gawain, Tristrem believes his life to be at risk: as he is hiding behind the tree, he prays to “God in Trinité, / No lat thou me nought spille” (1462-1463).⁵⁹⁴ In addition to the breaking of the spear, the dragon has also just slain Tristrem’s horse (1458). Thus, it has already removed two symbolically important elements of Tristrem’s chivalric identity – his horse and a

⁵⁹³ The wooden weapons I have previously discussed include the queens’ spears in *Le Morte Darthur*; Colgrevice’s spear, and the clubs of the churl and the Castle of the Maidens champions in *Ywain and Gawain*; the Green Knight’s axe in *SGGK*; and the spears and staves in *Sir Degaré*, *The Erle of Tolous*, and *Sir Cleges*.

⁵⁹⁴ Rumble notes that Tristrem also prays like this during the final stages of his battles with two other antagonists, Urgaine and the aforementioned Beliagog (Rumble, “The Middle English *Sir Tristrem*,” 227-228; see lines 2350-2352 and 2779-2781).

weapon – that are also of practical importance in this case; his chances of winning the battle are dwindling, and his fear for his life is justified, especially considering that he must now fight the dragon “afot” (1465), as the text takes time to specify. Furthermore, Tristrem’s victory over the dragon comes only after the dragon has taken away two other facets of his chivalric accoutrement: the dragon “cast fere ful right / And brend / His armes that were bright” (1471-1473) and “swiche fer he cast ogain / That brend scheld and ston” (1475-1476). This loss of armour and shield is serious, as is emphasised by the alliterative “schamliche he [the dragon] hath hem [Tristrem’s arms] schent” (1474); the burning of Tristrem’s arms is not only frightening, but shameful. The text later emphasises these losses again by repeating “now lith his stede yslain, / His armes brent ichon” (1477-1478). Though Tristrem’s moment of fear, and his hiding behind the tree, is unusual and somewhat comic, it is accompanied by a real threat to his life and identity; these non-human elements of his chivalric assemblage have been burnt away.

Though the time that Tristrem spends in proximity to the tree marks a turning point in his battle with the dragon, this threat continues even after it is slain. Tristrem’s prayer beneath the tree (1462-1463) seems to work, and after he utters it, he “faught with his fauchoun” (1466) – with his sword, instead of his spear – and manages to wound the dragon with the violent image “his nether chavel [lower jaw] he smot doun” (1468). This violence continues as Tristrem ends the battle: “Tristrem raught his brain / And brak his nek bon” (1479-1480). To prove his victory, Tristrem then takes the dragon’s tongue, “schorn of bi the rote” (1485), which mirrors his butchering of the hart at the start of the poem.⁵⁹⁵ This turns out to be inadvisable: he is poisoned by the tongue as he tries to carry it away. In fact, in removing the

⁵⁹⁵ Tristrem cuts off the hart’s tongue on line 475.

dragon's tongue, Tristrem also removes his ability to use his own tongue: "No yede he bot ten stride / His speche les he thar" (1489).

Indeed, Tristrem is intimately connected with the slain dragon here. He is poisoned because he stores the tongue "in his hose next the hide" (1486): he places it against his skin and within his stockings, which he has been reduced to wearing after his arms were destroyed. The word "hide" in line 1486 also connects Tristrem with the dragon, whose "hide / was hard so ani flint" earlier in the episode (1451-1452). Furthermore, just as the dragon has been rendered inert by Tristrem's sword, here Tristrem's own movement is cut off: "nedes he most abide / That he no may ferter far" (1490-1491). Although these links between Tristrem and the dragon may not entangle Tristrem as thoroughly with the non-human as, say, Ywain's relationship with the lion does, these parallels can be seen to emphasise Tristrem's vulnerability during and after this interaction with the non-human.⁵⁹⁶ This vulnerability is consistently linked to inactivity: before Tristrem is rendered immobile by the dragon's poison, his fear renders him "al stille" (1461) as he hides behind the tree, a position that calls his chivalric prowess into question. If we also consider that Tristrem is without his horse, armour, arms, and spear when he finally manages to slay the dragon, the silence and inactivity forced upon him by the dragon's poison becomes even more threatening; Tristrem is completely vulnerable and he has lost most of the markers of his identity.

However, the more unsettling possibilities of Tristrem's position at this point are not realised. A conspiring steward who comes upon the scene does not approach Tristrem's vulnerable form, but instead cuts off the dragon's head, intending to claim the kill, and Ysonde, for himself (1492-1496). Doubtful of the

⁵⁹⁶ Tristrem is also likened to a "lothely lioun" (1444) at the start of his battle with the dragon.

steward, Ysonde and her mother travel to the site of the dragon's death, where they re-identify Tristrem as chivalric, even if his true identity is not realised quite yet. Ysonde declares that the steward could not have slain the dragon as "this ich brende stede / No aught he never a day, / No this riche wede / nas never his" (1510-1513) and, when she finds Tristrem lying nearby, immediately states "this man the dragoun slough" (1518). Thus, though Tristrem's horse and armour are severely burnt, Ysonde still uses them to identify him as a noble knight capable of slaying the dragon, unlike the steward. Ysonde and her mother then revive Tristrem, giving him back his voice, which he uses to confirm their assumptions about his status: "his mouthe opened thai / And pelt treacle in that man. / When Tristrem speke may, / This tale he bigan" (1519-1522). Though Tristrem certainly experiences vulnerability elsewhere – and even in the very next scene, in which Ysonde discovers that Tristrem killed her uncle and tries to murder him with his own sword while he is bathing (1574-1595) – his vulnerability in the presence of the non-human is over for now.⁵⁹⁷ Instead, the non-human components of Tristrem's chivalric assemblage are again used as "prosthetic" support of Tristrem's identity, even if they have been burned.

To conclude my discussion of this episode, then, I will return to its non-human, specifically arboreal, aspects. Combining both comedy and an unsettling undercurrent of violence, the moment in which Tristrem hides behind the tree implicates it in the threat to Tristrem's life and identity. On the one hand, like the central tree in *Ywain and Gawain*, this tree can be seen to occupy a position of power, as it witnesses a moment of heightened masculine vulnerability in combat.

⁵⁹⁷ Though it is interesting to note that Tristrem would probably have been bathing in a wooden tub while facing Ysonde's attack; see Elizabeth Archibald, "Bathing for Beauty in the Middle Ages," in *The Recovery of Beauty: Arts, Culture, Medicine*, ed. Corinne Saunders, Jane Macnaughton, and David Fuller (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 54.

Furthermore, it protects Tristrem, affording him an essential moment of safety that allows him to pray, after which he is victorious; in this way, it can be likened to the hollow tree in *Sir Orfeo*, which safeguards Orfeo's harp. On the other hand, the tree is also vulnerable, especially if we consider the emphasis on burning in this episode. Just as repeated images of fire in *SGGK* can be read as unsettling considering the human/non-human knots in the text, the dragon's fire threatens human and non-human alike. Before it is killed, the dragon systematically destroys the non-human aspects of Tristrem's identity, and the tree would presumably also be at risk from the dragon's "helle-ferre" (1440), as Tristrem identifies it. The tree's appearance is immediately preceded by the death of Tristrem's horse, the most important non-human marker of his identity, and the death of the horse is also linked to the tree through rhyme: "the stede he gan sle / Tristrem, withouten wene, / Stirt under a tre" (1458-1460). The destruction of another arboreal presence is also linked to the horse and tree here, as the rhyme immediately before these lines refers to Tristrem's spear: "it brast on peces thre" (1456). This spear, formed of a tree that has already been cut down and re-fashioned into a weapon, becomes collateral damage, alongside Tristrem's horse, and – perhaps – the tree behind which he hides. This tree not only participates in the text's more comic elements, but is also implicated in the narratives of forced inaction and threat that underpin them.

Conclusion: Ships and Sea

Trees and wood are therefore used in *Sir Tristrem* as backdrops, meeting places, vectors of communication, hiding places, and materials for objects and structures; they are used both practically and symbolically, within the narrative and on a structural level. The linden trees that act as sites and methods of

communication at the start of the text introduce the idea that trees are linked to the transmission of love, humour, and violence throughout. Trees and wooden things participate in the narrative, protecting Tristrem from the dragon, winning back Ysonde from the earl, hiding first Mark and then the lovers, and building Tristrem's hall. Just as the linden wood floats down the river to deliver Tristrem's message to Ysonde, all of these instances transmit messages within the narrative.

This floating linden wood is not the only instance in which this text brings together the aquatic and the arboreal; I will conclude by pointing out the salience of movement over water via ship in this text. Almost every episode in *Sir Tristrem* features sailing in some way, and the word "schip" appears over thirty times. Tristrem continually travels back and forth over the sea: first between Armenia and England (see 364-374 and 925-930); then to and from Ireland (see 953-957, 1013-1016, 1156-1172, and 1374-1395, for example); and then between England and Brittany (see 2641, 3013-3014, and 3293, though no ships are mentioned in these lines). The love potion scene, one of the most important in the text, happens at sea (1660-1694), Ysonde is confined to a ship when she is abducted by the harper (1855-1857), and Tristrem, disguised as a beggar, carries Ysonde to a ship when she must go to Westminster to stand trial for treason (2245-2248); it is this that allows her to truthfully claim that no man has touched her intimately, except the king and the man "on to schip me bare" (2271). Finally, ships are central to the tragedy of the final episode, in which Tristrem dies because his wife lies about the colour of the sails on the ships returning from England, leading him to believe that Ysonde has forsaken him (3433-3465).

That sailing, and ships specifically, are essential to this narrative again entangles human and non-human, both in general and in relation to Tristrem specifically. As man-made wooden vessels, the ships in this text, like the other

wooden objects previously discussed, stand on the threshold of nature and culture, here with the added dimension that they are used to navigate other non-human elements: the sea and the weather.⁵⁹⁸ The first time that Tristrem sails is against his will, as he is abducted by some merchants. These merchants establish a link between Tristrem and the non-human, as they believe him to be the cause of the bad weather and seas that they encounter:

Niyen woukes and mare
 The mariners flet on flod,
 Til anker hem brast and are
 And stormes hem bistode.
 Her sorwen and her care
 Thai witt that frely fode [Tristrem];
 Thai nisten hou to fare,
 The wawes were so wode
 With winde.
 O lond thai wold he yede
 Yif thai wist ani to finde (364-374)

The repeated alliteration here emphasises not only the power of the storms and waves, but also situates Tristrem's assumed power within them: between the "stormes hem bistode" (367) and "The wawes were so wode / With winde" (371-372), stands Tristrem, "that frely fode" (369). Although this is a convenient plot device that brings Tristrem to England – as they decide to set him on land instead of taking him to their destination – this association between him and the non-human prefigures his connection to the sea, and the fact that almost every major episode in his life involves ships in some way.⁵⁹⁹

⁵⁹⁸ Again, there is exploitation encoded in this use of wood; ship-building was a process that involved excessive felling of trees. In an Italian context, for example, Harrison points out that "[t]he Italian peninsula had already undergone severe deforestation during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, but the emergence of Venice as a formidable sea power during the fifteenth century spelled disaster for many of the remaining woodlands" (*Forests*, 92); also see Rackham, *Trees and Woodland*, 68-70 and 76-77 for wood use in England.

⁵⁹⁹ Another episode also associates Tristrem with freshwater, though more with his absence and inaction: Ysonde of the White Hands "lough ful smare" (2870) when water from a puddle splashes up her dress, because the water reaches where "never man no sought" (2889). This is an allusion to the fact that Tristrem has not consummated their marriage.

Furthermore, although this initial sailing episode establishes a dichotomy between the land and the sea – one of the merchants tells Tristrem “yond is the land, / And here schaltow to bare” (355-356) – the wood which makes up the ships brings land and sea together. The ships become a kind of “land” of their own, as is also recognised by the aforementioned merchant: after he tells Tristrem he must leave the land, he says he must “chese on aither hand / Whether the lever ware / sink or stille stand” (357-359). Alliteration again places emphasis, here on the fact that Tristrem might “stille stand”, as if on land, if he chooses to stay on the ship. Therefore, wood is again being used here to simulate and control the non-human land; just as Morgan and the queens use spears and silk to produce “trees” in *Le Morte Darthur*, these merchants are using wood felled and fashioned into ships to simulate the land.⁶⁰⁰

Recognising the woodenness of these ships, and viewing them in relation to the other trees in this text, both living and dead, opens up a space for the arboreal non-human to hold power in turn. Within a text in which trees and wood participate in the hidden messages of the narrative, and also periodically hide human presences, these ships contribute to an eco-subtext in which the arboreal is again entangled with the human, and acts to protect, communicate, and progress. Embracing *Sir Tristrem*'s occasional lack of clear coherency allows us to glimpse this eco-subtext, situated as it is within the other layers of meaning in this poem, which is, in turn, one of the layers that forms the palimpsest of the Tristan legend.

⁶⁰⁰ Though this is not the place to discuss it, this can be seen as related to the fact that the sea represents an unknowable entity to humans; we possess a “refusal or inability to envisage the sea, a paradox which seems to spring from the sea’s vast expanse” (Rudd, *Greenery*, 160; also see 133-134). In her discussion of the sea and coast in *The Franklin’s Tale*, Rudd argues that “Dorigen’s inability to deal directly with the sea is tantamount to a refusal to actually see it. Rather than focus on the waters, she looks at either the ships on its surface or the rocks and cliffs that mark its shore” (Rudd, *Greenery*, 148). I argue that the merchants in *Sir Tristrem* display a similar impulse, as they see the sea in terms of the artificial “land” that their ships provide as a means to navigate it.

Whether we view it as a chivalric or hagiographical romance, or even a romance parody, *Sir Tristrem* and its trees provide a unique contribution to this legend, and to the genre of medieval romance, which goes beyond simple linear trajectories and hierarchies. Instead, it enfolds the uncanny, resists a monologic reading, and opens spaces for non-human participation in the narrative.

Conclusion

In romance, nature, especially the woods, is often the source of the strange. It is to be encountered and defeated in whatever form it appears. It can bring fulfilment and real success, or it can blight and destroy almost unwittingly. It is opposed to the settlement or city as darkness is to light, as disorder is to order. It is the shadowy underside of life, and out of it comes all that is numinous, good as well as evil, hermits as well as dragons, salvation as well as damnation.⁶⁰¹

Though he is not addressing trees specifically, Bloomfield here captures the difficulty of pinning down the non-human, arboreal presences that I have explored throughout this thesis. If, on the one hand, trees are to be “defeated”, they are also powerful. If they threaten those that travel among them, they also protect them. If they operate in the shadows, or underground, they also rise above ground, and grow into the light. Just as day turns to night, as winter gives way to spring, trees in medieval romance grow and change in endless cycles of meaning. At the same time, they transcend these cycles, rooting down, growing up, and spreading wide. This thesis has explored how trees contribute to Middle English romance through their entanglement with the intertextual knots of this corpus, and through the ways in which they are enmeshed with the human narratives they witness and influence.

To bring the texts I have discussed together, I will now come full circle, and return to the start of this thesis – as romance heroes are wont to return to the beginning of their journeys – to re-consider *Le Morte Darthur*. The “Book of Sir Tristram de Lyones” is a complex network of interlaced narratives, in which one tree in particular stands upon a nexus of the key themes I have discussed. The episode in question occurs during Tristram’s period of madness, but he is not my main focus

⁶⁰¹ Bloomfield, “Episodic Motivation,” 111.

here; instead, it is Isolde's interaction with a plum tree that encapsulates the human/non-human relationships I have been exploring. This tree again provides a glimpse of the powerful eco-subtext that lies just below the surface of romance narratives, waiting to be uncovered. It is worth quoting the relevant section in its entirety, starting just after false news of Tristram's death reaches Mark's kingdom:

But whan quene Isode harde of thes tydyngis, she made such sorrow that she was nyghe oute of hir mynde. And so uppon a day she thought to sl[e] hirselff and never to lyve aftir the deth of sir Trystramys.
 And so uppon a day La Beall Isode gate a swerde pryvayly, and bare hit into her gardyne, and there she pyghte the swerde thorow a plum-tre up to the hyltis so that hit stake faste, and hit stode breste-hyghe. And as she wolde have renne uppon the swerde and to have slayne hirselff, all thys aspyed kynge Marke, how she kneled adowne and seyde,
 'Sweyte Lorde Jesu, have mercy uppon me, for I may nat lyve aftir the deth of sir Trystram de Lyones, for he was my firste love and shall be the laste!'
 And with thes wordis cam kynge Marke and toke hir in hys armys. And than he toke up the swerde and bare hir away with hym into a towre, and there he made hir to be kepte, and wacched hir surely. And aftir that she lay longe syke, nyghe at the poynte of dethe (2:499.6-24)

This episode distils three themes that I have returned to throughout this thesis: trees and wood in Middle English romance are subject to human manipulation, but they nevertheless hold an uncanny and subversive power, often in relation to the ways in which they are entangled with human identities. Isolde treats this tree with a certain violence, cutting into it with a sword to turn it into a living wooden weapon that she intends to use to slay herself. While this infuses the tree's narrative with a type of subjugation, as it is mutilated by human hands, this gesture also allows it a certain power, as the tree becomes an agent that is implicated in Isolde's suicide attempt. When Mark removes the sword from the tree, it presumably lives on unaffected. However, for a moment, it holds a sword, and almost becomes a means of human death. The tree momentarily incorporates this symbol of masculine, chivalric strength, and participates in the type of violence that is

witnessed by the countless, but unseen, trees that inhabit the tree-based settings of romance.

Additionally, though Mark intervenes to save Isolde's life, I propose that the violence she intends to inflict upon herself is, in some ways, carried out *through* the tree. Instead of impaling herself, she instead impales this fruit-bearing representation of her body, and then lies "longe syke, nyghe at the poynte of dethe" (2:499.23-24). This is a depiction of grief that coincides with the physical wounds that she inflicts on the plum tree, which is growing inside "her gardyne" (2:499.12), aligning her with the tree and its wounds. The tree therefore becomes a synecdochal representation of Isolde, giving it the power to participate within the narrative on more than one level, even if it is also subjugated within that narrative. In the following conclusion, I will use this episode and these themes as a framework to connect elements of the complex and mighty arboreal eco-subtexts I have revealed.

First, this plum tree is subject to human violence; Isolde impales it with a sword in order to use it for her own ends. I have drawn attention to many comparable instances of tree use that involve the mutilation of trees. Elsewhere in *Le Morte Darthur*, for example, Morgan and her ladies use cut-down and repurposed wood in the form of spears that they turn into artificial "trees" to shade themselves, and the Edenic tree that Eve grows is farmed for its wood, to make the spindles and mysterious sheath. Likewise, Isolde's plum tree also becomes a type of sheath, acting as a receptacle for her sword. In *Ywain and Gawain*, wooden weapons such as spears and clubs imply tree felling, and the word "tre" is used to describe wooden stakes that have been felled and re-fashioned to imprison the women in the Castle of the Maidens episode. In effect, Isolde likewise turns the tree into a living wooden "weapon" that she intends to use to enact her suicide, before Mark locks her away. In *SGGK*, Gawain is also "imprisoned", in the sense that he is hunted and trapped

within Hautdesert. The trees that surround Bertilak's castle, in which he hunts on the three successive mornings, symbolically highlight the vulnerabilities of Gawain; these trees, in turn, are presumably farmed for firewood. This is accompanied by the images of the axe and holly branch, which are both comprised of wood that has been cut away from a tree, just as the plum tree is "cut" by the sword.

Furthermore, this cutting can also be understood in terms of grafting. Grafted trees like the one in Herodis and Orfeo's orchard first require the rootstock to be "wounded", as Isolde's tree is, to allow a scion – a part cut away from another tree – to be inserted and incorporated into it, as the sword is inserted into the plum tree. Additionally, like the *ymppe*-tree that is so central to *Sir Orfeo*, this plum tree resides in an artificial and enclosed space, cultivated for human leisure and to produce fruit. Another wooden tree product in *Sir Orfeo*, the harp, also features in *Sir Tristrem*; in the latter, wood is used to make instruments, but also becomes communicative in other ways, as Tristrem repeatedly uses trees, or parts of them, to communicate messages. At first, he does so on small bits of linden wood that he sends to Ysonde but, by the end of the poem, he has cut down a whole forest to build a monument that tells the story of his love for her. Though Malory's Isolde does not cut anything away from her tree, she cuts *into* it when her corresponding love for Tristram drives her to attempt to join him in his supposed death, through the medium of the tree.

Picking up on the ways in which Tristrem and Orfeo communicate through wood – through their harps, and through Tristrem's linden wood messages and decorated hall – this thesis has drawn attention to the ways in which trees are similarly used by authors to communicate a diversity of meanings. This is often in a descriptive sense; I have shown how Malory and the anonymous authors of *Ywain and Gawain*, *SGGK*, *The Middle English Breton Lays*, and *Sir Tristrem* populate their narratives with trees, even if only as a backdrop to the actions of their

protagonists. Within these settings, trees are used in practical terms, as hitching posts or location markers, to allow the narrative to move forward. Thus, the forests, woods, wildernesses, gardens, and orchards of romance – and their trees – are essential tools for romance authors.

On another level, I have also explored the symbolic potential of these spaces, and of specific trees, which allow for a different sort of arboreal communication. In the case of Isolde's plum tree, the fact that she is attempting to commit suicide for Tristram, who is her "firste love and shall be the laste" (2:499.19), is reflected in the symbolic connotations of the fruit of the tree that she chooses to help her in this attempt. As Ferguson notes, "the plum is symbolic of fidelity and independence".⁶⁰² This association also flags up the irony that she is being faithful to her lover here, and not her husband. In the context of the text's other fruit trees, and particularly the apple tree and fig tree with which Lancelot and his relationship with Guenivere are associated, the fact that this tree produces fruit further links it with the adulterous (but committed) relationship between Isolde and Tristram. Just as apple trees appear in different tales to witness Lancelot's struggles to maintain his status as a perfect knight (complicated in part by his adulterous relationship) this fruit tree exists within an intertextual continuum of meaning that connects the trees of Malory's tales with wider arboreal narratives. In this case, these narratives involve the wide-ranging and vital significance of bearing and picking fruit, in both a Judeo-Christian context, and as a metaphor for fertility. Another layer of irony exists here, in the fact that, like Guenivere, Isolde does not have any children. In contrast, the tree that Eve grows from the Tree of Knowledge, which is also a fruit tree,

⁶⁰² Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols*, 46.

symbolises Eve's fecundity in a way that both inverts and reinforces Christian iconography of the Fall.

I have read the trees of medieval romance in this way – that is, according to their symbolic potential – throughout this thesis. I have noted the oak tree's associations with strength and nobility; the hawthorn's links to fertility and eroticism; the linden tree's relationship with spring and carnal love; the holly tree's protective and regenerative connotations; the opposing meanings of ash and hazel trees; the resonances of cherries; and the liminal and gendered status of grafted trees. Reading trees in these ways to some extent reinforces anthropocentrism, in the sense that it necessitates viewing trees from a human perspective, through collective human understandings of, associations with, and attitudes to the non-human. Trees are not only physically cut down or mutilated in romance; they are also "used" by poets and authors in a metaphorical sense. *Sir Tristrem* is particularly relevant here, as it features trees that are literally cut down to communicate within the narrative; in some ways, the poet similarly exploits trees to convey meaning. As Rudd argues of Chaucer's use of trees in *The Knight's Tale*, "the only place these trees have in Chaucer's imagination here is as lumber to be grown and harvested for human purposes – lexical and physical".⁶⁰³ Reading trees according to their symbolic potential, then, as I have done, could reinforce anthropocentrism, and remove focus from the "real" trees behind these symbolic meanings.

However, reading trees in this way also opens a space for what this thesis calls arboreal power; authors are not "cutting down" trees by using them as symbols, but are instead allowing them to grow. With the oaks, hawthorns, lindens, holly, and fruit trees I have discussed, interrogating their semiotic importance has allowed for

⁶⁰³ Rudd, *Greenery*, 52.

these trees to cast a greater interpretive shadow over the narratives they inhabit. Viewing the strength and nobility of oak trees as related to Arthur, for example, provides a new perspective on the trees of *Le Morte Darthur*, which, like Arthur himself, are central and largely absent. Likewise, considering the religious connotations of the apple and fig tree deepens the intimate relationship that first Lancelot, and then Eve, shares with these trees. The same can be said of the ways in which the hawthorn in *Ywain and Gawain* is linked to Ywain, and the way that the holly branch encodes Gawain's violent and problematic, but at the same time productive, rebirths. These rebirths are also connected to the potentially subversive erotic connotations of the linden trees in *SGGK*, and these same trees figure into the ways that Tristrem and Ysonde's erotic relationship is connected to the arboreal in *Sir Tristrem*. Similarly, the gender symbolism inherent in the *ympe*-tree's incorporation of both masculine and feminine allows the relationship between Orfeo and Herodis to be reconsidered through an arboreal framework in which Orfeo is portrayed as "tree-like" even before he retreats to the wilderness where he becomes "also a tre".

In each case, this arboreal power comes precisely *from* tying the human to the non-human. Though, again, this could be seen as anthropocentrism, it also creates spaces within which human and non-human are productively enmeshed with each other. This breaks down the human/non-human dualism that previous scholars have identified as one of the major reasons for our current environmental crisis. Breaking down this dualism – viewing human identities as "unstable, contingent, hybrid, discontinuous" – allows for a more inclusive conception of what it means to be human.⁶⁰⁴ This also has gendered implications; to quote Plumwood again,

⁶⁰⁴ Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines*, xxiii.

Women must be treated as just as fully part of human culture as men. But both men and women must challenge the dualised conception of human identity, and develop an alternative culture which fully recognises *human* identity as continuous with, not alien from, nature.⁶⁰⁵

In the figures of Lancelot, Eve, Galahad, Arthur, Ywain, Gawain, Orfeo, and – to a lesser extent – Tristrem and Freine, I have argued that this type of identification is visible, when we focus on the arboreal.

These characters, and Malory's Isolde, in effect *become* trees throughout their narratives. Sometimes this arboreal identification – or non-humanisation, as I have also termed it – involves simile or metaphor. In *Le Morte Darthur*, Lancelot is as bitter as wood and as bare as a fig tree, while Gawain and Lionel are rotten and worm-eaten trees; Lunet's ring hides Ywain "Als the bark hilles the tre" (741); Gawain is as cut-down and strong as a tree stump entwined with the earth in *SGGK*; Orfeo returns from the wilderness "y-clongen also a tre" (509); and Emaré "wax lene as a tre" (365) during her first exile. In each case, these similes and metaphors are accompanied by other instances in which the identity of each character is further tied to the arboreal. Sometimes this occurs through physical interaction, as when the knights of *Le Morte Darthur* tie their horses to trees, and Gawain ties Gringolet to a linden tree outside the Green Chapel, or when Orfeo inserts his harp into the hollow tree.

Elsewhere, identities are tied to trees through other intimate arboreal relationships, such as Lancelot's with apple and elm trees, Ywain's with the hawthorn tree, Gawain's with the trees of the wilderness and Bertilak's hunting park, and Orfeo's with the *ympe*-tree. Women also form close attachments with trees; the *ympe*-tree is also associated with Herodis, for example, and Eve, Solomon's wife, and Percival's sister are connected to the tree grown from the Tree of Knowledge.

⁶⁰⁵ Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 36.

An opposing situation can be seen in *Ywain and Gawain*, in which Alundyne and Lunet resist even mentioning the hawthorn tree that is so central to Ywain's narrative. On the other hand, though *Lay le Freine* resists the elision of boundaries between the feminine and the arboreal non-human, Freine is also connected to the ash tree that "births" her, even if this association cannot nourish her.

In this context of human/non-human enmeshment, Isolde's interaction with the plum tree can be viewed in the same light. She impales the tree with a sword, and she intends the same fate for her own body, aligning her material existence with that of the tree. This single tree exhibits the diverse meanings of trees that this thesis has explored. It is both impaled and the potential impaler; penetrated and potentially penetrative; subjugated "wood" and active arboreal presence; and, finally, human and non-human. In the plum tree, then, we again have a non-human, wooden "thing" that represents the permeability of human/non-human and masculine/feminine binaries.

This tree, and the others that I have mentioned, therefore *embody* the human in ways that destabilise patriarchal and anthropocentric discourses. Again, in some ways, reading the trees of romance as participants in human narratives anthropomorphises them. As Rudd argues in her discussion of the wilderness in *SGGK*, this reflects "our inability to let [the landscape] be as it is, without attributing some kind of attitude to it".⁶⁰⁶ However, at the same time, to reference Bennett, "maybe it is worth the risks associated with anthropomorphizing ... because it, oddly enough, works against anthropocentrism: a chord is struck between person and thing, and I am no longer above or outside a nonhuman 'environment'".⁶⁰⁷ Taking this into account, viewing trees as "things" that are enmeshed with the human

⁶⁰⁶ Rudd, *Greenery*, 121.

⁶⁰⁷ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 120.

discourses and presences in romance is productive. As Perkins argues, “things” in romance “become not only symbols of identity formation which wrap themselves around the selfhood of their leading protagonists, but actants that overlap with those protagonists and have their own narrative trajectories”.⁶⁰⁸ Like the wooden objects that can be understood through this framework, such as Orfeo’s harp or the Green Knight’s axe, trees can therefore be indicative of an alternative narrative of non-human “thing-power”, an eco-subtext, that encroaches on the more central discourses of romance texts.

This encroachment is often unsettling and almost always accompanies violence. I have discussed the EcoGothic in relation to *SGGK* in Chapter Three, and the ecophobia it contains. It is striking that tree-based settings are sites of fear and violence in all of the texts that I have discussed; as part of Frye’s “night world” phase of the romance hero’s journey, the forests, wildernesses, and woods within in which knights complete their *aventure* or exile are places of combat and uncertainty, where knights increase their renown, but are also vulnerable. When they interact with trees directly in these spaces, this vulnerability is often emphasised, such as when Lancelot sleeps beneath the apple tree, or climbs the elm. Likewise, Colgrevance and Salados are defeated underneath Ywain’s hawthorn, and he, in turn, almost dies beneath it when he falls on his sword. Gawain enters Hautdesert between the interlocking boughs of its surrounding trees to be hunted by Bertilak and Morgan, culminating in his “felling” at the Green Chapel. While the hollow tree in *Sir Orfeo*’s wilderness protects his harp, it also witnesses the suffering Orfeo endures there. Similarly, the tree behind which Tristrem hides while he is facing the dragon shelters him, but also observes the real threat that the dragon poses to his life and identity.

⁶⁰⁸ Perkins, “Introduction: The Materiality of Medieval Romance,” 7.

Likewise, trees in gardens and orchards, though enclosed, are not without these dangerous associations. Malory's Isolde intends to use her garden as the site of her death, Gowther's mother is a victim of sexual violence in her orchard, and Herodis finds herself at the mercy of the fairy king underneath the *ympe*-tree in the orchard she shares with Orfeo. In fact, as I pointed out in Chapter Four, there are almost no references to trees in the Middle English Breton Lays that are *not* accompanied by violence: like Gowther, Degaré is also conceived through an act of sexual violence witnessed by a tree, and later tears down a tree to *make* a weapon of violence; Cleges similarly rips away a part of a tree and then violently attacks Uther's porter, usher, and steward with a wooden staff; trees in *The Earl of Tolous* are linked with execution; and Freine almost dies in her ash tree. Similarly, though it is not a living tree, Emaré lies next to the wooden "tree" that forms part of her boat as she suffers during her exile. Additionally, Launfal is sitting beneath a tree when he is taken to meet the fairy mistress; this episode, though it does not feature violence itself, enables the violent aspects of the rest of the text. The trees that inhabit a variety of romance settings, then, oversee some of the most disturbing and violent episodes of romance. Underneath every "fair" tree are the dark, hidden roots of arboreal power, and they cast a shadow over human narratives.

Likewise, when romance protagonists "become" trees it is often in a disconcerting way. It is the more problematic aspects of Lancelot's chivalric identity that associate him with trees in *Le Morte Darthur*, and Eve and Abel's association with the tree in the story of the spindles culminates in the fact that it bleeds when it is mutilated. The violence and horror of this image is also hinted at in the episode in which Ywain must be hidden by the "bark" of the ring, as his horse has just been cut in two, and he will meet a similarly bloody fate if Salados' men find him. Likewise, Gawain's tree-identity is unsettling, as he has been "cut down" by the Green

Knight's axe, and, similarly, Orfeo and Emaré's tree-like bodies are a result of their suffering. In this, there is the same kind of horror that Dinshaw reads into medieval Green Man sculptures, which she describes as "eerie", "haunting", and "unsettling" in their representation of the interconnectedness between human and non-human.⁶⁰⁹

However horrifying becoming tree-like can be, and however frightening and uncanny tree-based settings often are, reading medieval romance through an arboreal lens can also be unsettling in a productive sense. To quote Rudd once more, it is possible to "take being disconcerted as a good thing, as it makes us aware of conflict between first reactions and subsequent interpretations through drawing attention to details that don't quite fit".⁶¹⁰ In this thesis, I have explored how trees "don't quite fit" into the human narratives that they occupy, as they also embody a potential to hold power beyond it. Furthermore, this power can be glimpsed through the repeated entanglement of tree and human identities, which destabilises anthropocentric hierarchies and opens up the potential for inclusive identities that simultaneously incorporate human, non-human, masculine, feminine, strength, and vulnerability. While I have tended to focus on the gendered implications of this type of identity construction, and particularly how it provides a new perspective on chivalric masculinities, this type of approach also has repercussions for other identity components, such as race, sexuality, and disability. I acknowledge that the readings I have put forward in this thesis would not have been understood in these terms by medieval authors or audiences, but the intermeshing of human and the arboreal non-human is nonetheless a productive site of ecocritical, ecofeminist inquiry that has far-reaching significance.

⁶⁰⁹ Dinshaw, "Ecology," 349 and 351.

⁶¹⁰ Rudd, *Greenery*, 17.

Though trees are largely unseen within the romance stories that they enable, they are rooted in a subtext that exists underneath the dominant discourses of those stories. Occasionally, they break through the “ground” of those discourses to become visible and salient but, even then, they are often only briefly noticeable. However, this does not wholly undermine their power, as their retreat into the margins – literally into the background – of romance also allows them the authority to impact the central action in uncanny and ambiguous ways. The vacuum of their frequent “absence” – when they constantly surround romance protagonists, but are not focused on – is filled with potential. This thesis has focussed on some “little acorns” of tree visibility as a way to glimpse this potential, through which trees become influential and mighty presences. As witnesses to the violence and danger that define *aventure*, as creators of wooden things whose narratives overlap and transcend those of their human vessels, and as wooden things themselves, trees dynamically participate in narratives of love and chivalry. More than this, they tell their own stories of strength and vulnerability, if you take the time to listen to them.

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