Ecocriticism and Medieval Literature OR How green is *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*? An ecocritical consideration of the fourteenth century Middle English romance

Ecocriticism, or 'green reading', is a new direction in literary criticism currently enjoying considerable exposure overseas. Despite a growing interest in 'green readings', ecocritical engagements with medieval texts have thus far been limited. In an attempt to shed some new light on medieval environmental perspectives, this paper introduces some of the central concepts of ecocritical theory and offers a fresh approach to the fourteenth century Middle English romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.[1] In medieval literature, nature is generally an abstraction, as many medieval texts favour the undemanding conventionality of an idealised two-dimensional natural world and the corresponding conceptual control. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* seems to eschew such anonymous abstraction. Using the notion of the *Gawain*-poet's 'dialogic imagination' and the poem's celebrated descriptions of the natural world as a fundamental premise, I suggest that the poem lends itself favourably to an ecocritical interpretation. The poem, I argue, demonstrates an awareness of nature on its own terms: through the observation and extension of descriptive convention, the poet opens dialogic spaces in the text that allow for the articulation of various responses to the presence and demands of the natural world on humankind, inviting the audience to interrogate established notions of (medieval) man's place in the world. The text is revealed as a site of cultural contest, in which conventional dualistic medieval assumptions regarding the status of nature and culture are critically interrogated.[2]

Environmentally oriented literary and cultural studies, or ecocriticism, emerged as a new field of critical inquiry in the early 1990s. In her article, "Ecocriticism and the Transnational Turn in American Studies", Ursula Heise documents how seminal studies from both sides of the Atlantic –

---

[1] To the best of my knowledge Gillian Rudd's *Greenery: Ecocritical Readings of Late Medieval English Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007) remains the only study that has devoted some space to an ecocritical consideration of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.*

[2] Throughout the discussion, terms such as 'nature' and 'nonhuman living world' interchangeably denote the natural world, which includes the seasons and their related climatic conditions, geographical terrain, flora and fauna.

from Jonathan Bate's *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (1991) and

Karl Kroeber's *Ecological Literary Criticism: Romantic Imagining and the Biology of Mind* (1994),

to Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation*

of American Culture (1995) and Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm's *Ecocriticism Reader:*

Landmarks in Literary Ecology (1996) – set the first parameters for the new research area, which has

since expanded rapidly in American and British literary studies (382). The foundation of the

Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment (ASLE), and its journal

Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment (*ISLE*) in 1993 are similarly regarded as

necessary developments in the establishment of ecocriticism's disciplinary visibility (Heise 382 – 3).

More recent additions to ecocritical theory include Greg Garrard's *Ecocriticism* (2004) and

Lawrence Buell's *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary*

Imagination (2005).

In her "Introduction: Literary Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis" to *The Ecocriticism*

Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology, Cheryll Glotfelty describes the concerns of ecocriticism as

a critical discourse:

> Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture,
>
> specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature … [thus,] as a theoretical
>
> discourse, it negotiates between the human and the nonhuman (xix).

Whereas other schools of literary criticism focus principally on the human social sphere, ecocriticism

widens the scope of textual inquiry to interrogate those textual modes of representation that articulate

the relationships between the human and nonhuman natural world. By critically exploring the

implicit or explicit cultural (including ethical, religious, and political) values operating in these

representations, 'green' readings demonstrate what Sarah Stanbury calls ecocriticism's "challenge

[of] the boundaries between nature and culture [based on the] understand[ing] [of] nature and culture as interwoven rather than as separate sides of a dualistic construct" (3). Karla Armbruster and Kathleen Wallace concur, arguing for an informed and viable ecocriticism that "continue[s] to challenge dualistic thinking by exploring the role of nature in texts more concerned with human cultures, by looking at the role of culture in nature … [and] understanding how nature and culture constantly influence and construct each other" (4).

Yet commentators have also criticised ecocriticism's continuing lack of adequate theorization – what Simon Estok terms its "strategic intangibility" (198) – as increasingly counterproductive.[3] While Estok concedes that this 'strategic intangibility' helped "define and bolster ecocriticism's inclusivity principle in the late 1990s" (198), ecocritics like Lawrence Buell continue to regard this "lack of a paradigm-inaugurating statement like Edward Said's *Orientalism* (for colonial discourse studies) or Stephen Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (for new historicism)" as a potential strength (1091). This ongoing debate notwithstanding, Heise contends in her article "Greening English: Recent Introductions to Ecocriticism" that ecocriticism as an apparent theoretical paradigm has not "yet demonstrated how its particular concerns over a nonhuman world under threat might reshape the study of texts and artifacts *[sic]* that do not explicitly engage with nature" (296). Despite these legitimate concerns, however, Heise does admit to ecocriticism's success in expanding the textual archive and in encouraging debate on previously neglected issues in literary and cultural studies (295). She cites Robert Kern who suggests that "ecocriticism becomes most interesting and useful [...] when it aims to recover the environmental character or orientation of works whose conscious or foregrounded interests lie elsewhere" (296). In sum, ecocritical readings are informed by the premise that human experience is dialogical, and that human experiences of nature inexorably

---

[3] For example, Estok 2005 and Heise 2006 and 2008.

shape, and are shaped by, the ontological and epistemological codes underpinning human sociocultural structures.

Medieval literary texts have hitherto been curiously neglected, or perhaps strategically avoided, by ecocritics – a stance undoubtedly informed by the orthodox medieval view of nature, which regarded the natural world primarily as an abstract repository of valuable lessons to be used for man's spiritual and moral edification. To be sure, the natural world in medieval literature frequently functions interchangeably as backdrop and metaphor: largely symbolic, imaginative and emblematic, it operates as an external referent for human experience.[4] When described, medieval writers exploit a rhetorical style crowded with conventional *topoi*, since medieval rhetorical convention prized the massing of detail over descriptive articulation. Derek Pearsall and Elizabeth Salter observe how such a technique tends to produce "concreteness of effect more by accident than design" (177). Such composite and primarily decorative descriptive techniques are evident in the depiction of spring in Lydgate's *Troy-Book*[5] and Chaucer's General Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*, for example. Both texts refrain from realism and employ conventional imagery drawn from classical traditions to indulge in expansive expositions of natural phenomena that function rhetorically to bridge the seasonal world and human desire.[6] Whether allegorical[7] or allusive,[8]

---

[4] To illustrate, Philippa Tristram explains how the medieval illuminator for instance "uses the natural world as a background to frame an event of spiritual significance" (52).

[5] See i. ll. 3907 – 41. For example, Lydgate's "Zephirus, ful agreeable and smothe, / The tendre braunchis enspireth and dothe springe" (ll. 3916 – 17) is akin to Chaucer's "Zephirus eek with his swete breeth / Inspired hath in every holt and heath / The tendre croppes" (ll. 5 – 7). The time of year is indicated by the position of the sun in the zodiacal sign of Aries: "Of the Ram, ful colerik at al, / Halvynge in ver the equinnocial" (Lydgate ll. 3913 – 14); "…and the yonge sonne / Hath in the Ram his halfe cours y-ronne" (Chaucer ll. 7 – 8). References to the Lydgate text are from the poem as reproduced in Pearsall and Salter 235 – 36. References to Chaucerian texts are taken from V. A Kolve and G. Olson's 2005 edition.

[6] I concur with Stanbury (11) here. Pearsall and Salter read the opening of the General Prologue as demonstrative of Chaucer's "return to the older tradition of scientific-philosophic seasons description derived from classical sources and from encyclopaedic treatises such as the *Secreta Secretorum*." (171). It is clear, therefore, that Chaucer's (and even Lydgate's) employment of convention is conscious, and evidence of a method that generally refrains from any attempted realism at natural description.

[7] The allegorisation of nature is evident in a text such as Langland's canonical *Piers Plowman*. Ymaginatif's rebuke of the dreamer is an exposition of the orthodox medieval view of nature.

[8] More secular but no less figurative is the response of an urban poet like Chaucer to the dawn in *The Knight's Tale,* ll. 1491 – 1496.

medieval natural representations tend to remain two-dimensional, idealised and conceptually undemanding. This landscape of the imaginary is particularly apparent in medieval Arthurian romance, where the image of the knight-errant riding into mysterious lands seeking *aventure* dominates. Often only cursorily described and vaguely identified as forest, waste or wilderness,[9] the natural world of the quest, acquiring definition by the events occurring within it, functions to advance the plot.[10] The imagined quest landscape thus must be a symbolic space of intrigue and potentiality – enchanted ground – a narrative setting prized more for its associative possibilities than its descriptive congruency with the 'real' world. While satisfying the genre's narrative demands, the romance landscape beyond the castle walls retains an aura of arcaded distance that works to consign its textual presence to the realm of convention. A medieval romance seemingly eschewing the convenience of such anonymous abstraction is *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.[11]

Widely acknowledged as a medieval literary masterpiece, the fourteenth century alliterative romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* interrogatively explores Christian-chivalric ideals with ironic humour.[12] Of particular interest for this discussion is how some critics, such as John Speirs, have interpreted the poem's explicit juxtaposition of the human and natural worlds as the intentionally "harmonious resolution of the antagonism between the human and other-than-human"

---

[9] Corinne Saunders comments on how lack of description is symptomatic of the romance form itself: "Description is rarely employed in romance and then only in a stylised fashion: ladies are fair and grey-eyed; knights are handsome, forests are thick and dark or, occasionally, flowery. Specification is not required, for the romance does not aim at minute verisimilitude" (38).

[10] For example, Malory uses the traditional associations carried by the forest motif to situate and advance his chivalric narrative in his *Morte D'Arthur*, where the forest acts as a backdrop for encounters with foes and fair ladies, as a perilous thoroughfare between courts and castles, and as a locale for that most popular of noble pursuits, the hunt.

[11] All subsequent references to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* will be taken from J. A. Burrow's 1972 edition and will be cited by the abbreviation *SGGK* followed by the line number(s).

[12] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, one of four works attributed to an anonymous West Midlands poet, enjoys critical consensus as to its stylistic sophistication. Scholars have regarded it as a critical social commentary expressing a concern with individual morality and the mutability of human existence. Studies that explore these aspects (with variations in perspective emphases) include John Speirs, *Medieval English Poetry: The Non-Chaucerian Tradition* (1957); J. A. Burrow, *A Reading of* Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (1965); C. Moorman, *The* Pearl-*poet* (1968); W. A. Davenport, *The Art of the* Gawain-*poet* (1978); L. Staley Johnson, *The Voice of the* Gawain-*poet* (1984); A. Putter, *An Introduction to the* Gawain-*poet* (1996); and J. J. Anderson, *Language and Imagination in the* Gawain-*poems* (2005).

(221), reconciling man and nature.[13] It is widely acknowledged that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* engages in mode-switching, shifting between the verisimilar and the fantastic, and this complex blending of the real and the unreal undercuts the audience's expectations. Ad Putter has emphasised that the pursuit of adventure that characterises romance narratives is simultaneously a pursuit of meaning (41). Drawing on this, J. J. Anderson introduces the idea of the Gawain-poet's 'dialogic imagination', which he interprets as working to construct interrogative discursive dialogues between ontological and epistemological codes (8). As Anderson convincingly argues, the poem's most visible 'dialogue' is between the foregrounded chivalric discourse and its Christian counterpoint (8). Yet, since the poet devotes much space to natural description in marked contrast to most medieval romances, it is possible that another dialogue is 'present' – one between the human and nonhuman world. Using the *Gawain*-poet's 'dialogic imagination' and his celebrated natural descriptions as a premise, I suggest that the poem lends itself to ecocritical reading.

Derek Pearsall has argued that the nature descriptions in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* adhere to medieval rhetorical descriptive precepts (133), and the *Gawain*-poet's careful detail is not sensuously vivid or significant (130).[14] A close reading (or 'micro' analysis) of these natural descriptions indicates that Pearsall may have too readily dismissed the intricacies of the *Gawain*-poet's descriptive technique. I argue that the Gawain-poet's celebrated natural descriptions create a narrative sensorium, communicating the intensity of phenomenological experience and demonstrating an awareness of nature on its own terms.

---

[13] Pearsall and Salter also draw attention to the intimate relation of the poem's action to "the cycle of the seasons and their festivals – beginning with a January feast, and ending in January snow." (147)

[14] Pearsall reiterates the prioritisation of descriptive convention in medieval literature, noting that the artistic aim was "description through [the] enumeration […] and accumulation of all available detail [since] the ideal was richness, ornament, elaboration […] and the superimposition of [this] decorative detail upon a 'typical' basis." (130). The *Gawain*-poet, Pearsall contends, "follows well-established tradition … in the essentials" (131), arguing that, while accurate and in some cases, original, most of the nature-descriptions in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are governed by rhetorical motives (133).

The *Gawain*-poet adheres to established medieval literary convention when describing the passing of the seasons.[15] While this grouping of conventional *topoi* certainly serves as a symbolic reminder of man's transience in counterpoint to the regenerative cycle of life in nature, and a narrative link to Gawain's imminent dangerous journey, this passage is more than merely figurative or structurally expedient. The intertwining of the imagery of the contention of the seasons and the inexorable passage of time, coupled with delicate detail and irony, intensifies the description. Throughout, the poet interrogates the perceived security of the human position-in-the-world, principally through irony. The regenerative image of the cycle of the seasons is undercut and transformed into a metaphor of surprise and contingency. Although this thought is perhaps more unsettling for an agrarian medieval audience than for a modern one, it links to another irony, where man is conspicuously absent from the natural cycle, underscoring his vulnerability. In contrast, the natural world manifests its presence and its independent agency through vibrant sensory impressions (recall the warm rain showers, the green groves, the burgeoning blossoms); and by bringing change to the weather and the land, nature controls the sheer physicality of existence. Although the description finally retreats into the warm comforts of the court while winter rages outside, for a brief yet significant moment, the poet brings his narrative into nature's space, alerting the audience to its 'thereness', preparing its sensibilities for the felt experience of Gawain's journey into the wilds and wastes of romance.

In the passages known as the winter journey,[16] the poet conflates the conventional quest landscape with identifiable topography, and this blend, with its accuracy and specificity of description, is unique in the Middle English romances. Although the poet gives the quest catalogue of landscapes and opponents a gratuitous nod, the narrative focus extends beyond the stock world of romance. The winter journey problematises the concept of human observational acuity and shows

---

[15] *SGGK* ll. 498 – 535.
[16] Gawain's winter journey is divided into three sections: ll. 691 – 712; ll. 713 – 739; and ll. 740 – 762.

how exposure to the natural world has a disruptive and destabilising effect on human identity. Furthermore, the narrative emphasis is not on chivalric prowess, rather, the main ordeal for Gawain is the survival of the bitter winter weather in a perilously real frozen wasteland. Elemental, metonymic detail and alliteration pare the harsh contours of the wintry world, and the diminishing and sharpening of focus, or 'zooming effect', encourages movement across the horizontal and vertical planes of perception. These techniques infuse the description with a kinetic quality. The unadorned simplicity and phenomenological acuity of the careful detail promotes a deeper level of engagement with the scene, the landscape *and* Gawain's experiences.

Hunting scenes are popular in medieval alliterative poetry, and the inclusion of three elaborate and spectacular deer, boar and fox hunts[17] in *Gawain* see the poet honouring convention, showcasing in extravagant style the prowess of the medieval hunter and the exhilaration of the chase. In these, the natural world is often only fragmentally present, functioning as archetypal quarry or as a static panorama. Although the vigorous language conveys the physical excitement of the hunt, in the animal and landscape descriptions the massing of superlatives catalogue details aimed primarily at rhetorical amplification. However, one cannot dismiss the lingering ambivalence sparked by the poet's chosen technique in the very first hunt. The deer hunt leaves the audience, medieval and modern, unsure of what its reaction should be. The poet simultaneously and skilfully evokes the contrasting experience of the hunt from the perspective of the hunter and the hunted, and through the descriptive emphasis on sound and the alternating patterning of points of view, the audience is confronted with the emotive juxtaposition of the excitement of the pursuers and the terror of the deer.

Gawain's journey to the mysterious Green Chapel[18] sees him traversing another winter landscape memorable for its visual and auditory verisimilitude. The description magnifies the mood

---

[17] *SGGK* ll. 1126 – 1149; 1150 – 1177; 1319 – 1371; 1421 – 1475; 1558 – 1622; 1690 – 1732; 1893 – 1921.
[18] *SGGK* ll. 2000 – 2005; 2075 – 2211.

of uncontrollable and indiscriminate motion, advancing the idea that nature is an impelling force containing and generating its own quickening power, independent of human influence. Metonymic detail and jarring alliteration sketch the mountainous terrain's elemental ruggedness; and onomatopoeia and alternating perspective make it seem as though the natural world is closing in on Gawain. The exploitation of the sound continuum leaves the audience with the indelible image of the outdoor world as a space in inexorable flux, dynamically reasserting its presence in the text.

Finally, as Gawain heads for home[19] the natural world returns firmly to the abstract, anonymous world of the romance quest, crammed with a breathless imagic catalogue of convention. Although after this passage, there are no more references to the natural world in the text, the gentle humour in the narrator's impatient tone is reminiscent of the earlier token nod in the passage recounting Gawain's winter journey to Hautdesert given to the rhetorical precepts of the medieval literary tradition. Thus, this brisk return to generic normality is not quite enough to do away with the lingering impression left by the poem's often ambivalent and complex response to the presence and demands of the outer, natural, world.

A close reading of the poet's descriptive technique employed in the descriptions of the natural world demonstrates the innovative reworking of convention. My overall findings thus contrast with Pearsall's, who concludes that, in the matter of the analysis of descriptive technique, one "should do away with all criteria of sensuous accuracy, realism for realism's sake, truth of self-expression, and, for nature-description, of *Naturgefühl*, and substitute instead the single criterion of efficacy within a conventional framework." (134). I contend that the audience is constantly confronted with familiar romance motifs, only to have these complicated, expanded and contradicted. This defamiliarisation strategy, comprising the careful deployment of the alliterative

---

[19] *SGGK* ll. 2479 – 2489.

technique, the switching and refocusing ('zooming') of narrative perspective, and the blending of romance and real modes, emphasizes the *Gawain*-poet's underlying preoccupation with the notion of perception as a way to make sense of the world. The alliterative technique, with its sensory emphasis, enables the poet to construct verisimilar depictions of nature that encourage a phenomenological response. This desire to reconnect the audience's sensory experience with the natural world it encounters in the text, as well as the originality and accuracy of the selected detail, confirms the *Gawain*-poet's awareness of nature on its own terms. The manipulation of the narrative point of view (sometimes the poet-narrator's, sometimes Gawain's) encourages the audience to question human perception's inherently problematic nature. Finally, the complex conflation of the romance and real modes creates an interface between the dominant Christian-chivalric ordering framework and the third ordering force of nature shown operating in *Gawain*, opening a dialogic space from which the poem's various responses to the presence and demands of the natural world on humankind can be explored from a 'macro' ecocritical perspective.[20]

By creating an identifiable natural presence in the text, the poet signals his desire to engage critically with the natural world. In light of this, and when one considers how the medieval mind viewed nature in general, the conclusion that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is to be regarded only as a sophisticated example of the successful execution of an established formula seems inadequate. Of interest are the cultural attitudes and habits of thought the poem's articulation of the nature-culture dichotomy makes apparent. Issues considered include the concept of anthropocentrism and its hierarchical and binaric conceptual structures; the representation of power relations between the human and the nonhuman world; the construction of nature as Other; and the resulting ontological and epistemological ramifications. I will evaluate whether the poem's awareness of nature on its own

---

[20] I would like to acknowledge my debt here to Gillian Rudd, who points out that "the effects and applications of green reading reach from detailed close readings of passages embedded in larger texts to wider, general conclusions about habits of thought, representation or attitude" (7).

terms constitutes a sustained critical interrogation of the binaric assumptions of the nature-culture

dualism, or whether the general predicates of anthropocentric thinking remain in force.

When Arthur calls for a "mervayl"[21] to liven up Camelot's Christmas festivities, he gets more

than he bargained for. The Green Knight, at once of human chivalric culture, simultaneously bears

visible traces of the natural world.[22] This suggestively ambiguous figure's entry into the conceptual

space of Arthur's court elicits a profound sense of ontological and epistemological disruption,

evident in the court's stunned reactions.[23] Blending discursive boundaries, the transgressive figure

creates a hybrid dialogic presence within the text, imagining a third term that exposes the

anthropocentric underpinnings of the nature-culture construct within the poem's dominant Christian-

chivalric discourse. As Arthur's court is invited to 'see' nature in the figure of the Green Knight, so

the audience is encouraged to critically examine the terms of the nature-culture dualism.

The poet-narrator's difficulty in explicitly defining the Green Knight's identity points to the

human desire to contain the unknown. This response signals the intense rupture in the human

(courtly) epistemological framework the Green Knight's textual presence generates. However, the

figure of the Green Knight is not allowed a potentially destabilising conceptual presence for long,

---

[21] *SGGK*, l. 94.

[22] What makes this individual truly remarkable and endlessly suggestive is the fact that he is "overal enker grene" (l. 150). There are many descriptive details that indicate his association with human chivalric culture: his humanness; his familiarity with aristocratic decorum; his knightly finery; his axe; and his (although also green) horse. His greenness, which is "grene as the gres and greener / then grene aumayl on gold glowande bryghter" (l. 235 – 6), the "holyn bobbe" (l. 206) he carries, and his "much berd as a busk [hanging] over his brest" (l. 182) amplify the fecundity of the colour green that has mesmerised Arthur's court, and align the visitor with the processes of natural growth and regeneration. This 'Green Knight' is a conceptual hybrid, seemingly equally at home in the interior world of the court and the exterior world of nature. The image of the Green Knight in Fit IV "hypp[ing] over [the stream] and orpedly stryd[ing] / bremely brath on a bent that brode was aboute on snowe" (ll. 2232 – 4) echoes the way "this hathel heldes him in and the halle entres" (l. 221) in Fit I.

[23] The nobles "[a]ll studied that there stode and stalked him nere / with all the wonder of the worlde that he worch schulde / for fele sellyes had thay sene, bot such never are." (ll. 237 – 9). In response to the Green Knight's Beheading challenge and Gawain's acceptance of it, Arthur is faced with the need to calm the court and restore order. He reasserts his authority by telling Gawain to hang up his axe and to join him at the table to eat as if nothing disconcerting has just happened: "'Now, sir, heng up thyne axe, that has innogh hewen […] / Than thay bowed to a borde these burnes togeder, / The kyng and the good knight, and kene men hem served / Of all dayntes double, as derrest myght falle. / With all maner of mete and mynstralsye both, / With wele walt thay that day til worthed an ende/In londe." (ll. 477 – 86). The emphasis in these lines on the articulation of chivalric custom is an indication that the intrusion of the Green Knight constitutes an epistemological 'disruption from within'.

being absent for more than half the narrative. The identity switch in Fit IV from Green Knight to Gawain's host at Hautdesert (the lord Bertilak) reincorporates the transgressive figure into the dominant discursive framework, reaffirming the courtly order's binaric values. Once the Green Knight/Bertilak finally rides "whiderwarde-so-ever he wolde"[24] and out of the text, the poem's natural world dissipates into the symbolic before disappearing altogether. It seems as if he was the only connection or conduit to the natural world and the uncertainty of his whereabouts emphasises the discursive distance existing between the human and nonhuman world. This exit without explanation retrospectively relegates the Green Knight's presence to the conventional spectacular, minimising its transgressive challenge. However, while the enigmatic exit seemingly stabilises the ontological world within the text, it simultaneously uncovers the inherent faultline in its dominant (anthropocentric) discourse. The Green Knight's brief presence exposes the instability of values assumed ideologically plausible because of their sociocultural pervasiveness. The reassertion of the human chivalric order at the poem's denouement thus bears the traces of a momentary discursive irruption by the natural world.

The seasons passage juxtaposes the poem's three 'dialogues': the human social order, expressed by the chivalric code; Christianity, embodied in the cultural artefact of the liturgical calendar; and nature, represented by the passing of the seasons. From an ecocritical perspective, this passage articulates the difficulty of sustaining a critical interrogation of the nature-culture dualism. Although the poet's dialogic method opens representational space for an autonomous nature, it simultaneously finds itself increasingly constrained by the dominant discourse. The lines immediately preceding the seasons passage delineate the chivalric world's insularity.[25] While human

---

[24] *SGGK,* l. 2478.

[25] Consider: "This hanselle has Arthur of aventures on first/In yong yere for he yerned yelpyng to here. / Thagh him wordes were wane when thay to sete wenten, / Now are thay stoken of sturn werk, stafful her hande. / Gawayn was glad to begynne those games in halle, / Bot thagh the ende be hevy have ye no wonder; / For thagh men bene mery in mynde when thay han mayn/drynk" (ll. 491 – 97). They suggest that the human social order, determined by the chivalric code (mapped by the metonymic referents "Arthur", "Gawayn" and "halle") is artificial and insular. The boundaries of the

agency subsequently becomes indirect and abstract, and somewhat dwarfed by the vigorous natural

processes,[26] anthropomorphism remains evident,[27] with the concept of the seasons itself a discursive

construction designed to satisfy the human desire for experiential predictability. While the seasons

passage acknowledges the existence of a dramatically separate natural ordering force, for an agrarian

medieval culture, this has particular ontological ramifications. Nature must ultimately be contained

and explained – cultivated – using human epistemological frameworks, such as those referential

terms supplied by the cultural construct of the liturgical calendar.[28]

Gawain's journeys trace a dialogic trajectory leading from the court out into the wild spaces

of nature back to the court. This progressive exteriorisation of the action, relocating the poem's

major dramatic confrontations outdoors, points to the anthropocentric notion that the otherness of

nature must be confronted, conquered and ultimately incorporated into the world of the human.

Although the depicted terrain's phenomenological actuality is undeniable, the winter wilderness and

the forest function as liminal spaces where human discursive values are tested in the absence of

civilisation's overt supports. The wilderness is apparent because it is the ideological negative of the

two courts it lies between. It is Other, deeply disconcerting, and an invocation of what is no longer

present, namely, the ontological security of a human ordering framework. That other rules apply here

---

chivalric world are delineated by the metonym "halle" and the image of the courtiers at table, playing games and drinking. The use of the past tense creates the sense that the human world is rather static. (By contrast, the poet employs the present tense consistently to describe the passage of the seasons 'out there in nature'.) Also, the courtiers are confined indoors, at tables and in regulated games at Christmas, and then required to follow the abstemious penitential regiment of Lent. The use of the third person pronouns ("he" and "thay") to refer to Arthur and his court has a distancing, even flattening, effect and emphasises the insulated environment. The poet proceeds to extract the human order in the succeeding lines, a countermovement clearly indicated by "Bot then" and already hinted at with "For thagh" several lines earlier, and the poem's focus moves outwards from the royal hall, where humans make merry with drink and games, into the world of nature, with its apparent absence of people.

[26] A human presence only becomes visible through the referentiality of the metonymic process: "groundes" (l. 508), "greves" (l. 508), "[hedge]rawes" (l. 513) and "wode" (l. 515) carry associations of cultivation and management.

[27] The most readily apparent is "Zephyrus" (l. 517) and the personification of "harvest" (l. 521 – 3). Similar is the imagery of the contention of the seasons. Admittedly evocative – "Bot then the weder of the worlde with wynter hit threpes" (l. 504) and "wroth wynde of the welkin wrasteles with the sunne" (l. 525) – there remains the unmistakable trace of human projection, as Rudd (118) agrees.

[28] Although the narrative seems to be governed by natural time, beginning and ending in winter, it is noticeable that the overarching temporal movement is revealed as humanly defined, from "Yol" (l. 500), "Cristmasse" (l. 502) and "Lentoun" (l. 502), to the feast of "Meghelmas" (l. 532).

is evident in the (seemingly unremarkable because generically conventional) presence of

supernatural creatures and the physical threat posed by the terrain.

For the duration of his wanderings, Gawain needs to (re)define his identity. Because the

wilderness's unknowability is depicted in direct proportion to Gawain's growing feeling of threat,[29]

this reflects the anthropocentric inclination to approach the natural world as a blank canvas, ready for

the projection of human concerns.[30] This overwriting of nature's otherness becomes iconic in the

implicit juxtaposition of the Green Knight's green[31] and Gawain's red[32] array, and the matter of the

girdle. Their ornate embroidery is a strategy to contain the natural world's perceived threatening

exoticism by transforming it into human artefact. This desire to incorporate the natural world into the

dominant cultural discourse is again apparent when Gawain returns to Camelot wearing the green

girdle, which retains traces of the Green Knight's alignment with nature.[33] Camelot's incorporation

of the girdle is the dominant Christian-chivalric ordering framework's attempt to domesticate the

natural world's irruptiveness by redefining it from a signifier of the natural into a sign of the Round

Table's collective honour. Yet, the celebration of the girdle with its suppressed silken greenness

perhaps serves as a tacit reminder that, by persistently ignoring the natural world, the poem's human

chivalric world is in danger of becoming over-refined.

---

[29] It is readily apparent that being in this space is disconcerting for Gawain and that he thus feels the need to assert his difference from it. He does this in two ways: through prayer and through the wearing of courtly finery. His prayer for succour (ll. 753 – 8) is an assertion of the human over the nonhuman by means of speech and a reassertion of his identity as a Christian knight. Although Gawain also prays while in the forest, this particular space seems less alienating than the wilderness. This is perhaps because Gawain's passage through the forest has ostensibly brought him closer to the rest of the animal world. In particular, the plights of Gawain and the little birds in this harsh winter landscape are depicted as interconnected. Yet, the forest remains a space for the competing nature-culture discourse. Although the notion of human-animal interconnectedness is a positive sentiment, it is ultimately irrelevant as the birds have no utilitarian value. This notion of usefulness is indicated elsewhere in the poem as the defining criterion governing the relations between the (superior) human and the (subordinate) nonhuman living world: there is no indication, implicit or otherwise, that Gryngolet is Gawain's equal, for example, or that the animals in the third fit are considered equal to their hunters in any way.

[30] This anthropocentric discourse is operative in the descriptions of Gawain's journey to the Green Chapel as well (recall the depiction of the mountainous terrain as malevolent and threatening). Since the poem's plot casts Gawain as a knight-errant, it is inevitable that his experiences in the wilds are interpreted in the main as emblematic for the trials of man on his way to redemption.

[31] The Green Knight, one recalls, came to Camelot "all graythed in grene … [and] with gold inmyddes" (ll. 151, 167).

[32] Gawain rides from Camelot into the wilds of romance "all … rayled on red rich gold […] [and] enbrawden and bounden with the best gemmes" (ll. 603, 609). Gawain's horse is similarly ornately arrayed.

[33] Earlier, the Green Knight/Bertilak informed Gawain that the girdle is his, not his wife's (l. 2358).

The poem's hunting scenes display, in spectacular fashion, the human desire to exercise careful control over the nonhuman natural world. As a cultural construct, the hunt is conceptually plural. A source of noble recreation, an opportunity to showcase masculine chivalric prowess, and a utilitarian exercise to secure the animal world as a food source, as a concept and a practice, the hunt is explicitly anthropocentric in premise. The courtly language's formality, suggesting order, contrasts with the unpredictability of hunting itself. However, the vigorous descriptions work to suppress this potentially disruptive undercurrent by foregrounding the hunts' adherence to chivalric custom.

The ritualised atmosphere and descriptive conventionality confirm the codified and clearly hierarchical nature of the depicted human-nonhuman relations.[34] Agency is located in the human pursuer, with the animal pursued relegated to the status of the dependent object that can only react. The animals' bodies, figuratively and conceptually 'cut up' in preparation for incorporation into the human world, act as objectified emblematic focalisers asserting human superiority. Despite the professed admiration for the animals – the narrator notes "the herttes … with the high hedes" (l. 1154), "the breme bukkes … with her brode paumes" (l. 1155) and the encounter with "one of the sellokest swyn" (l. 1439) with noticeable approval – this attitude becomes tangential, as the delight in human prowess is repeatedly foregrounded, as in lines 1170 – 73. Although the differentiation between an open and a closed hunting season (ll. 1156 – 7) on one level speaks of an ethos of care, whereby the society in *Gawain* acknowledges the need for human stewardship of the natural world;

---

[34] The outdoor natural world, which functions primarily as a backdrop to the action, is revealed to be thoroughly human, gaining definition by the human (chivalric) pursuit of hunting. It is not an open space denoting freedom, as the rapidity of movement in the descriptions would seem to imply. The "bent-felde" (l. 1136) the deer hunters make for is in all likelihood a hunting park. In the Middle Ages, these hunting parks were a common part of the noble estate. Although the poet does not designate the location of the boar and fox hunt as specifically as he does with the deer hunt, the landscape these hunts move through bears evidence of human cultivation. There is mention of "rones" (l. 1466), "holt[s]" (l. 1697), "mony greve" (l. 1707) and "wode[s]" (l. 1718). The physical layout of these parks, often bounded by elaborate enclosing features, was carefully conceptualised and the vegetation scrupulously managed so as not to impede the passage of the hunt. The medieval hunting park served as the quintessential symbol of the aristocracy and a physical manifestation of human ownership and control over the land.

on another, it becomes apparent that the animals are preserved, not for their own benefit, but ultimately for human use.

The hunting dogs and Gryngolet, Gawain's horse, are further examples. The hunting dogs remain largely anonymous: identified as "braches" (l. 1142) and "grehoundes" (l. 1171), these markers merely denote their identity as (hunting) dogs and connote their supportive role in the human pastime of the hunt. In the text, the dogs behave as required and are instrumental in bringing down the quarry. However, they have been trained to do so and are shown in the poem to be reliant on the vocal commands of their human handlers to act. Thus apparently instinctual behaviour, such as baying, tracking, and pursuing, is in fact evidence of human intervention. Gryngolet's presence and function in the text reveals the operation of similar cultural values. A chivalric necessity, Gryngolet's body is 'colonised', constrained and subsequently elided by the trappings of the court, foregrounded in lines 597 – 604. Since Gawain is a gallant knight (a "fre freke"), Gryngolet can also be no less "fayr", and is thus depicted as the archetypal charger for a knight-errant, suitably tall and strong and decked out in exquisite finery. Thus, his identity is derived from human demands. On a more practical level, the horse is dependent on humans to sustain him (literally, to keep him alive). Thus, when Gawain retrieves his horse from the Hautdesert stables in Fit IV, the excellent condition the knight finds his charger in is cause for joy. The foregrounding of the high standard of care given to the horse works to venerate the inherent goodness and morality of courtly customs. This concept of stewardship remains inherently anthropocentric, functioning as an ideological affirmation of human superiority and denying the nonhuman any identity or agency not devolving directly from its utilitarian role within the human cultural ordering framework.

The Green Chapel foregrounds the human and nonhuman world's primary difference. The capacity, through language, to reason and order perception into logical experiential schemas

confirms an anthropocentric ontology. Gawain's narrative position as a perspective focaliser has a distancing effect on the audience's response to the natural world. Although nature is allowed a tangible presence, the audience nevertheless becomes complicit in Gawain's responses, which here work to systematically relegate the natural world to the symbolic. Blurring the boundaries between the sacred, the heathen and the natural, the Green Chapel's ambiguous corporeality challenges existing epistemological codes. By reinterpreting the mound as the devil's kirk, Gawain reverts to the conceptual safety offered by a religious ordering framework, and thus no longer has to confront it as a tangible natural entity. Through speech, Gawain transforms it into a comprehensible construction that returns his sense of agency. He couples this reasserted conceptual control with direct action, striding in full armour over the mound to show his mastery of the situation, re-emerging as an imposing knight. Scarcely allowed to even acknowledge its presence, the audience is not challenged to fully consider the Green Chapel's hybrid otherness. Similarly, the poem's only other remaining reference to the natural world – the "wylde wayes" Gawain traverses on his journey home – poignantly reminds of its tendency to eventually 'write out' the natural: the forest, once so directly engaged in the winter journey, first fades into metaphor and then finally disappears from *Gawain*'s world altogether.

By approaching the *Gawain*-poet's descriptions of the natural world from an ecocritical perspective, the dissonance between the poem's 'micro' and 'macro' attitudes towards nature becomes apparent. Consideration of the cultural values operating in these passages indicates that the poet is unable to articulate a sustained representation of nature free from anthropocentric cultural discourse. Because the poem's subject is the motif of the romance quest, the natural world inevitably reverts to functioning in the main as a space of trial to examine human virtue, and the nature-culture and the human-nonhuman distinction remain strongly visible in the poem's ideological framework. However far the poem may wander with Gawain into the natural world, its denouement makes clear

that the ontological and epistemological security of anthropocentric Christian-chivalric discourse is preferred.

However, the ecocritical reading has also brought to light unresolved ambiguities existing in tension with the poem's general (re)affirmation of the nature-culture dualism. These are as impossible to ignore as it is difficult to simply dismiss the unique perceptiveness of the poet's descriptive engagement with the natural world. The dissonance between what emerges from close reading and the poem's general anthropocentric attitudes does not undermine either interpretation's validity.[35] Rather, they can coexist, to use an appropriately ecological term. The suggestiveness of the poet's descriptive technique, which unsettles the audience's tendency to relegate the natural to the abstract, and the interplay between the poem's broad anthropocentric drive and its unresolved ambiguities bear testimony to the *Gawain*-poet's dialogic method, which encourages the audience to ponder the epistemological stability of its cultural assumptions even as these are apparently affirmed. Ultimately, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* articulates a poetic engagement with the natural world that is in constant conceptual movement. For medieval man, the utilisation of nature was understood as a legitimate exercise that reinforced the belief "in a norm of labour and fruitfulness [which spoke of] the [eventual] reconciliation of God and his creation" (Pearsall and Salter 134).[36] But conviction in an 'eventual unity' does not mean that late medieval culture was incapable of speaking with more

---

[35] Ecocriticism seeks to refocus critical attention on aspects in texts that are either consigned to the margins or ignored completely in favour of other, more 'dominant' concerns. An ecocritical interpretation such as this one extends the existing critical corpus around *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and offers a different perspective on the poem that moves away from more established readings. Moreover, it informs the understanding of the Christian-chivalric ethos operative in the poem, as nature is seen to be subject to these social arrangements and subsequently appropriated as a means to underwrite the precepts of the dominant cultural discourse. However, during the course of my interpretation, I have been forced to neglect large sections of the text, such as the famous pentangle passage and the wooing scenes in Fit III. Furthermore, the problematic issue of chivalric courtesy is at best only obliquely addressed by ecocriticism, if at all. However, as an ecocritical reading is not intended to supercede other interpretations, its findings should not be dismissed.
[36] For any society so inextricably linked to the earth for its survival – where failed crops and starvation were a reality – the desire for predictability in the face of an uncertain world should be regarded and interpreted contextually. Thus Lynn White Jr's assessment of the medieval period's relationship with the natural world (its so-called "new exploitative attitude" (8)), while perceptive, tends towards an anachronistic view.

than one voice when it came to debating humanity's place within the wider world of nature, as David

Salter notes (Rudd 17). The *Gawain*-poet's is one of these voices.

Works cited

Primary works

Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Canterbury Tales: Fifteen Tales and the General Prologue.* Ed. V. A. Kolve

and G. Olson. 2ⁿᵈ edition. New York: W. W. Norton, 2005. Print.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Ed. J. A. Burrow. London: Penguin Books, 1972. Print.

Secondary works

Anderson, J. J. *Language and Imagination in the* Gawain-*poems*. Manchester: Manchester

University Press, 2005. Print.

Armbruster, Karla & Wallace, Kathleen R. "Introduction: Why Go Beyond Nature Writing, and

Where To?". *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism.* Ed. Karla

Armbruster and Kathleen R. Wallace. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001. 1 –

25. Print.

Barron, W. R. J. *Trawthe and Treason: The Sin of Gawain Reconsidered. A Thematic Study of* Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Publications of the Faculty of Arts of the University of Manchester 25. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980. Print.

Buell, Lawrence. "Letter," "Forum on Literatures of the Environment." *PMLA* 114.5 (October 1999): 1090 – 92. http://www.asle.umn.edu/archive/intro/pmla/buell.html. 2 October 2004.

Burrow, J. A. *A Reading of* Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965. Print.

Davenport, W. A. *The Art of the* Gawain-*poet.* London: The Athlone Press, 1978. Print.

Estok, Simon C. "Bridging the Great Divide: Ecocritical Theory and the Great Unwashed". *ESC.* 31.4 (2005): 197 – 209. Print.

Glotfelty, Cheryll. "Introduction: Literary Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis". *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology.* Ed. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1996. xv – xxxvii. Print.

Heise, Ursula K. "Greening English: Recent Introductions to Ecocriticism". *Contemporary Literature.* 47.2 (2006): 289 – 298. Print.

Heise, Ursula K. "Ecocriticism and the Transnational Turn in American Studies". *American Literary History.* 20.1-2 (2008): 381 – 404. Print.

Moorman, Charles. *The* Pearl-*poet.* New York: Twayne Publishers, 1968. Print.

Pearsall, Derek A. "Rhetorical 'Descriptio' in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*". *The Modern Language Review.* 50.2 (1955): 129 – 134. Print.

Pearsall, Derek and Elizabeth Salter. *Landscapes and Seasons of the Medieval World.* London: Paul Elek, 1973. Print.

Putter, Ad. *An Introduction to the* Gawain-*poet.* London: Longman, 1996. Print.

Rudd, Gillian. *Greenery: Ecocritical Readings of Late Medieval English Literature.* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007. Print.

Speirs, John. *Medieval English Poetry: The Non-Chaucerian Tradition.* London: Faber and Faber, 1957. Print.

Staley Johnson, Lynn. *The Voice of the* Gawain-*poet.* Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1984. Print.

Stanbury, Sarah. "Ecochaucer: Green Ethics and Medieval Nature". *The Chaucer Review.* 39.1 (2004): 1 – 16. Print.

Tristram, Philippa. *Figures of Life and Death in Medieval English Literature.* New York: New York University Press, 1976. Print.

White, Lynn Jr. "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis". *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology.* Ed. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1996. 3 – 14. Print.