



Gawain's Struggle with Ecology: Attitudes toward the Natural World in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*¹

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Abstract

As a poem largely dependent on the relationship between humans and the natural world, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight provides the ecocritic with an excellent case study in medieval attitudes toward the non-human world. The poet presents conflicting attitudes toward the non-human world, with Gawain asserting militaristic dominance and Bertilak acting as steward. The existence of these competing attitudes shows that medieval thought on the place of the non-human world was a complex philosophical issue. As such, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight presents evidence relevant for the on-going debate over Lynn White's "Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis."

In 1957, John Speirs recognized the importance of the natural world in the Middle English *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. A number of scholars have since echoed his comments. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a poem that depends in large part on the relationship between human and environment. Corinne J. Saunders notes that in the poem "the contrast between the security of the court, and the discomfort and danger, real and supernatural, of the quest landscape plays a central role" (148), and scholars have connected the Green Knight to symbols of fertility and nature.² Indeed, the ecological setting plays a significant role throughout the poem. With its concern with the non-human, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is certainly a poem conducive to an ecocritical analysis. The poem's settings provide binary oppositions of human/non-human, habitation/wild, privileging throughout the former. The poet presents two competing notions of the interaction between these oppositions. From the beginning,

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Gawain struggles with the non-human, the wild aspects of his world. Rather than being represented as an interconnected part of the environment (and one would not necessarily expect this from a late fourteenth-century poem), Gawain is in constant struggle with the natural world. Bertilak, on the other hand, interacts with the environment, acting as a steward of sorts, not so much struggling against the natural world as working with it in many ways. Foregrounding the relationships between these characters and their natural surroundings reveals a dual cultural approach to nature. Gawain represents the attitude that the environment is hostile and needs to be ruthlessly conquered. Bertilak represents an opposing approach: humans should be custodians of the environment, working with and respecting it.

A discussion of ecocriticism as an approach would be superfluous for an article in *The Journal of Ecocriticism*. However, for the present study it is important to note that even with the increased awareness of our ecological problems, ecocriticism has been slow to become widely accepted. The latest edition of Lois Tyson's *Critical Theory Today*, an introductory literary theory text, omits it,³ and although plenty of ecocritical studies have appeared on what we can loosely call "nature writing," ecocriticism has been sluggish to penetrate other literatures. This trend has been particularly apparent in medieval studies, and especially scholarship on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.⁴ Scholars addressing *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* invariably must deal with the poet's representation of the natural environment, from the Green Knight's symbolic representation of the uncultivated ecosystem to Gawain's briefly-mentioned but significant journey from Camelot to the Green Chapel. Various scholars have addressed nature imagery in the poem. John Speirs has called the seasonal theme "the poem's underlying, indeed pervasive theme" (219). A. V. C. Schmidt also addresses the passing of seasons, calling the passage "naturalistically accurate" (153) but also claiming that it is "more than ornamental (151), viewing the passage as symbolic of human mortality. Schmidt seems to refute the Green Knight as symbolic of nature: "if the Green Knight *is* to be considered as a type of Nature, it must be Nature understood as an analogue for the moral and spiritual life of man: a mirror of man's daily and hourly death in sin and daily and hourly resuscitation through the grace of divine forgiveness" (167). Yet Schmidt's assertion about the Green Knight's relationship to nature seems not to be prevalent. For Speirs, the Green Knight as symbol of nature is a given. Larry D. Benson echoes Speirs, arguing that the poet has conflated two "familiar and meaningful stock characters": the green man and the wild man, but by the time of the poem's inscription, these figures had lost their pagan associations (162-69). Thirty-seven years later, William F. Woods echoes Speirs's and Benson's arguments. In fact, throughout his article, Woods refers to Gawain's antagonist not as the Green Knight but instead as the "green man," an echo of Speirs's assertion that "The Green Knight whose head is chopped off at his own request and who is yet as miraculously or magically alive as ever, bears an unmistakable relation to the Green Man" (219).

Two articles are particularly important for the natural world in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The first is William Goldhurst's "Green and the Gold: The Major Theme of *Gawain and the Green Knight*." According to Goldhurst, "the major theme of *Gawain and the Green Knight* is the idea that the primitive and sometimes brutal forces of nature make known their demands to all men, even to those who would take shelter behind the civilized comforts of court life" (61). Goldhurst focuses on the binary oppositions that I have highlighted above: civilization/nature, concluding that "the poem suggests that at best life is but a truce between natural impulses and allegiances to the virtues which civilized creatures are pledged to uphold"(64). In Goldhurst's opinion, the poet "believes

that the primitive forces of nature represent a factor that must be reckoned with, contended against somehow, and if possible mastered"(65). Goldhurst's argument complements the present study in that it establishes the binary opposition between civilization and wilderness. However, he stops short of analyzing the ways that characters "contend against" nature. The second study is Woods's article. First, Woods focuses on space and boundaries, both of which are dominant topics for ecocritics. In Woods's view, nature—the outer—functions to reveal the human "inner man" of Gawain. The contrast between outer and inner "turns inward upon itself: outer and inner turn out to be versions of each other, suggesting that man is always already in nature, and nature, forever in him" (209). This sentiment is strikingly similar to the ecocritical standpoint that humans are part of the natural environment, influencing it as it influences humanity. For the ecocritic, the relationship between human and the natural world is reciprocal. Humans and the natural environment are inextricably interconnected, enmeshed in a continuous web of reciprocating actions, reactions, and interactions.⁵ While Goldhurst presents convincing evidence for his conclusions, a deeper analysis the relationships between human and natural environment in the poem will reveal competing philosophical attitudes toward the non-human world.

No discussion of medieval attitudes toward the natural world is complete without addressing the debate over Lynn White, Jr.'s 1967 "Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis," a debate that directly impacts my conclusions about a dual approach to the natural environment in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. In his article, White links the Judeo-Christian tradition with the rise of technology, claiming that this tradition, particularly during the late classical and medieval periods, formed the foundation of the rise of technology and, by extension, the ecological crisis that we faced in 1967 and today. This brief article has been cited or reprinted in a plethora of ecological studies and, later, by ecocritics.⁶ White's argument has also been repeatedly attacked. Lewis W. Moncrief has called the acceptance of White's position "simplistic" and "based more on fad than on fact" (32). Gabriel Fackre argues for an alternative position in Christian theology. Robin Attfield objects to White's seeming lack of adequate Biblical interpretation, repeatedly pointing out alternative interpretations of scripture.

Yet many of the scholars who disagree with White indicate that he is, at least in part, correct. Moncrief states, "Certainly, no fault can be found with White's statement that 'Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny—that is, by religion'" (32). Fackre says that "Lynn White is indeed correct when he says that the biblical story places man above nature" (117). Even Attfield stops short of claiming that White's information is incorrect. He stresses that White and his methods have been challenged (21), but he also asserts that "White's theory is not to be rejected on grounds of historical method or of historical materialism," affirming that "the invocation of traditional ethical and religious attitudes may do much to illuminate ecological problems and the principles required for their solution" (23).

Thomas Sieger Derr correctly asserts that White's article "has unfortunately been carelessly read and selectively quoted" (28).⁷ Derr's assertion is entirely correct, and many of White's opponents, to which he responds in "Continuing the Conversation," misread him, misinterpret what he says about Judeo-Christian ideology, or attempt to refute his arguments based upon twentieth-century theology. In asserting a link between the Judeo-Christian tradition and ecological crisis, White refers to an ideological world view, not scriptural interpretation. For this reason, White uses the term *root* rather than *cause* in his article. Yet opponents consistently assert that White's thesis is that

Christianity caused the environmental crisis.⁸ White's comments about the Judeo-Christian tradition are based upon late-classical and medieval interpretations of scripture. While theological attitudes toward the environment have changed over time, that is not White's stated concern. White focuses on the impact of medieval theology on Western attitudes toward the environment and how those have contributed to the rise of technology. Put simply, White sees a scriptural foundation for theological interpretation that, in my interpretation, unconsciously shaped an ideology leading to technological advancements that contributed to ecological crisis.⁹ As a result of such misreadings, counter-arguments that rely upon more recent interpretations of scripture are irrelevant. We must remember that most people during the Middle Ages had no direct access to scripture, which—with very few exceptions—was in Latin. Clergy acted as an intermediary between scripture and the populace. As a result, most people received an interpretation of scripture, and that interpretation, itself, was based upon other, previous interpretations, including the copious body of theological writings. Many of White's opponents base their opposition on post-medieval interpretations of scripture, particularly the passages of Genesis to which White refers. While such interpretations are important for our current discussions about environmental issues, they have no impact on the validity of White's argument, which indicates that those passages were the foundation of a worldview that would spark technological innovation and particular attitudes toward the environment.¹⁰ The ideology to which White refers has, at its root, a Judeo-Christian tradition. However, it is no way limited to religious belief. I interpret this as a true ideology, only partially-conscious, embedded within all of the West's cultural institutions. As a result, arguments using scriptural interpretation or contemporary surveys on contemporary religious attitudes do not address White's argument.

The Lynn White debate is interesting in that, while theologians have criticized his argument, his article has received very little, if any, attention from a medieval perspective, which is perplexing, considering that White makes strong assertions about medieval attitudes toward the natural environment. What his article lacks is evidence from the late-classical and medieval periods. Two articles that lend evidentiary credibility to White's argument are Mark Muldoon's "Environmental Decline and Christian Contemplation" and Lee Patterson's "Brother Fire and St. Francis's Drawers: Human Nature and the Natural World." Muldoon's analysis of Aquinas provides the evidence that White's article lacks, highlighting a dominant medieval view of the non-human environment. Using Thomas Aquinas's *Summa theologiae* and *Compendium of Theology*, Muldoon shows that the Aquinian view was thoroughly anthropocentric: "Nature is seen more as an object for human use which satisfies biological needs and serves spiritual knowledge rather than a subject of spiritual importance in its own right" (86). The end result of this view is that "Natural objects [. . .] become available for crass exploitation and destruction" (86).¹¹ Yet White's opposition almost unanimously asserts that other views existed. Patterson examines St. Francis's views of the natural world. In many ways, St. Francis's views are conventional. However, Patterson also shows that Francis had a view of nature that differed significantly from that of Aquinas. According to Patterson, Francis "sees the natural world as something other than man, as having an existence of its own which man aspires to join but from which he is in his sinfulness always in danger of being excluded" (6). This attitude fits firmly within the binary opposition of human/nature. However, Francis's view went beyond that: "for Francis nature represented a realm of being that related to God in a way that is unaffected, spontaneous, and authentic—an idea to which fallen man could only aspire" (7). So, while Francis's view corresponds in many ways to that of Aquinas, it differs in significant ways. Rather than nature existing for the purpose of human exploitation, nature, in

Francis's view, exists in a state closer to God than that of human kind. In this sense, Francis's view is the opposite of Aquinas, who posited a hierarchy of beings, with humans being closer to God than the rest of nature. Yet, however interesting or different, Francis's view does not seem to have been prevalent in the Middle Ages; as White asserted, "He failed" (29), continuing to say that "I propose Francis as a patron saint for ecologists" (30). Muldoon and Patterson provide the evidence necessary for White's view. The Aquinian view seems to have been dominant, with Francis's attitude, according to Patterson, unique. Although the view did exist, it did not gain the authority that Aquinas's view did.¹²

Yet even this evidence has been challenged by a number of scholars. Jan J. Boersema's "Why Is Francis of Assisi the Patron Saint of Ecologists?" contradicts Patterson's view. He analyzes accounts of Francis's life and writings attributed to the saint, concluding that Francis's view of nature seems to fit firmly within the orthodox view that Patterson and Muldoon present. In his 2009 "Social History, Religion, and Technology: An Interdisciplinary Investigation into Lynn White, Jr.'s 'Roots,'" Atfield presents a compelling analysis of Lynn White's argument, concluding that—although White's article was significant in sparking research into the historicization of ecological crisis—his arguments on the Judeo-Christian tradition are false. Jeremy Cohen provides a revealing analysis of the historical reception of the relevant Genesis chapters, an analysis that seems to refute much of White's argument. While a full analysis of the debate is beyond the scope of the current study, the debate is important in that reactions to White indicate that the Middle Ages produced multiple, perhaps competing, attitudes toward the natural world. This is precisely the situation that we find in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

I will start my analysis of the poem after the Christmas game and when we see Gawain on his journey to the Green Chapel. Gawain leaves Camelot to travel into the unknown, establishing a binary opposition between human habitation and unsettled regions. The poet privileges the former of these in a number of ways. First, the poet depicts Camelot as a place of joy and merriment. When the poem opens, we find a Christmas feast, "With ryche reuel orȝt and rechles merȝes [With fittingly splendid revelry and care-free mirth]" (40).¹³ None of the tribulations that later afflict Camelot are evident in this depiction of the royal city.¹⁴ In fact, strife only enters Arthur's court at his own invitation. He will not eat without witnessing a marvel (91-99), and immediately after that statement, the Green Knight, representing various facets of the natural world, enters, not from within the court but from without. The poet provides detailed descriptions of activities at both Camelot and Hautedessert. By contrast, Gawain's journey receives very little attention. Yet the details we do receive serve to separate Gawain from his natural environment and highlight a particular attitude toward the ecosystem.

As Gawain searches for the Green Chapel, the poet comments that he traveled "In þe wyldrenesse of Wyrle; wonde þer bot lyte / Þat auþer God oþer gome wyth goud heart louied ["In the wilderness of Wirral; there lived but few / That loved either God or men with good heart]" (701-02). The poet here defines *wyldrenesse*. It is a place in direct opposition to human habitation, a place where living beings have no love for God or humankind. Wyrle, though designated a forest, was known to be wild into the sixteenth century, according to Tolkien and Gordon (98).¹⁵ As such, it serves as a representative of land relatively untouched by human habitation. It is in this setting that we find Gawain battling the natural world. The poet asserts,

Sumwhyle wyth wormez he werrez, and with wolues als,

Sumwhyte wyth wodwos, þat woned in þe knarrez,
Boþe wyth bullez and berez, and borez oþerquyle,
And etayneþ, þat hym aneledede of þe heze felle.
[Sometimes against serpents he defends, and against wolves also,
Sometimes against trolls, that lived in the crags,
Both against bulls and bears, and boars at other times,
And giants, that pursued him from the high rocks] (720-23).

The choice of the governing verb in this passage is revealing about Gawain's attitude toward his natural surroundings. The verb *werrez* does not simply mean battle or fight. Rather, it refers to a defense against attack, and it connotes a particularly human struggle—organized warfare, as Marie Boroff's translation—*wars*—would indicate (720). This term governs the representatives of the non-human world: serpents (perhaps with the overtone of dragons), wolves, trolls, bulls, bears, boars, and giants. The poet depicts Gawain not simply fighting these creatures but instead defending himself in earnest against them. These creatures are hostile, reinforcing Gawain's separation from the natural environment. What is more, the poet indicates that some of these creatures—the wodwos and etayneþ—reside in the harshest conditions of wilderness: the craggy rocks that seem to be completely inhospitable for human habitation. These creatures, as representative of the environment, are violently hostile to representatives of human civilization. The environment, then, is a hostile enemy to be conquered. What is more, the poet implies that Gawain wins these battles because of a distinct difference between him and the creatures he fights. Gawain "Dryȝtyn had serued" ["had served God"] (724), and had he not, "Doutles he hade ben ded and dreped ful ofte" ["Doubtless he would have been dead and slain very often"] (725). Here we find a number of binary oppositions. First, of course, we have the opposition between human habitation and wilderness. Within this, the poet establishes another opposition between those who serve God and those who do not. As a member of the former groups—the privileged oppositions—Gawain is victorious; the environment and those that represent it are defeated. Gawain, in the words of Genesis, has subdued the natural environment (1.28).

The poet even presents the weather as conspiring against Gawain. The battles he has fought seem to be simple compared to his daily existence: "werre wrathed hym not so much þat wynter nas wors [war afflicted him not so much that winter was worse]" (726). Here the poet provides a vivid description of Gawain's situation. He is accosted by freezing rain; he is almost killed by sleet. He sleeps in his armor many nights "in naked rokkez [among naked rocks]" (730). He is, in the poet's words, "in peryl and payne and plytes ful harde [in peril and pain and hardships full hard]" (733). As with the creatures Gawain fights, the poet presents the weather as an adversary to be overcome. In addition to the adversarial weather, the very landscape opposes Gawain. The conclusion of his journey occurs as he guides Gringolet, his horse, over a threatening landscape. He travels "Into a forest ful dep, þat ferly watz wylde, / Hiȝe hillez on vch a halue, and holtwodez vnder [Into a forest full deep, that was exceedingly wild; / High hills on each side, and woods below]" (741-2). The poet repeats the word *wylde*, emphasizing the lack of human habitation in the forest.¹⁶ The forest is composed of old oaks and hawthorn,

and "þe hasel and þe hazþorne were harled al samen, / With roþe raged mosse rayled aywher [The hazel and the hawthorn were tangled all together / With shaggy, ragged moss arrayed everywhere]" (744-45), and he rides "þurþ mony misy and myre [Through many a bog and mire]" (749-50). The implication is that these plants have actively formed a boundary against Gawain, that the wilderness opposes his successful completion of his journey. The wild creatures, weather, and landscape almost seem to be characters here, placed in the poem to make Gawain's journey impossible, and the environment succeeds. Only after Gawain prays to Mary and crosses himself three times does a castle appear. The wondrous appearance of Hautdesert reflects what the poet has said about the wilderness. It is a hostile place, and the only way to emerge from it is to remain faithful.

The poet devotes a mere three stanzas (71 lines) to Gawain's journey. These three stanzas present a particular opinion of uncultivated nature. Any representative of civilization is in mortal peril from wild nature, a foe to be defeated. The following stanza, describing the castle, contrasts sharply with the wilderness. The castle is "loken vnder boþez / Of mony borelych bole about bi þe diches [shut under boughs / Of many a strong tree trunk about by the moat]" (765-66). The description of these trees is very different from the plants in the wilderness. These are not wild, foreboding trees. Rather, they adorn the castle, providing a pleasant grove for civilized society. The poet continues to describe the surroundings: "Pyched on a prayere, a park al aboute, / With a pyked palays pyned ful þik, / Þat vmbeteþe mony tre mo þen two myle [Erected in a meadow, a park all around / With a palisade with spikes enclosed full thick / That many a tree surrounded more than two miles]" (767-70). The castle exists in an enclosed, defended meadow with trees. The poet establishes friendly boundaries within the defensive spikes, a defense against the natural world. The image is not of bare boughs and wild undergrowth. Rather, it is cultivated nature. The oaks here are "schyre," fair. The transition from wild journey to cultivated habitation is sharp. From Gawain's perspective, since we are seeing things from his point of view, regions without civilization are hostile, in need of domination. His physical salvation is civilized habitation.

The poet obviously privileges the human over the environment, as we would expect. Yet such privileging functions to remove humanity from its natural relationship to the ecosystem. The human relationship to the environment is a reciprocal one, with humanity altering the environment—as with the park around Hautdesert—and the environment influencing human existence—as with Gawain's struggles on his journey. The poet captures this reciprocal relationship during Gawain's journey, of course, but he also reinforces the artificial division between human and environment by the way he handles these episodes.¹⁷ The journey itself is a significant task, yet we get only a few lines of the poem that reveal Gawain in a non-civilized setting. In fact, this section reinforces the complete divorce of Gawain from his environment, for within it we have not coexistence but violent strife, and the rest of the poem solidifies the binary opposition by separating Gawain physically from the natural world—first at Camelot, then at Hautdesert—and finally at Camelot again. The message is clear; human kind belongs in a tightly-controlled habitation, not in the wild natural world.

The attitude embedded in this part of the narrative seems straightforward. Gawain views the environment as a barrier between inhabited places, spaces that physically alter and limit the influence of the environment. The extension of this attitude, of course, would be the modern clear cutting of forests and driving species to extinction, for we find no

attempts at co-existence. Here, the environment is an other binarily opposed to humanity.

By contrast, the Green Knight/Bertilak blurs the binary opposition that Gawain's relationship to his environment exemplifies. Most obviously, of course, is the well-acknowledged notion that the Green Knight represents nature. He is, after all, green, rides a green horse, bears holly in his hand, and resides at the Green Chapel. The Green Knight represents the environment outside of human habitation. His challenge, then, is a challenge from the environment. Arthur's court must attempt to defeat the natural world, and this attempt progresses throughout the poem, with Gawain failing to defeat the environment during the Christmas game and, subsequently, battling the natural world until the end of the poem.

His entry into Arthur's hall illustrates a collision between the natural world and human civilization. First, although he seems an otherworldly figure and represents the wilderness, he is still a man. In fact, he is Bertilak, lord of Hautdesert, magically altered to become the Green Knight. Within this single character, then, we have a conflation of nature and human, a hybrid of civilization and wilderness. The poet, however, directs our attention to his wildness rather than his humanity, focusing on differences from the Arthurian court. The poet calls him "Half etayn in erde [half giant on Earth]" (140), emphasizing his difference. A line later, however, the poet says "Bot mon most I algate mynn hym to bene [But the greatest man at any rate I think him to have been]" (141). By presenting the Green Knight as the other, the entrance into Arthur's hall assumes added meaning, blurring the line between nature and civilization. When the Green Knight and his horse burst through the doors of the hall, the poet presents a reversal of the typical order. The natural world enters civilization. Rather than confronting nature on a quest, as Gawain does, the court must confront nature within civilization. In an instant, the binary opposition of civilization/wilderness ceases. The wilderness has entered Camelot.

In the Green Knight's character—and in his entry into the hall—the poet destabilizes the line between civilization and wilderness. His alter-ego, Bertilak straddles humanity and the environment in a slightly different way, acting as a bridge of sorts between the two. Nowhere is this more evident than in the hunt scenes, and the juxtaposition between the wild hunts and the domestic hunts that occur concurrently in the castle furthers the division between humanity and the environment.¹⁸ While it could be argued that the three hunts represent humankind's dominance over nature, a deeper analysis from an ecocritical standpoint reveals that this is not necessarily so, particularly when contrasted to Gawain's interaction with the environment.

The deer hunt, in particular, reveals not domination but, instead stewardship—the careful management of the environment. In fact, we see in this hunt attitudes almost analogous to current conservation efforts. Only the harts will be hunted, "For þe fre lorde hade defende in fermysoun tyme / Þat þer schulde no mon meue to þe male dere" ["For the noble lord had forbidden in close-season time / That there should no man interfere with the male deer"] (1156-57). While protecting bucks may be related to patriarchal culture, it also indicates at least a concern for conservation. Only the does are hunted, and this has been legislated by Bertilak. Moreover, the deer hunt is anything but a battle scene—as Gawain's struggles with the environment are depicted. It is, instead, a scene illustrating humankind's restrained use of the environment. The does are food for the upcoming feast, and not all of the deer are killed. What is more, the detailed dressing

scene reinforces this. The animals are used for practical purposes, and no part is wasted.¹⁹

At first glance, the other two hunting scenes seem to be more similar to Gawain's interaction with the environment. Yet—while both the boar and fox hunts depict actions akin to martial actions—neither divorces human from environment. In fact, both connect human and environment intimately. Both hunts provide entertainment for the participants as well as material for the manor—the boar's meat and the fox's pelt. So they serve a dual—triple if you count the contest between Bertilak and Gawain—purpose in light of the human-environment relationship.

Moreover, unlike the creatures that Gawain battles on his journey, both the boar and fox become characters in the poem. The poet provides a history of the boar, relating that the boar "Long sythen fro þe sounder þat sized for olde / For he watz breme, bor alper-gratrest" ["Had long ago left the heard because of age, / For he was fierce, a boar greatest of all"] (1440-41). We find no such description of the creatures with which Gawain "warrez" on his journey, nor do we find the deep description of Gawain's battles, a description that dominates all three hunt scenes. The fox hunt is similar, though rather than fierceness, we find a crafty adversary that becomes a character in the poem. In fact, the poet even enters the fox's mind for an instant, claiming that the fox suffers from "wo" as he darts away (1717). What is more, the fox is personified far more than any other animal in the poem. The hunters call him "þef" ["thief"] (1725), and the poet provides the traditional name for him, "Reniarde" (1728). While naming a fox Reynard can be seen as traditional, naming in a non-beast-fable narrative often applies only to human characters, just as calling the fox "schrewe" [villain] (1896) could be seen as characterization. What the poet says after the fox is killed provides more characterization. The hunters blow their bugles seemingly in tribute, for the poet says that the noise "watz raysed for Renaude saule" ["was raised for Reynard's soul"] (1915). A soul is typically reserved for human characters, yet the poet imbues this fox with one, a definite sign of both respect on the part of the hunters and characterization on the part of the poet.²⁰

His status as Green Knight aside, Bertilak's attitude toward the environment, as represented by the prey he hunts, may at first seem to be similar to Gawain's. After all, he does stalk and kill these animals and takes them from their environment into his castle. The difference between Gawain's interaction with the environment and Bertilak's is pronounced, however, and, from an ecocritical point of view, profound. Gawain is constantly at odds with his environment. Bertilak, on the other hand, exists in relative harmony with his. While Gawain acts the warrior during his journey, conquering symbols of a wild natural world and struggling against that world, Bertilak interacts with the natural world, bridging the fine line between human and environment. While admittedly he does use representatives of the environment for human needs, and while he is involved in violent confrontations with these representatives of the wilderness, the poet represents these interactions as respectful. He places limits on the deer that can be killed. He has a healthy respect for the boar, and the hunters attribute a soul to the fox and even honor that soul with their horn blasts. Such stewardship is characteristic of managed natural spaces during the Middle Ages. Royal forests and parks were carefully-managed landscapes. As Richard C. Hoffmann has indicated, these "had effects both protective—by retaining habitat and regulating consumptive use—and destructive—by modifying plant succession and extirpating rare trophy animals such as bear, wolf, and wild pig" (24). Hoffmann sees such managed landscapes as "historic examples of

interactive co-adaptation, or the reciprocity of ecological change between Nature and humankind" (24).²¹ Although Bertilak's interaction with the non-human world certainly establishes dominance, it is a moderated form of dominance, one that promotes care for the natural environment rather than militaristic domination. The poet goes further in characterizing the boar and fox. Gawain's natural foes receive no characterization. In fact, the lack of description of Gawain's environmental struggles contrasts sharply with the deep description and characterization of Bertilak's interaction with the environment, reinforcing the difference and producing two distinct attitudes toward the natural world: domination on Gawain's part and stewardship on Bertilak's.

How a medieval audience would have received the blurring of boundaries and the opposing relationships to the environment is difficult to determine. Some, perhaps, would have recognized it. Regardless, these differences reinforce the outcome of the poem. Bertilak is, after all, the Green Knight, a direct symbol of the natural world and a hybrid of civilization and wilderness. Gawain's encounter with Bertilak echoes his struggle with the environment on his journey. He arrives at the Green Chapel to confront nature, yet he flinches from nature in the ultimate fulfilling of his agreement. From the information the poet presents about Gawain's relationship to the environment, this outcome should come as no surprise.

Few of White's opponents offer a detailed analysis of medieval sources. While Boersema and Cohen have presented evidence, neither provides a full account of medieval attitudes on the relationship between humans and the natural world. The existence of competing attitudes toward the uncultivated environment in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* indicates that, at least by the fourteenth century, multiple viewpoints existed on the issue. In fact, Bertilak's interactions with the natural world would seem to indicate that many of White's opponents are correct: the idea of stewardship was, indeed, an available approach to the natural world. While both Gawain's and Bertilak's attitudes toward the non-human world certainly conform to the Aquinian hierarchy, which places humans above the rest of creation, the two differ substantially in their application of this dominance. Gawain's militaristic antagonism toward the non-human world contrasts sharply with Bertilak's careful management and respect for the non-human. The poet reinforces the difference with his presentation. Gawain slaughters representatives of the natural world and only seems at home within the confines of civilization. Bertilak, by contrast, manages the non-human, and the poet's characterization of boar and fox, coupled with Gawain's flinch from nature, would seem to indicate that his attitude tends to conform to that of Bertilak.

What is clear is that Gawain's attitude toward the environment reinforces the binary opposition between human and environment, while Bertilak's attitude mitigates it. For Gawain, the natural world is an opponent to be conquered. For Bertilak, the natural world, although existing to serve humans, should be respected. Although hunting is definitely an assertion of human dominance (Crane 79), it does not represent the martial confrontation characterized by Gawain's experience. Gawain becomes, then, a representative of human civilization and the attitude that in the civilization/wilderness opposition, humans must violently maintain dominance. As both courtly and, as the Green Knight, uncultivated, Bertilak asserts regulated dominance over the natural world, acting the steward to Gawain's aggressor. While Gawain remains firmly in the realm of human civilization, Bertilak stands astride the boundary between human and natural world, offering an attitude toward the environment that at least in part conflicts with what White considers to have been the dominant medieval view.

Notes

- ¹ A version of this article, in substantially abbreviated form, was presented at the 34th Annual Southeastern Medieval Association Meeting in St. Louis on October 3, 2008.
- ² See, for instance, Spiers; Larry D. Benson, *Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*—especially Chapter 2; William Goldhurst, "The Green and the Gold: The Major Theme of *Gawain and the Green Knight*"; W. Bryant Bachman, Jr., "*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: The Green and the Gold Once More"; and Piotr Sadowski, "The Greenness of the Green Knight: A Study of Medieval [*sic.*] Colour Symbolism."
- ³ M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham's *Glossary of Literary Terms*, however, does have an entry for *ecocriticism*.
- ⁴ This has begun to change. See, for instance, Bruce M. S. Campbell, "Ecology Versus Economics in Late Thirteenth- and Early Fourteenth-Century English Agriculture"; Rebecca Douglass, "Ecocriticism and Medieval Literature"; Chris Fitter, *Poetry, Space, Landscape: Toward a New Theory*; Lisa J. Kiser, "Chaucer and the Politics of Nature"; Lesley Kordecki, "Ecofeminism and the Father of English Poetry: Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls*"; Gillian Rudd, *Greenery: Ecocritical Readings of Late Medieval English Literature*; and Sarah Stanbury, "EcoChaucer: Green Ethics and Medieval Literature"; as well as the essay collections *Historical Ecology* (ed. Lester J. Bilsky), *The Medieval World of Nature* (ed. Joyce E. Salisbury) and *Engaging with Nature* (ed. Barbara A. Hanawalt and Lisa J. Kiser).
- ⁵ In fact, Richard C. Hoffmann goes so far as to assert that "Rather than viewing Nature as the passive recipient of human actions, we should acknowledge Nature as an active participant in history, understood as a process of *co-adaptation* of human societies with cultures in their changing environments. Nature changes human society. Human society changes Nature" (13), moving this reciprocal relationship to the realm of culture and society.
- ⁶ White's article has been reprinted in a number of ecocriticism collections, including Cheryl Glotfelty's *Ecocriticism Reader*. It was also reprinted in Ian G. Barbour's *Western Man and Environmental Ethics*, a collection that compiles articles on ethical considerations on the rise of technology.
- ⁷ This attitude has been stressed by others, as well. See, for instance, Baird J. Callicott's "Genesis and John Muir," in which he has "no quarrel with his [White's] historical argument, as far as it goes." David N. Livingstone asserts that White's "article is more often referenced than read" so that "many have missed the subtleties of his argument" (24). Gene M. Tucker acknowledges that "on his most fundamental claim he [White] was right on target," asserting that "many biblical scholars misread an important point in White's argument" (4). Robert John Russell says that "White's thesis was not all that wrong in light of the compelling and perverse reality of human greed and its attempt to self-legitimation" (151).
- ⁸ Livingstone, although defending White's approach, even makes this error by asserting that White "suggest[ed that] Christianity was largely to blame for the world's environmental problems" (24). Russell claims that "Lynn White argued that Christianity is profoundly responsible for the environmental crisis because of the biblical belief that humanity has been given the right to domination over nature and its capacity through the *imago Dei*" (150). Whitney Bauman claims that "White suggested that Christianity is to blame for the alienation of humans from the natural world and thus for many of the ecological ills we are all now familiar with" (120).

- ⁹ Duncan Roper is one of the few who seem to understand fully White's assertions: "He [White] also claimed that these advances [in modern science and technology] occurred in a mediaeval [*sic.*] social context that was informed by the Judeo-Christian tradition in its western form, both Catholic and Protestant" (12).
- ¹⁰ A number of social science studies attempt to link religion to attitudes toward the environment. Laurel Holland and J. Scott Carter claim that "many researchers have tested the White thesis" and provide a brief list of those studies (740). While these studies are, indeed, important in determining the extent to which religious beliefs influence environmental attitudes, in actuality, they do not test White's argument.
- ¹¹ John Hilary Martin's work reinforces this view. According to Martin, "The principle of human predominance over creation is no passing idea in Thomas's writings. It is repeated frequently in various contexts so that it seems fair to say that for him the whole physical world came into being for the use of the human community" (170), and he shows that St. Bonaventure and Scotus tended to follow this line of reasoning.
- ¹² Others have attempted to articulate various medieval attitudes toward the non-human world. See, for instance, David J. Herlihy's "Attitudes Toward the Environment in Medieval Society," in which he examines four attitudes, each dominating different periods.
- ¹³ All quotations from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are from J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, ed., *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, 2nd ed., ed. Norman Davis. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967. Translations of the text, unless otherwise indicated, are my own.
- ¹⁴ J. A. Burrow takes issue with scholars who see in Fitt 1—and the poem as a whole—foreshadowing of the betrayal and fall of Arthur (4-11).
- ¹⁵ See also Henry L. Savage, "A Note on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* 700-2." Although using attitudes about *Wyrle* in an attempt to position the poem geographically, Savage presents evidence that *Wyrle* in the fourteenth century would have had not only wild but also negative connotations, since the region had become, apparently, a haven for outlaws (455).
- ¹⁶ The term *forest* here denotes not a royal forest or park, a "wooded tract belonging to a ruler, set apart for hunting" (*MED*). Rather, the adjective *wylde* would indicate that the term corresponds to *MED*'s first definition: "A large tract of uninhabited, or sparsely inhabited, woodland; a wilderness." Medieval forests have received scholarly attention. See, for instance, Corinne J. Saunders, *The Forest of Medieval Romance*. Saunders asserts that "the quest landscape plays a central role" in the poem (148). For her, this forest is different from hunting reserves. It is "an immensely hostile, natural world far less pleasant than the court" (149).
- ¹⁷ The binary opposition of human/non-human is a human construct, and hence artificial. See, for instance, Rudd's discussion (8-10).
- ¹⁸ The relationship between the hunting and bedroom scenes has often been commented upon, with varying degrees of success. See, for instance, Henry L. Savage, Bernard S. Levy, Gerald Gallant, Joseph A. Longo, Hans Schnyder, and Gerald Morgan. For more on the hunting scenes in general, see Susan Crane, "Ritual Aspects of the Hunt à Force," Rooney's *Hunting in Middle English Literature* and Rooney's "The Hunts in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*."
- ¹⁹ Susan Crane argues that "wild animals in ritual hunting are elevated through ceremonial treatment" (78), which would indicate respect for these animals.
- ²⁰ The existence of souls in animals was a debatable issue. J. Donald Hughes shows that "The Orphics and Pythagoreans taught that all living creatures are related and have a common origin and natural ties" (51), indicating that one ancient school of philosophy believed that animals had souls. Maureen A. Tilley shows that the Neoplatonic tradition did not draw a sharp distinction between humans and animals (97).

- ²¹ For more on such managed landscapes, see John Cummins, "Veneuers s'en vont en Paradis: Medieval Hunting and the 'Natural' Landscape"; Oliver Rackham, *The History of the Countryside* and *Trees and Woodland in the British Landscape*; and Saunders.

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