

Living Landscape: Attitudes Toward the Environment in French Medieval Literature

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Abstract

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This dissertation demonstrates the material grounding of twelfth and thirteenth century French texts by using environmental history and archaeology in conjunction with close readings. The title, “Living Landscape,” attempts to capture the physical and symbolic imbrication of humans, animals, plants, topographies, and objects in these texts, and each chapter addresses one or more of these enmeshed configurations. The first seeks to recognize the life and agency particular to the non-human environment, and the way in which the “inanimate” can nonetheless act on the human characters in the *Chanson de Roland* and the *Roman d’Alexandre* via physical manifestations. The second chapter focuses on the way in which humans live and interact with the material world around them, particularly how the non-human nodes in the network can be negatively impacted by human misbehavior, particularly in the form of physical and moral pollution in French grail romances from the *Conte du Graal* to the *Queste del Saint Graal*. The

third chapter has as its subject how the historical, cultural and material conditions of one's surroundings can impact relations to objects, based on the geo-political situation which determines the familiarity of automata, hydraulic, and fabric technologies Floire et Blanchefleur, the *Voyage de Charlemagne*, and *De Planctu Naturae*. I am not claiming that one can glean "facts" about medieval "reality" from medieval literature; rather, that the inclusion and manipulation of said "facts" can shed light on the interpretation of the text itself. In other words, here are two questions to which this project attempts to respond: what is the degree of faithfulness of depictions of geography, pollution or technology to contemporary realities or knowledge levels, and what do any alterations tell us?

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Introduction

This dissertation demonstrates the material grounding of twelfth and thirteenth century French texts by using environmental history and archaeology in conjunction with close readings. The title, “Living Landscape,” attempts to capture the physical and symbolic imbrication of humans, animals, plants, topographies, and objects in these texts, and each chapter addresses one or more of these enmeshed configurations. The first seeks to recognize the life and agency particular to the non-human environment, and the way in which the “inanimate” can nonetheless act on the human characters in the *Chanson de Roland* and the *Roman d’Alexandre* via physical manifestations. The second chapter focuses on the way in which humans live and interact with the material world around them, particularly how the non-human nodes in the network can be negatively impacted by human misbehavior, particularly in the form of physical and moral pollution in French grail romances from the *Conte du Graal* to the *Queste del Saint Graal*. The third chapter has as its subject how the historical, cultural and material conditions of one’s surroundings can impact relations to objects, based on the geo-political situation which determines the familiarity of automata, hydraulic, and fabric technologies Floire et Blanchefleur, the *Voyage de Charlemagne*, and *De Planctu Naturae*. I am not claiming that one can glean “facts” about medieval “reality” from medieval literature; rather, that the inclusion and manipulation of said “facts” can shed light on the interpretation of the text itself. In other words, here are two questions to which this project attempts to respond: what is the degree of faithfulness of depictions of geography, pollution or technology to contemporary realities or knowledge levels, and what do any alterations tell us? Before proceeding to a more detailed consideration of my chapters, I’d like to take a moment to acknowledge my indebtedness to

ecocriticism, ecocriticism and its various offspring, including but not limited to object oriented ontology, new materialisms, and animal studies.

I have benefited from wide-spread medievalist work on English texts, which undermine presentism in ecocriticism. For example, Gillian Rudd's "green reading" has expanded the more prevalent symbolic readings of the non-human in texts to valorize even the briefest landscape description. "Green reading poses the question of exactly what such non-iconographic, descriptive elements are being true to: of whose 'real' is operating at any given time and what undercurrents may be at work in those apparently insignificant 'other details'" (Rudd 11). In the Middle Ages, the "real" at stake is at once physical and spiritual since each material phenomena had an explanatory referent in the realm of the divine. In the chapters that follow, the choice of words or the turn of a phrase that describes a landscape or an object often opens up understanding of interconnected concepts on physical and symbolic levels. For example, in Chapter Two, we see how in the *Conte du Graal*, the Waste Forest's non-utilitarian value to the twelfth-century urban economy and its association with the "lande" or moor connects to Orgueilleus de la Lande, who badly mistreats his "amie," and from there to other remote locations that lend themselves to rape.

Ecocriticism's initial fixation on the color green has recently received some backlash for the way in which it can reify "nature" and "wilderness" and thus reinforce the hierarchical divide between humans and non-humans. For example, *Prismatic Ecology: Ecotheory beyond Green* proposes alternatives to "green reading" by embracing other hues to complicate this nature/culture divide (Cohen, "Introduction: Ecology's Rainbow" XX). My second and third chapters follow somewhat in this tradition, since the second chapter is interested in non-utilitarian or destroyed environments, and the third is interested in human crafts, particularly the

precious metals, crystals and silks representing foreign automata, hydraulic, and fabric technologies. Eileen Joy uses a “both-and” approach to advocate for non-human agency (which is at stake in Chapter One). Eileen Joy’s “You Are Here: A Manifesto,” theorizes a way of being in the world which eliminates terms of division between the human and the non-human, placing everything “on the same ontological footing as everything else, including us” (Joy 164). She admits like other critics that such terminology is unavoidable, as it will be in these chapters. Part of her manifesto involves the recognition of everything’s personhood and letting “the world happen *to us* for a change” (Joy 170). This idea is crucial to Chapter One, which works to recognize the way in which “[s]ilent things [...] speak, exert agency, propel narrative,” like the storm and France’s mourning in the *Chanson de Roland* and the sea in the *Roman d’Alexandre* (Cohen, “Introduction: All Things” 6). Scholars like Eileen Joy and J.J. Cohen have built on the “vibrant materialism” of Jane Bennett and the Actor Network Theory of Bruno Latour. Latour’s ANT theory, which involves the non-hierarchical connection of human and non-human “actors” across time, space, and categorical divisions, has been particularly useful for Animal Studies and object oriented ontology, as its framework allows the animal to be recognized as an individual with agency, as well as theorizing the impact of the circulation of inanimate objects upon the animate (see Chapter Three, for the circulation of automata, fabrics, and other technologies). Latour’s series of networks is reminiscent of the Chain of Being discussed in Chapter One, except that the latter is hierarchical and tolerates agency other than God’s uneasily. Now I’d like to turn to a more detailed discussion of the individual chapters.

Chapter One is concerned with the agency possessed by French and Spanish landscape in the *Chanson de Roland*, and by the sea and hostile Eastern landscape in the *Roman d’Alexandre*, which all fall under the heading of “agentic topography” and comprise a “spectrum of non-

human agency,” which runs from an impact on the human characters that is so subtle as to almost pass unnoticed (like the way in which the landscape forms a funnel between two sites of violence, between the mountain pass at Roncevaux and the Spanish Shadowy Valley, or the sea’s positive presence during Alexander’s life) to the terrifying storms before which human beings cower uncomprehending, unaware that these storms celebrate Alexander’s birth or mourn Roland’s death. The ambush of Charlemagne’s rearguard at Roncevaux and the legendary life of Alexander the Great, including his Eastern conquests, are both *topoi*, common sites of inspiration for epics throughout the Middle Ages (D. Kelly, “Alexander’s Clergie” 52). Topography is an anachronistic word for the French-speaking Middle Ages, but possesses a helpful etymological connection to the word *topos*, and thus underlines the realistic details of geography including topographical relief and climate that undergird the *materia* or materials which the author shaped in order to reveal the truth he sees hidden within the text (D. Kelly, *The Art of Medieval French Romance* 37ff).

In Chapter Two’s corpus of French grail romances from Chrétien de Troyes’ *Le Conte du Graal* to the *Queste del Saint Graal*, the key word is pollution, which has existed in the French language since the twelfth century (Leguay 13). In the first section of this chapter, the concrete destruction of war turns Biaurepaire into a wasteland or “terre gaste” in the *Conte du Graal*. The vocabulary and concrete symptomatology of the Wasteland topos in French grail romances suggests that human violence and material environmental destruction overlap, even so far as human moral misconduct has environmental consequences beyond the usual cause and effect. In some of the later grail romances like the *Queste del Saint Graal*, one act of human immorality (murder or rape) results in the same kind of environmental desolation enacted by all-out war. I argue that moral pollution in the grail romances is extrapolated from (and remains connected to)

material realities of war, famine, and trade, that would have been familiar to medieval audiences. In the second section of this chapter, the concept of pollution reminds us that the twelfth century was a time of increasing urbanization, when cities were plagued by human and animal waste, artisanal smoke and water pollution, noise and odor pollution. Populations within cities relied on nearby fields and forests for food and wood for construction and burning. We can guess that Perceval's childhood home, the Waste Forest, didn't fall within an urban resource "footprint" due to the small stature of the trees, unsuitable for building (Hoffmann 288–294; Bechmann 28). The Waste Forest's isolation from human population centers and its uselessness for urban consumption, seem communicable to Perceval. These traits of the Waste Forest appear responsible for Perceval's anti-social behavior, particularly his near-rape of the Tent Damsel. Upon meeting the Tent Damsel's "ami," however, Orgueilleus de la Lande, who spouts misogynistic rhetoric, and in comparison with Gauvain's own unchivalrous intentions toward a damsel, it becomes clear that moors as remote locations lend themselves to violence.

The first two chapters of this study focus on the material reality underpinning medieval literary interactions between humans and their non-human environment. What remains to be considered in a range of human-environmental relations are crafts or the "mechanical arts," human modification of the non-human world. Just as E. Jane Burns reads "through clothes" worn in courtly love narratives, Chapter Three performs a reading of twelfth-century texts through the material presence and production history of fabric, hydraulic, and automata technologies. Crafts or the "mechanical arts" have long been criticized and praised for being human creations inspired by nature's divine forms. In texts such as the *Roman d'Alexandre*, *Floire et Blanchefleur*, and the *Voyage de Charlemagne*, the location of crafts in non-Latinate cultures contributes to the atmosphere of distrust while also reflecting material realities.

Mechanical arts like automata, water systems, and silk were initially discovered in the West during the Classical Period before being lost. Since these technologies were maintained in Islamic and Byzantine civilizations before their eventual reintroduction to the Latin West, this offers an explanation for their literary appearances in conjunction with deceit and strained intercultural relations. The title of this chapter, “Artificial/Nature,” plays with etymology, connecting the English sense of “artificial” to its Latin origins in *artifex*, artisan, which is the root of the English “artificer”. Old French “artifice”, “artificiel”, “artificien” and variants refer to the profession of artisan, retaining their Latin origins, as opposed to acquiring the connotation of “fake”, as they will later in English. Both senses of “artificial” apply to this chapter, to the usually absent artisans responsible for the crafts in circulation, and also to the suspiciously mimetic value of mechanical arts like wind-powered singing metal birds. This subject allows the dissertation to close where it began: with God as the Ultimate Artisan coexisting, however uneasily, with *Natura Artifex*, lowly artisan of material forms in Alan of Lille’s *De Planctu Naturae*, a text filled with urban and craft references, and thus representative of the twelfth century, with one eye to the material world and the other to the spiritual allegory. It is this division between the sensible and supernatural worlds that offers one justification for putting the twelfth century at the temporal center of my corpus. The twelfth century was a momentous coalescence of the systematic study of “nature” at Europe’s great universities, increasing urbanization, and the return of silk and other fabric technologies to “Europe” in Norman Sicily, and these events changed the way in which the material world was theorized and thought about in texts (Chenu 14–15; Gies 123). Now we turn to the way in which the non-human environment’s material manifestations of agency are circumscribed by the framework of Christian thought.

Chapter One: Agentic Topography

Critics have paid significant attention to nuancing certain hegemonies in the *Chanson de Roland* and the *Roman d'Alexandre*, including discourses of race, alterity, religion, gender, and sexuality. Work on the non-human environment, however, has been scattered or anecdotal throughout the criticism of these medieval epics, with selective readings for example of the mountain pass in the *Chanson de Roland* and the East in the *Roman d'Alexandre*, but with less attention given to the topography and its agency. This chapter will argue that the material realities of the mountain pass and plain at Roncevaux and the hostile desert climate of the East undergirds these literary texts, supporting the symbolic agency of concrete environmental forces like storms, seas, and the topography of France, Spain and the East.

I side with Gillian Rudd in supporting the importance of mentions of the environment in medieval texts, however scarce (Rudd 4). Rudd defines her approach as “green reading,” which means applying the attention advocated by ecocriticism to the non-human in literary texts, but not just to texts where nature is visibly and symbolically present, but also to small inclusions of landscape description. “The challenge must be to read with an awareness of allegory, while also focusing on the actual animals, plants, rocks or seas under debate. For literary critics it is not a case of either/or but of both-and” (Rudd 11). This approach is compatible with the medieval Christian idea of the physical world veiling the spiritual truth contained within God's creation, the coexistence of tangible and metaphysical realities in the same plane of being (Gurevich 49). This chapter will perform a “both-and” reading of depictions of the environment by paying attention to how medieval material realities interact with conceptions of spiritual realities. We will see that these texts possess a spectrum of non-human agencies, always circumscribed by each entity's place in the Chain of Being, always made to be subservient to God but allowed a

certain amount of agency within those parameters. For multiple reasons, the presence of agencies other than God's in these texts creates tensions, which are due in part to the origin of this Chain of Being and the desacralizing of nature in the twelfth century when these texts were written.

The Greek Platonic ideas at the origin of the Great Chain of Being resulted in some significant tension once the Middle Ages brought it into a Christian framework. If God was to maintain his position as supreme authority, it became necessary to restrict the agency or "creative potency" possessed by each entity that is a link in the Chain (Lovejoy 70). We will see in this chapter that the complete elimination of these agencies was not possible. This chapter will work to complicate Barbara Newman's observation that the Christian hierarchy makes *Natura* and other entities fit within it, and to identify any subversive tension, any dissonance within this act of conforming. The fact that God becomes the agent of the storm in later, rhymed versions of the *Roland* and that the importance of the sea at Alexander's birth vanishes in Kent's and later versions of the Alexander romance suggests that France's storm and Alexander's sea were potentially troubling agencies.

There is precedence in twelfth century Neoplatonic thought concerning the divine delegation of tasks to aspects of the environment within the framework of medieval Christianity, which Barbara Newman has characterized as an "inclusive monotheism," in which "infinite gradations of being [and] chains of angelic and human command [...] all remain subordinate to the One" (Newman 319). God Creator of the cosmos entrusts certain acts of creation (the continuation of species through procreation) to Nature, a personified "goddess" of sorts that presides over the world God created and enforces "natural" laws that only God Himself can circumvent. M.-D. Chenu has theorized that the natural world became desacralized in the twelfth century, when the sense of an immediate divine presence was evacuated from the natural or

“sensible” world (Chenu 14–15). This meant that God was no longer expected to intervene personally in the everyday affairs of the material world. The desacralizing of nature left a power vacuum, permitting other entities in the Chain of Being to gain some agency, since God was in need of authorized intermediaries, like Nature, on earth. But we will see that nature is in no way separate from the divine, and during the rise of the universities, worldly phenomena become an object of study precisely for its connection to God.

During the platonic revival at Chartres, Christian philosophers used Aristotle and the *Timaeus* to begin studying “secondary causes” of their world (Chenu 11). The observation of earthly phenomena was not in contradiction with their belief, for appreciation of God’s creation translated into appreciation for God Himself (Chenu 13). As E. Randolph Daniel puts it, “People still believed that God had created the ‘natural’ world, that God still operated in it, but that such operations were usually by natural means and only exceptionally by supernatural ones” (Daniel 76). All this helps to explain the tolerance shown toward agentic landscape in these medieval Christian texts, but there was tension also. This hierarchy of creation, which subsumes “Nature” to God’s direction, is characteristic of the “integrated structure” of the physical and the spiritual for medieval Christians, what A.J. Gurevich calls “the inseparability of its various spheres” (Gurevich 9). In the writings of the Neoplatonic theorists of the twelfth century, however, one can see a growing concern that authority delegated to “Nature” might dilute a theocentric view.

Neoplatonic thinkers within the Christian community like Bernard Silvestris and Alan of Lille work similarly to contain “Natura” in her allotted position in the Chain of Being, under God. In his *Cosmographia* in the 1140s, Bernard Silvestris draws on Plato’s *Timaeus* and acknowledges Nature as a creator in her own right, a “skilled artisan” whose replication of human and other bodies reproduces in miniature “an image of the cosmos” but “a much cruder

copy of that masterpiece, prone to constant decay” (Newman 62). Alan of Lille, however, works to suppress the circumspect value that Silvestris attributed to Nature. A couple of decades later, in the 1160s, Alan of Lille’s *De planctu Naturae* presents Natura as “more explicitly subordinate to God,” with an emphasis on Biblical rather than Platonic thought (Newman 2003, 68). In Alan of Lille’s *Anticlaudianus*, contemporary with the earliest possible composition of de Bernai’s *Roman d’Alexandre*, in the 1180s, we see God’s ability to circumvent natural law, reinforcing His position at the top of the Chain of Being, as with the divine extension of the day for Charlemagne: “For here there is no power for her [Nature], but all decrees are silent: laws grow feeble and justice takes fright where the will of the supreme Artisan [voluntas / Artificis summi] alone prevails” (Anticl. VI.174-77).¹ The Latin “artifex” (artisan) is constructed from the verb *facio* “to make” and *ars* indicating skill in physical, artistic, scientific and mental creation. The world is God’s creation, which like literature is in need of interpretation. Literature is also the means for that interpretation, for drawing back the veil concealing the sense behind the world. It follows that aspects of the environment as portrayed in literature would be in similar need of interpretation. Study of Plato’s *Timaeus* “allowed scholars to see God’s invisible traits reflected in the arrangement of visible creation. [...] [T]heir approach is in full conformity with the practice of *integumentum*, a rhetorical strategy whereby one seizes on a text’s poetic and philosophical polyvalence to pry it open and unveil a kernel of underlying Christian truth” (Otten 236; 242).

By reinforcing God’s position as the ultimate Artisan, the only one able to break His rules policed by Nature, Alan of Lille contributes to the clear delineation of the Hierarchy of Creation.

¹ I took the translation given here by James Sheridan and combined it with Wetherbee’s translation in order to be as literal as possible: “...ubi nulla potestas / Illius [Naturae], sed cuncta silent decreta, pauescunt / Leges, iura stupent, ubi regnat sola voluntas / Artificis summi” (Newman 84).

The Neoplatonic imagining of the Chain of Being permits the delegation of divine authority to entities like Natura, recognizing their (lesser) artisanship and thus their capacity to express intent with their actions. This sets a precedent for the limited agency allotted to Nature and to non-human aspects of the environment as lower-level creators within the medieval Christian framework, not unlike the sea shaping Alexander's conqueror identity with God's approval. Of course, there is still pressure on these agentic entities to conform to their place in the Hierarchy of Creation and to enforce certain societal values in the *Chanson de Roland* and the *Roman d'Alexandre*. By supporting Alexander as a conqueror, the storm and the sea sanction his importance as the origin of chivalry and European civilization, even if he “predates” Christianity, just as the storm confirms Roland’s status as a hero of France. The co-existing agencies of God and the storm or the sea is eliminated in a later rhymed version of *Roland* (post-Neoplatonic), which attributes this storm to God (Gilbert 23). The fact that a situation of multiple agencies has been reduced to one may indicate the extent to which agencies other than God’s were troubling for these texts’ audiences.

The *Chanson de Roland*

Laisse 110 of the Oxford version of the *Chanson de Roland* describes the storm raging over the entirety of “France” as a “turment” (Dufournet v.1423). Definitions for this Old French word include storm, loss, and disorder, all three of which apply here, since this storm is a manifestation not only of elemental disorder but also of grief anticipating the death of Roland. The last line of this *laisse* introduces the problem of agency and intention concerning so-called “inanimate” aspects of the environment: “Ço est li granz dulors por la mort de Rollant” (v.1437).

Who is mourning Roland by means of a tempest of thunder and lightning, wind and hail? Not the people of France, who have no idea of the tragedy unfurling in the mountain pass at Roncevaux, where Charlemagne's rearguard are valiantly killing Saracens, where Roland, Oliver, the archbishop Turpin, and the other Franks will die. Instead France's residents mistake the storm, and the daytime darkness and the earthquakes that accompany it, as signs of the forthcoming apocalypse. Storms, rain, hail, thunder, earthquakes, and houses splitting open are cited in the Bible as signs of the Last Judgment (Matthew 24:7; Matthew 27:51; Revelation 16:17-16:21), as are shadows at midday (Matthew 27:45; Matthew 24:29).²

Michel Zink notes the impersonal construction of this last line and postulates Nature as the mourning agent responsible for the storm and unleashing of the elements. Since there is no explicit mention of divine intervention, as there will be for the time miracle, this storm must be “le grand deuil de la nature, [...] de l'univers entier” (Zink 87). By the early fourteenth century Franco-Venetian (V4) assonanced manuscript of the *Chanson de Roland*, God is at the origin of the tempest: “Deo li fist tot per la mort de Rollant” (V4, 1346; equivalent to O[xford], 1433-7) (Gilbert 27). God shows every sign of approving Roland's martyrdom, sending Saint Gabriel to conduct Roland's soul to heaven. Since it is understood that the deaths of Roland and his men are necessary to Christendom's victory over the Saracens, God has no logical reason to mourn Roland's passing. Zink convincingly argues that death only disturbs “nature” because resurrection is a miracle reserved for God and is beyond nature's laws: “Seule la nature est

² Citations from the Bible will come from the Douay-Challoner-Rheims translation, which can be found online at <http://www.drbo.org/>. This version is based on the Latin Vulgate used in the Middle Ages (Emmerson and McGinn, Preface xiii). See also (Garrard 93-116) on the use of apocalyptic rhetoric in environmental discourse in his chapter “Apocalypse.”

bouleversée et endeuillée par la mort, parce que la nature ne connaît rien au-delà de sa propre loi” (Zink 87-88).

Like with Alexander, the important thing is that Roland succeeded in his goal and identity as saint martyr and loyal vassal to the ultimate feudal Lord, not that he survive to see the (re)conquest of land to which the Christians had legitimate right, divinely granted. Because of “the universality of France, called to represent Christendom throughout the world[, ...] the conquest of Spain represents not so much a conquest of foreign lands as a reconquest of lands that are, in spirit, truly France” (M. R. Kelly 155; 173). The geography in the text seems to conform to God’s desire for death (specifically Roland’s martyrdom and the death of the pagan Saracens) and reflects the symmetry of the narrative: the mountain pass is a perfect ambush point for Roland and the rear guard, and the Saracens responsible are later trapped in their own valley against the banks of an impassable river.

However, if one returns agency to the “inanimate” forces in question, the storm becomes symptomatic of a “country” or a “kingdom” grieving for one of its own via the elements that compose it: air (wind), earth (quakes), water (rain, hail), and fire (lightning). As Molly Robinson Kelly observes, “Roland is so deeply connected to France that, in a presentiment of his death, the entire space of France trembles and shakes (*laisse* 110)” (M. R. Kelly 174). The storm as an expression of “France” in mourning legitimizes Roland’s actions, honoring him as a hero above and beyond his more practical companion Oliver. “Moreover, the earth does not quake where the actual death takes place, but in Roland’s homeland. Just as Christ’s death on Calvary causes the temple curtain to be rent in two, the walls of France break, indicating that the space of France is Roland’s temple, his sacred center” (M. R. Kelly 175). I agree with M. R. Kelly that “France,”

or the entity by that name to whom the Franks address their sense of homesickness, is the agent responsible for the storm, comprised of elemental outbursts and shifting geography.

Roland and Charlemagne address laments to France as if it were an entity independent of its constituent people. France as a suffering subject dates back at least to an anonymous poem from shortly after January 28th, 814, in which a monk of Bobbio laments Charlemagne's death: "Francia has endured awful wounds [before], / But never has suffered such great sorrow as now, / Alas for miserable me!"³ Roland addresses France directly prior to his death: "Tere de France, mult estes dulz païs, / Oi desertet a tant rubostl exill" (*laisse* 140 v.1861-2). France is damaged (deserted, depopulated) by such a rude calamity, the slaughter of its people in the mountain pass (Godefroy). After Roland's death, Charlemagne fears that the people Roland conquered will rebel, diminishing his rule and, by extension, France: "'Morz est mis niés, ki tant me fist cunquere [...] / E! France cum remeines deserte!'" (*laisse* 209 v.2920, v.2928). Literally, France will be "ravaged" or made "fallow" by the loss of Roland. Just as Charlemagne and Roland recognize France as an entity capable of loss, like humans, Saragossa will be deprived of Marsile, the Saracen king, when he dies: "'E! Sarraguce, cum ies oi desguarnie / Del gentil rei ki t'aveit en baillie!'" (*laisse* 188 v.2598-99). Both sides' "countries" are made to suffer by their conflict, and this suffering is recognized by the human characters, but what are these "countries," France and Spain? A collection of land and elements comprising a "kingdom" under the control of Christian Franks or pagan Saracens respectively, an entity separate from its population, able to mourn its inhabitants and to suffer without them (as we've seen above with the storm). We have seen that France's existence as a rhetorical entity, a suffering subject in lament, provides

³ "Francia diras perpessa iniurias / nullum iam talem dolorem sustinuit—/ Heu mihi misero!" Stanza 13 (Godman 206-211) poem cited in (Noble 3).

precedence for its demonstration of agency in deploying the storm and the elements in grief. In addition to “countries” and cities, landscape also possesses agency in the *Chanson de Roland*.

Independently but within the framework of divine will, the landscape acts on the human characters in ambivalent fashion in order to achieve Roland's martyrdom and the downfall of the Saracens that ambushed him. From the first *laisse*, the text sets up Charlemagne as a conqueror of Spain, his successes only limited by the sea and Saragossa's fictional location on a mountain, which protected it from Frankish conquest for a time: "Tresqu'en la mer cunquist la tere altaigne/N'i ad castel qui devant lui remaigne [...] Fors Sarraguze, ki est en une muntaigne" (v.3-6). In reality the city was situated in a plain. As Paul Zumthor observes, this discrepancy could be due to the city's rebellious nature, which necessitates its position on a height, like the Tower of Babel (Zumthor 22). It is also possible that the poet may be focusing on the fortress of Aljaferia, situated on a butte above the city proper, since “mountain” could mean any height, as André Burger argues (Burger 106). For the Saracens, the borderlands where they attack Roland and the rear guard is well known to them, “Terre certeine” (v.856), but this familiar territory between border and Saragossa turns on them at the moment of Charlemagne's vengeance, when the Shadowy Valley and Ebro River prevent the Saracens from escaping the Frankish army (M. R. Kelly 138). Earlier in the narrative, the mountain pass between France and Spain appears to serve the goals of both Franks and Saracens before functioning as a conduit that leads to Saracen defeat.

The importance of the mountain pass in the *Chanson de Roland* begins with the systematic opposition of darkness and light in battle. As the armor of both armies shine clearly, the darkness settling into the valley foreshadows the tragedy about to take place there, “Halt sunt li pui e li val tenebrus” (laisse 66 v.814). Bernard Huppé argues that the “echoic effect” of

repeated variations on this line creates narrative unity in this sequence of episodes (Huppé 31). The repetition of this line emphasizes the importance of the uncanny juxtaposition of contrasting landscapes, whose materiality is required in order for the “lowering mountains” to fulfill their “psychological... function,” which is to lend a sense of foreboding to the scene (Farnham 148). From a concrete historical perspective, the mountain pass as choke-point is essential for the ambush that will result in Roland’s martyrdom as plotted by Ganelon, Roland’s stepfather, and the Saracen King Marsile (laisse 38). M. R. Kelly attributes agency for the ambush both to Marsile who “[uses] space to his advantage” and to the space of the mountain pass itself, which “participates in the perfidy about to occur” (M. R. Kelly 138). Historically, Charlemagne’s battle technique and his use of heavy cavalry would have been impaired by the narrow mountain pass, thus contributing to the historical slaughter of the rearguard by Basques (fellow Christians, not pagan Saracens) (Pidal 526). In the *Chanson de Roland*, the physical restriction of the mountain pass lends itself to the intent to kill Roland, and to Roland’s stubborn determination to die gloriously as a martyr (one interpretation of his refusal to blow the horn in time to summon Charlemagne’s aid). This topography also funnels the sound of Roland’s and Charlemagne’s horn. When Roland finally blows his horn weakly to summon aid, Charlemagne knows his nephew is dying and has his soldiers blow their horns in return: “Seisante milie en i cornent si halt / Sunent li munt e respondent li val” (laisse 156 v.2111-12). The mountains ring with the sound and the valleys respond: the acoustics of the landscape participate in the communication via horn, carrying the message to and from the Frankish troops and warning the Saracens of Charlemagne’s approach. In the aftermath of the ambush, the imagery of the shadows filling the mountain pass creeps back into the narrative. Charles finds his nephew’s eyes full of shadows in death: “Turnez ses oilz, mult li sunt tenebros” (laisse 207 v.2896) (Terry 141). Charles’

vengeance upon the Saracens will be enacted in a “shadowy valley” on the Spanish side of the border, reinforcing the narrative link between darkness and death and echoing the circumstances of the initial Saracen attack.

Critics rarely comment on the second topographical feature that plays a mirrored role to Roland’s mountain pass. Thanks to divinely extended daylight, the Franks catch up to the Saracens in the Shadowy Valley, “[e]l Val Tenebrus” (v.2461), as they flee to Saragossa. The Saracens are trapped between the Franks and the Ebro river, and those not killed by the Franks drown in its deep, fast current: “mult est parfunde, merveill(us)e e curant” (*laisse* 180 v.2466). When the Saracens responsible for the ambush are dead, the sun goes down (*laisse* 181). Despite Saragossa’s fictional placement on a mountain, the landscape is otherwise accurate in these scenes. If one examines the details of topographical relief on a map, one sees that the way from the pass at Roncevalles (Roncevaux) to Zaragoza (the modern name of Saragossa) constitutes a vast valley surrounded by higher ground, which fits the description of the landscape through which Charlemagne pursues the Saracens before trapping them against the Ebro river, which flows just north of the center of Zaragoza. In fulfillment of the parallel structure of the narrative, the darkened landscape on the Spanish side of the border facilitates the entrapment of the fleeing Saracens, as the mountain pass confined Roland and his comrades.

In the *Chanson de Roland*, Saracens and Christians are opposed in their similarity to one another: “All the main characters including Ganelon and the Saracens are treated as worthy barons, while no individual is wholly righteous. Up until Roland’s death, the assonanced Rolands [including the Oxford manuscript] ambiguously encourage discord as well as unity within the noble Christian community and maintain an uneasy tension between those forces” (Gilbert 24). These “problematic similarities” extend to the landscape’s role in their deaths:

Roland is felled in the darkening mountain pass, accomplishing his just martyrdom; and the Saracens who contributed to this crime are punished on their own side of the border in the Shadowy Valley, trapped near the river that probably ensured their safety in other circumstances (Gilbert 24).

One can imagine a long topographical “funnel” connecting the mountain pass and the Shadowy Valley and thus the entire arc of this part of the narrative: "Halt sunt li pui e la voiz est mult lunge" (laisse 133 v.1755). The same landscape that is conducive to an ambush (and thus Roland’s martyrdom) is also a conductor for the sound of Roland’s horn, summoning Charlemagne to avenge Roland and punish the Saracens. The same deep swift-running river that might have protected the way to the Saracen fortress traps the Saracens without boats or bridges and drowns those not killed by Charlemagne’s forces. The landscape is confined by divine intention: it acts on the human characters (fulfilling the primary definition of agency), but its own intent is questionable (a second component of agency). This ambiguity reflects the tension inherent in the conceptual model of the Chain of Being. What tips the scales against the Saracens is their pagan gods’ inferiority to the Christian deity in the text. Narrative reality conforms to God’s plan and supports Roland’s assertion that puts pride and wrong on the side of the Saracens: “Devers vos est li orguilz et li torz” (laisse 119 v1562). As we saw above, the impersonal phrasing of the storm's purpose (the mourning of Roland) without an explicit subject suggests that “France” or “Nature” (and their composite elements) possess agency distinct from God’s. In contrast, the landscape’s ambivalence toward the human characters in the *Chanson de Roland* operates within the parameters of divine will and is governed by God’s purpose. Its own intent is uncertain. However, the entity behind the storm does not pose an active threat to the Christian hierarchy, supporting instead the positive valence attributed to Roland’s actions by the

narrative and by God. In the *Roman d'Alexandre* by Alexandre de Bernai, the Christian God is responsible for the tempest and various signs announcing Alexander the Great's birth, but the sea receives individual agency and narrative importance as a part of Nature, under God.

The *Roman d'Alexandre*

In Alexandre de Berai's late twelfth century version of the *Roman d'Alexandre*, Alexander's exemplary status as a conqueror is first established on the day of his birth, when lightning and thunder, the shaking of the earth, and the reddening sea welcome he who is destined to be the world's master. The meaning (*senefiance*) that God gives to this disruption of the "natural" order, that spreads from the elements to the animals and humans trembling in fear, is that the child born (Alexander) would govern a great "seignorie", an "empire" over which his feudal lordship would extend. From the first *laisse* the romance fits Alexander (a pagan) into the Christian hierarchy of creation within the subset of humanity, granting him mastery of humans and beasts, placing him at the summit of feudal authority. The apocalyptic phenomena repurposed here—including the exceptional agency of the sea, below—can best be illuminated within the context of twelfth century shifts in Biblical interpretation and Christian Neoplatonic approaches to "nature." As we saw with the storm in the *Chanson de Roland*, the environment and the elements unleashed are considered part of God's creation, imbued with meaning but in need of interpretation, like a book that reflects the world's inner truth: "la nature médiévale est le livre où se lit la présence du Dieu chrétien" (Zink 25).

The “signes” that God uses to show Alexander's future significance resemble the apocalyptic storm that mourned Roland: thunder and lightning crack open the sky, and the earth quakes. In the *Roman d'Alexandre*, this last phenomenon indicates the world's submission to its future conqueror: “Por ce craula la terre en icele jornee / Q'en cele eure naissoit la persone doutee / A la qui poësté el fu puis aclinee” (Branch I *laisse* 3 v.78-80). In both the *Roman d'Alexandre* and the *Chanson de Roland*, these apocalyptic signs indicate support for conquerors, Roland who lived and died as a conqueror of Saracen Spain, “mort cunquerant”, and Alexander who will extend his reign from Greece to Babylon, from West to East (Dufournet *laisse* 174 v.2363).

Twelfth century interpretations of the apocalypse had a component of conquest, supported by contemporary crusading fervor, imagining like the abbot Joachim of Fiore that Christendom would extend across the entire world prior to the End Times” (Whalen 2). “At various points the abbot [Joachim of Fiore] expressed a basic sense of geographical purpose in this process [“millennial conversions” that would reintegrate Jews, Muslims, and non-Latinate Greek Christians back into the fold, once they recognized their wrongs], observing that God's grace had moved from the East to the West, and in the future would move from the West back to the East” (Whalen 121-123). Joachim coupled this vision “of Christendom realized on a worldwide scale,” to a historicizing view of the Apocalypse (Whalen 123). By mapping all the books of the Bible—and thus of history—onto Revelation, Joachim intended to reveal “a narrative of what has happened, written by the Holy Spirit, through which the structure of the past, the present, and the future may be grasped” (Daniel 78-79). Since the apocalyptic imagination “is able to identify specific human historical manifestations of the cosmic conflict between good and evil,” Alexander's depiction as a (mostly) virtuous, chivalrous pagan may be

motivated by a desire to see him as a model to prefigure Christian conquest of the East before the Apocalypse, which will parallel the movement of his own journey of conquest from Greece in the West to Babylon in the East (Emmerson and Herzman, *The Apocalyptic Imagination in Medieval Literature* 30).

The beginning of this section on Alexander opened by describing God's intention as communicated by apocalyptic signs, that Alexander will become an exemplary conqueror. At the end of the second *laisse*, the narrator claims that Alexander the Great is a worthy model for "sens et proëce", wisdom and prowess, for Alexandre de Bernai's aristocratic audience (Branch I *laisse* 2 v.58). The preponderance of Alexander romances throughout the medieval period offer testimony to the popularity of Alexander the Great as a cultural hero from Antiquity to the fifteenth century (Stoneman 1–4). In the French tradition in particular, Alexander was long considered a paragon of chivalry, and this reputation culminates in the *Roman de Perceforest* in the fourteenth century, which credits Alexander's men with bringing this honored concept to Britain in pre-Arthurian times (Huot 1–22). Earlier French Alexander romances, like de Bernai's, encode Alexander's character and comportment with positive didactic meaning, from exemplary kingship and knightly prowess (*laisse* 1 v.2-10) to generosity (-v.114), the latter borrowed from King Arthur's own reputation. According to de Bernai's account, chaos reigned in the world before Alexander's birth and after his death, due to the arrogance of feudal lords, the "orgellous" (*laisse* 3 v.87) that Alexander eliminated, thus returning goodness ("bontés") to the world that was suppressed by "malvais segnors" (v.96-97) and their lack of generosity. Alexander's relationship to the (Western) world is similar to the relationship between Roland and France: after Alexander's death the earth will be "[p]ar l'orguel des barons gastee et desertee" (Branch I *laisse* 2 v.138). We saw variations of this word "desertee" often repeated in the

Chanson de Roland to describe France and Spain ravaged by war.⁴ As we'll see below, Alexander's relationship to the land changes as he progresses eastward into the "terre diverse" beyond his father's realm and the world he knows.

The most active agent in facilitating the accomplishment of Alexander's conqueror identity is the sea, which turns red at the moment of his birth. The *Roman d'Alexandre* repurposes an apocalyptic Biblical reference, the blood-red sea, to suit its new conquest-oriented context. In Revelation 16:3-16:6, angels pour out bowls of God's wrath on the sea and the rivers and springs, turning them to blood, because "they have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and thou hast given them blood to drink; for they are worthy" (Revelation 16:6).⁵ Here the sea turning blood red is God's infuriated reaction to blood wrongly spilled, but in the context of Alexander's birth, it is the celebration of future bloodshed, divinely approved. This Alexander romance explains that the sea changes color in anticipation of the blood that will be spilled by the countries that Alexander will successfully conquer, thanks to the wartime tricks that the sea will teach him, like ambushes in leafy forests: "la mers enrougi par cele destinee / Que en li prist l'engieng de la gerre aduree / Et d'enbuschier agais dedens selve ramee, / Dont sans fu expandus par tant mainte contree" (*laisse* 3 v.81-4). The sea will present these lessons during the undersea voyage in Branch III, during which descent beneath the waves, the sea will become Alexander's unacknowledged instructor in the art of warfare. Although Alexander later "reads" contradictory advice for successful conquest in the behavior of the sea's denizens, this earlier reference in Branch I suggests that the sea is not a passive object to be interpreted, but rather that it has the power to teach Alexander a specific lesson.

⁴ We'll examine the image of the wasteland (gastee) in the next chapter, on moral pollution.

⁵ "Quia sanguinem sanctorum et prophetarum effuderunt, et sanguinem eis dedisti bibere: digni enim sunt."

In the examples exposed previously in this chapter, the narrative grants agency to entities that support the ultimate authority of the Christian God over the entire world. Nature or the mass of land, water, and air that falls within the boundaries of “France” honors Roland, whose death is God’s wish; and the sea acts to fulfill God’s own proclamation, that the child born will be an extraordinary conqueror, Alexander the Great. While the storm mourning Roland posed no threat to God’s authority, agentic environmental forces in the *Roman d’Alexandre* find themselves aligned with the Christian God, or pagan gods and demons, or no divinity at all, in a more complicated hierarchy. The restrictions placed on the agency attributed to the rhetorical embodiment of Nature represent this anxious relationship with agentic non-humans.

The beginning of *Genesis*, in which water predates the creation of the heavens and the earth, might also support the sea’s agency in the *Roman d’Alexandre* as an entity separate from God, but water’s “seniority” does not exclude it from God’s dominion (Uebel 62). Both a late twelfth century Alexander and a thirteenth century Roland swear by the God that made the sea or the ocean, reasserting God’s “lordship” over the water that delineates the boundaries of the medieval world. Alexander is walking by the sea when he swears by the Lord that made the Ocean that he will know the truth about Bucephalus, the monstrous horse that once released from imprisonment will contribute to his heroic persona: “Et [il] jure cel segnor qui fist Oceanon” (Paris Branch I, *laisse* 19, v444). In a late thirteenth century text from the rhymed tradition, Roland swears by God creator of the sea as he declares that he will die that day: “‘Deus,’ dist Rollant, ‘qui feïs mer salee, / men esïent, ma mort est hui juree’” (CV7, 1532-2) (Gilbert 28). The importance of the sea is not mentioned at Alexander’s birth in Thomas of Kent’s version, contemporary with de Bernai’s, suggesting that the “inclusive monotheism” identified by Barbara Newman in her corpus could be problematic for a Christian lay audience—or at least for

texts like Kent's, intolerant of ambiguity. The sea's significance also disappears in later versions of the *Roman d'Alexandre*, such as Jehan Wauquelin's from the middle of the fifteenth century (Bryant). This same phenomenon accounts perhaps for the attribution of the storm to God in later versions of Roland (as mentioned above in the *Chanson de Roland* section).

God is in the highest position of authority in de Bernai's text, but He intervenes directly only at Alexander's birth by inspiring elemental disorder. In addition to the sea that exercises agency as God's intermediary in the *Roman d'Alexandre*, pagan gods also factor into the narrative within a limited realm of action, acting to punish Alexander's overreach when he trespasses beyond the Eastern Limits of the world, as established by Arthur and Liber (Sasaki 5–6). Intervention by both the Christian God and pagan gods occurs in terms of odd weather and apocalyptic signs in this text, in addition to the environmental or topographical entities aligned with them. In contrast with the terrifying signs at Alexander's birth meant to signal a temporary end to the tyranny of the prideful kings, (“orgellous”, *laisse* 3 v.87, below), Alexander's Shadowy Valley, “cest val tenebror” (Branch III *laisse* 150 v.253), is a hellish apocalyptic context, part of Alexander's punishment meted out by his pagan gods for violating the divine ban on crossing the Eastern Limits (Branch III *laisse*s 140-147). The height of the mountains and the depth of the valley, in addition to the demon that resides there, prevent them from escaping: “Les montaignes sont hautes et li pui sont aigu / Et la terre si basse que tuit somes perdu” (*laisse* 149 v.2509-10). This description of menacing landscape is similar to language used in the *Chanson de Roland*. Recall that the *Chanson de Roland* foreshadows Roland's death by remarking on the height of the mountains and the shadows in the valley: “Halt sunt li pui e li val tenebrus” (*laisse* 66 v.814). The Saracens are also trapped in their own “Val Tenebrus” (v.2461). Not unlike Roland's mountain pass, this Shadowy or Perilous Valley is complicit in their imprisonment, and

like the sea, it is aligned with divine intent. The description of this valley portrays its agency in the gray area between the animate and inanimate.

Odd disturbances of the natural order in Alexander's "vaus perilleus" (*laisse* 155 v.2698) include thunder, lightning, and earthquakes, like the apocalyptic signs at Alexander's birth, accompanied by infernal phenomena⁶: "Si commence a tourner et foudroie et esclaire, / Li mons prist a crauller, li vaus esous a braire, / Et gete une puor dont li rois sent la flaire" (Branch III *laisse* 156 v.2702-09). The valley cries out and emits a foul odor, and the earth burns in places: "la terre en plusiors lieus ardoir" (*laisse* 157 v.2719). The description of hellish landscape in the quote above features verbs that are polyvalent and apply to human, animal and inanimate agency: "crauller" can apply to people or things shaking, and "braire" that today describes the bray of a donkey, could also apply in the medieval period to the cry of people or "inanimate" entities. It is appropriate that the Perilous Valley occupies an ambivalent linguistic register, a position between person and thing, since its agency is more supernatural than realistic, standing in as it does for the wrath of pagan gods and enmity of a trapped demon or "*aversier*," literally an adversary to humankind, (*laisse* 160 v.2813). The Perilous Valley's relationship to Alexander is not as well developed as his relationship to the sea, which will accomplish the future action it signifies by turning blood-red at Alexander's birth—the sea will *teach* him, "Que en li prist l'engieng" (my emphasis, Branch I *laisse* 3 v.79). But Alexander's pagan gods have not always

⁶ For purgatory, hell and paradise as geographically accessible from this world, see *Saint Patrick's Purgatory*. The version attributed to Marie de France dates to the late twelfth century, and features the plotting of hell and paradise onto the landscape, "cum fussent en lius corporels" (v.126), which creates a "land of possibility", like the East: "Altresi est d'enfer li lius / desuz terre, parfuz e cius [...] / En terre a il un parewis, vers Oriënt, u Deus l'a mis" (v.133-138) (Marie 52-53). See also the *Voyage of Saint Brendan*, which situates paradise, hell and purgatory on islands in the ocean, of which The Anglo-Norman Version dates to the early part of the twelfth century.

intervened in his life in punitive fashion, and do not always find themselves aligned with demons.

In the *Roman d'Alexandre*, the pagan gods are not opposed to the Christian God. Before the Perilous Valley episode, his pagan gods grant Alexander the miracle of finding a way out of the desert: “Cel jor por Alixandre firent li dieu vertus” (Branch III *laisse* 88 v.1492). This is a moment when the One God would have stepped in directly, if this were the *Chanson de Roland*. Recall that God breaks Nature’s laws by granting Charlemagne the miracle of stopping the sun’s course in the sky so that the emperor can hunt down the Saracens to avenge his nephew’s death: “Pur Karlemagne fist Deus vertuz mult granz” (*laisse* 180 v.2458). Both texts use the same phrasing to describe divine intervention (miracles or marvels) that has been documented in texts ranging from the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries.⁷ The *Roman d'Alexandre* uses this language once more to reference divine favor accorded to Alexandre. This time one of the Amazons he encounters makes this observation: “Sire rois Alixandres, por vos fait Dieus vertus, / Car par tout le mont estes et doutés et cremus” (Branch III *laisse* 445 v.7583-84). The plural gods above has morphed into one God. Although critics have often noted the interchangeability of God and gods as a characteristic of this text, it seems that the use of the singular God does make sense here. God's general favor, as demonstrated at Alexander’s birth, has made Alexander who he is, feared throughout the world. Even the Amazons’ isolated kingdom is aware of his reputation for ruthless conquest, and thus surrenders to him upon his arrival to avoid the slaughter predicted by a prophetic dream (*laisse* 430). If any distinction can be signaled, the one God tends to be

⁷ See the entry for “vertu” (Godefroy 211). This phrasing for miracle or marvel also appears in: *le Voyage de Charlemagne* (twelfth cen.), Wace's *Conception de Notre Dame* (twelfth cen.), la *Chanson de Jerusalem* (twelfth cen.), Gautier de Metz's *Image du Monde* (thirteenth cen.), *Besant de Dieu* (thirteenth cen.), *De dan denier* (thirteenth cen.), Eustache Deschamps's *Poésie* (thirteenth cen.), *le Mystère de St Bernard de Menthon* (15th cen.), and Greban's *Mystère de la Passion* (15th).

referenced when it comes to aspects of the world created by Him (Alexander swears by the God that made the Ocean, for example). This interchangeability is still in line with the Christian hierarchy. Barbara Newman has noted the acceptable rhetorical usage of pagan gods in her Neoplatonic corpus: “‘inclusive’ [monotheism] implies not tolerance of dissent or celebration of human diversity, but a recognition that the glory of the One God is mediated; that God can be, and is, manifest in immeasurably varied ways” (Newman 326-7). In the *Roman d’Alexandre*, his pagan gods are not portrayed as equals of the Christian God.

All the signs God gave at Alexander’s birth endorse Alexander’s conquest of the world, which he will accomplish not only by using his force but also his ruse, as will be demonstrated by the fish during the undersea voyage. Alexander proves himself to be cleverer than the demon imprisoning him in the Shadowy Valley and tricks him into revealing the exit (*laisse* 162). This episode showcases Alexander’s ambivalence: Alexander makes a promise to release the demon, and does so, but his initial sacrifice by remaining in the valley alone allows his men to escape, making him a Christ-like figure. An infinitely fascinating character for the Middle Ages, de Bernai emphasizes traits that would make Alexander a model of virtue, “de biens essamplaire” (Branch III *laisse* 156 v.2715) for his audience without eliminating the ambiguities inherent in this pagan figure.

Within this complicated hierarchy of God and gods, Alexander's identity is shaped by encounters with the environment, and punctuated by “baptisms” in liquids. After the sea turns blood-red at his birth to foreshadow the undersea voyage, other milestones in his development include the bath in the sea that makes him king, and the deadly bath in the Nidèle river,⁸

⁸ In Thomas of Kent’s Alexander romance, contemporaneous to de Bernai’s, this river episode takes place in the Tigris (“Tygre”, v2745) (*laisse* 133), and historically, in the Cydnos river in Sicily, beyond Alexander the Great’s

initiation into the dangerous alterity of the East. Francis Dubost notes the symmetry in the narrative, balancing this earlier purifying bath against the deadly encounter with the freezing waters of the Nidèle river: “Au bain lustral précédant l’adoubement, répond l’immersion dans les eaux du Cydnus, qui faillit être fatal au héros” (Dubost 264). The fact that the Nidèle river episode takes place in the hostile landscape east of Alexander’s ancestral territory accounts for the changing significance of water for Alexander, just as the activity of pagan gods and demons only occurs in this text beyond the known Mediterranean world. Only the sea remains consistently positive in its rapport with Alexander. The undersea voyage will set him on the path to become a successful world conqueror. After learning war strategies from the behavior of fishes, he decides to pursue the fleeing Porus, whereas his participation in earlier conflicts was provoked, by the taunts of Nicolas and the *seigneur* Darius. But first, let us return to the beginning of Alexander's life and the sea’s complicity in making him king and knight.

The taming of Bucephalus is one of the defining moments that proves Alexander’s exceptional nature and his worthiness to receive arms and become king, and the sea coast provides the setting for the revelation of this challenge. He is walking by the sea with his companions when he hears the cry of the monstrous, man-eating horse, and Alexander swears by the Lord that made the Ocean that he will know the truth about Bucephalus, just as later he vows to undertake the undersea voyage in an effort to conquer the truth of the sea: “[Alexander] jure cel segnor qui fist Oceanon / Q’il savra a cort terme se ce est voirs ou non” (Branch I *laisse* 19 v.444-5). Alexander frees Bucephalus from his prison, and Bucephalus bows before him as his rightful master. This exploit, worthy of an emperor, “Icist fait bien enseigne de roi emperial”

Macedonian origins, see footnote (Kent 213). In these three versions, the nearly-fatal river episode is situated outside Alexander’s ancestral territory, in a land of dangerous alterity.

(*laisse* 21 v.483), establishes Alexander's renown in the public sphere, and his father Philip's noble advisors beg to make Alexander a knight, along with his companions. Here we see that an individual animal, Bucephalus, like individual aspects of the environment, are granted with agency conditional upon service to the divine. As a kind of monster, Bucephalus' approval is a sign from God, based the etymology established by Isidore of Seville of monsters as "monstrations (monere)[proof] or warnings (monare) of divine will" (White 1).

His subjects anticipate Alexander's role as protector of his kingdom, which he will save from the unjust predations of Nicolas: "leur terre iert par lui secourue / Et la dant Nicholas gasteet et confondue" (*laisse* 22 v.492-3). Alexander will wreak devastation on Nicholas' realm as a "roi emperial", an emperor, claiming for himself the ultimate position in the feudal hierarchy. This role has been envisaged for Alexander from the beginning, from the divine signs of favor at his birth and the sea's blood-red testimony that he would rule the world over. To accomplish this end, the sea grants him kingship and later, conquering strategy.

Alexander is about to receive his arms, along with three hundred young noblemen. The initiatory bath is prepared, a bath to be taken with his fellow noblemen, about to be "adoubés" (*laisse* 24 v.530). Alexander refuses the water brought to him and declares that the only water he will accept for his bath is seawater (*laisse* 24 v.538). He and his men all bathe at the sea's edge, outside of any civilized context or usual political proceedings. Only Alexander emerges from the waves with a changed identity, reflecting his privileged relationship with the sea. In the *laisse* immediately following his sea-bath, Alexander is referenced in the narrative as the new king of Greece, "[I]i noviaus rois de Gresse" (*laisse* 25 v.548).⁹ As king, his first act is to provide fine

⁹ See Emile Nourry/Pierre Saintyves' 1923 work, *Les contes de Perrault et les récits parallèles*, in which he has a chapter on Puss in Boots that discusses the bath as part of the kingship ritual in folklore.

armor and equipment for his knights, beginning with the poorest. This demonstrates his legendary generosity, reminiscent of King Arthur, whose romances are also popular in the twelfth century. Here we see the ideal vision of royalty dreamed of by the aristocracy: a king who receives arms at the same moment as his knights, in a position of equality, and who also provides material aid to them from a fatherly position of superiority.¹⁰ Alexander's most acclaimed virtue, his largesse, serves a practical social purpose: to strengthen feudal bonds between himself and his men, and his conquests allow him to acquire land which he can then give away as fiefdoms (Croizy-Naquet 166). This king is welcomed into the world and to the throne with the acclaim of Creation, in equine and liquid form. But his God-given destiny isn't to be a kindly king, but a conqueror, and even at this stage Alexander will receive validation in the form of a piscine display of war strategy.

The narrator of de Bernai's romance (dated to after 1180) depicts Alexander as the height and origin of chivalry, but the narrative shows that he sometimes behaves like the absolutist king, the powerful centralizing monarch that, in the thirteenth century, would be the bane of the aristocracy in the form of Philip Augustus (G. M. Spiegel 16-17). What is particularly interesting from an environmental standpoint is the fact that the sea bolsters his authority at every turn whereas the object of Alexander's conquests, the eastern landscape, actively resists his advances. The division in the attitudes of the non-human environment toward Alexander reflect Alexander's own ambiguous positioning. Alexander is neither the perfectly virtuous pagan nor the fatherly king, and sometimes embodies the authoritarian king responsible for diminishing aristocratic power and privileges in the medieval present. His relationship with his noble companions becomes particularly strained after Alexander leaves his father's land. The

¹⁰ See discussion of the undersea voyage, below, and (Le Goff 97-98).

further Alexander penetrates into this new environment, the more the landscape resists him, and the more authoritarian he becomes in order to conquer.

Alexander's two encounters with the sea are realistically placed—that is, in looking at a map of Alexander's historical travels, a sea offers itself to his kingship baptism in Greece (the Mediterranean), and several bodies of water in “India” could have hosted the undersea voyage (the Persian Gulf? the Caspian Sea? the Arabian Sea?). Though the symbolic meaning of these “baptisms” is fore fronted, medieval material experience of these regions' topography accounts for the uneasy coexistence of these modes, the realistic, the symbolic, and the fantastical East. The first- or second-hand material experience of the “Middle East” through pilgrimages and crusades underlays these texts and accounts for the distancing of strange landscape and monstrous beings in the Far East and no nearer. As Nicolas Ostler has observed, French support for the Crusades resulted in “Frankish domains in Palestine which lasted out the twelfth century”, which were retaken by Muslim reconquests in the thirteenth century (Ostler 407). Since the *Roman d'Alexandre* was composed after 1180, it is likely that areas like Caesarea in Israel in which Alexander's adversary Nicolas has his kingdom would still be considered a part of the “known world” and thus not a believable setting for marvels. Since the marvels attributed to India and the East are situated at a distance from the more familiar Mediterranean zone, they lose their “marvelous” nature: “projetées dans un espace lointain et inconnu, les merveilles de l'Orient ne sont plus tout à fait des merveilles” (Dubost 279).

The Classical world was centered around the Mediterranean, which remains the known world of the Middle Ages, with worrying monstrous alterity positioned around this center of European, Christian civilization. The land that is “diverse,” dangerously strange or different, extends to the encircling sea at the world's edge (D. Kelly, *The Art of Medieval French*

Romance 28; Dubost 258). When Alexander sets out on his Eastern journey to India, he enters into "terre [...] diverse" shortly after crossing the borders of his ancestral land (Branch I *laisse* 105 v.2191-92). The first manifestation of the dangerous strangeness of the land is the "mervelle" (v.2201) of the Rock Fortress whose natural defenses "par nature nee" (v.2195), while unable to prevent Alexander's assault on it, do end up costing the lives of his men as they climb the rock wall, which troubles Alexander. He doesn't want to be a "malvais seignor", a bad lord, and abstain from the fight (Branch I *laisse* 111 v.2330). But one of his men, Caulus, points out that Alexander is "a blasmer", to blame, if Alexander allows himself to perish (*laisse* 112 v.2339). Specifically, he says that Alexander is here to conquer, not to die: "Ja estes vos venus por conquerre outre mer / Et vos volés ja ci en cest païs finer" (*laisse* 112 v.2340). Yet Alexander nearly dies in the following episode, after his bath in the Nidèle river. This is the closest he comes to death before the Perilous Valley episode, and he faces his first true failure on the *tertre recreant*, the Cowardly Knoll (see below). In these two instances, it is the environment—unaligned with divine or demonic forces—that threatens Alexander's life and pride, not moments of armed conflict during conquest.

Immediately after the Rock Fortress episode, Alexander has a realistic environmental experience made metaphorical in context: he bathes in the cold water of the Nidèle river, whose contrast with the hot sun makes him sick: "De la froidor de l'eaue, dont clers estoit li rus, / Et du chaut du soleil qui sor aus cheüs / Li est li sans el cors torblés et commeüs / La parole li faut et li rois devint mus" (Branch I *laisse* 115). Literally, his blood is troubled, and he is unable to speak. In the following *laisse* the narrative specifies that the king is inundated or filled with congealed blood: "de sanc seellé ne soit souronde et plaine" (*laisse* 116 v.2403). His men also enter the cold, clear water due to the increasingly intense heat as they journey east, but

Alexander is the only one to fall ill, perhaps because Alexander doesn't take off his armor before plunging into the icy river (v.2391-4). De Bernai reworks many episodes that, in other versions, showcase Alexander's hubris clearly. In Thomas of Kent's *Roman de toute chevalerie*, Alexander plunges in fully armored to prove his courage to his men reluctant to enter the deep, fast-moving waters, and he nearly drowns (*laisse* 133). The changes that de Bernai has made make it possible to interpret this episode literally and metaphorically at the same time: he may be affected in his role as conqueror and would-be "emperor" of this resistant territory.

Aristocratic wealth and power is in the land, which the nobility will gradually lose to the encroaching monarchy (G. M. Spiegel 11; L. Verdon 124-129). Greece is the beneficiary of Alexander's conquests, as expressed by Alexander's "pairs" when they think he is dying, a lament not unlike that of Roland or Charlemagne for France: "Par foi! honor de Gresce, molt estes hui soutaine; / Or remaint a conquerre mainte terre lointaigne" (branch I *laisse* 116 v.2413-14). Greece as the center of Alexander's feudal territory would be laid low by his loss, particularly since he will not expand its holdings, prestige and productivity by conquest. The significance of Alexander's troubled bath in the Nidèle river could thus be related to the connection between the land, the seigneur, and the aristocracy.

In the *Roman d'Alexandre*, the land becomes increasingly hostile during the journey to the east, to Persia (to confront Darius), then India (to fight Porus), then beyond. But the environment poses no problem for Alexander within his father's territory or while fighting and defeating Nicolas, since his kingdom is within the known Mediterranean world. This could suggest that Alexander is overreaching his feudal authority when he leaves his ancestral domain. Since Alexander's men emerge from their bath in the river unscathed, it would seem that the environment's hostility affects Alexander in his usurped position as "sovereign" of this territory.

That the bath in the Nidèle river, which is an immersion in Eastern alterity and hostility, nearly kills him, sets the tone for the environmental encounters that follow. After recovering from the Nidèle river episode, Alexander and his men are equally affected by the *tertre recreant*, the cowardly knoll or hill, which halts Alexander's advance and causes him to experience his first real setback in his conquest of the east.

Almost immediately following his recovery from the physical illness resulting from the bath, Alexander is afflicted by a moral ailment when he ascends the “tertre aventureux” or “recreant” (Branch I *laisse* 121-2 v.2519, v.2536), which induces a reversal of character, making cowardly men courageous, lowly nags great warhorses, and vice versa. The valleys on either side prevent circumnavigation of the topographical feature, since they are “grans et parfons, perilleus et soutis” (v.2521).¹¹ The valleys surrounding the *tertre recreant* are deep and isolated, and those who enter them do not come out alive: “Onques puis n'en issirent en trestout lor vivant” (v.2547). Alexander becomes as cowardly as he is normally courageous, and he is forced to backtrack, delaying his eastward progression temporarily.

Not for the last time does the Eastern landscape repel him. Alexander turns back after crossing the Eastern limits or *bornes d'Arthur*, and he never reaches the island guarded by carnivorous hippopotami.¹² What is unique about the *tertre recreant* episode is the tangible effect this geographical feature has on human and animal qualities, the opposite of the relationship we will discuss in the next chapter, wherein human morality has a physical effect on the environment.¹³ But the *tertre recreant* is not associated with a local human population as is

¹¹ The adjective “perilleus” in particular echoes forward to the Perilous Valley episode, in which the army is imprisoned until one of their number (Alexander) agrees to stay.

¹² For the *bornes d'Arthur*, the limits on the Eastern world imposed by Artus and Liber (just as Hercules imposed limits on the Western world), see (Branch III *laisse* 137-147) and for the confusion Artus/Hercules see (Sasaki 5-6). For the hippopotami, see (Branch III *laisse* 59-61).

¹³ See the following chapter on “pollution,” with the grail romances as its subject.

the island that the carnivorous hippopotami protect, nor with the violation of divine taboos as are the *bornes*. The *tertre recreant*'s resistance seems more impersonal, more misanthropic in its non-anthropomorphic agency. A “tertre adventurous” hated by all men (“de maint home haïs” v.2519), it acts on all passers-by without discrimination, the difference being that the locals know to avoid the treacherous area. Its danger has even been inscribed for posterity in a book (v.2533-34). It is not acting on behalf of God like the sea, or fulfilling the wrath of pagan gods and demons like the Perilous Valley. This topographical agency remains without discernible intent, unfathomable, one possibility in the spectrum of non-human agencies present in the *Roman d'Alexandre*, which seem to be geographically determined. In opposition to the sea's loyalty, the Eastern landscape is resistant to God's plan to make Alexander a successful conqueror. The land of the “non-virtuous pagans” is not always compliant to the one God's wishes, its space often appearing to be complicit in local resistance, without achieving unmitigated success in repelling the invader.

The sea, however, is a consistently positive presence for Alexander, facilitating his development as a conqueror through the first three branches of the *Roman d'Alexandre*. The sea was the site of Alexander's bath before becoming king and knight, and it turned red as blood at the moment of his birth in anticipation of the wartime ruses it would teach him later. Between the events of Branch I and his undersea voyage in Branch III, Alexander imagines for himself a different kind of “bath” in Branch II as a result of the reputation God and sea have worked to achieve. After Alexander engages Darius in combat, Darius attempts to reinstate the feudal status quo, offering half his land and his daughter to Alexander, if he will serve Darius as his faithful vassal. When one of Alexander's “pairs”, Perdicas, recommends that—if he were Alexander—he would accept Darius' peace offer, Alexander immediately accuses Perdicas of

cowardice and refuses the offer of woman and land without bloodshed (Branch II *laissez* 123-125). He prefers to imagine himself covered in blood, from head to foot, as a conqueror should be: “en serai en sanc trestous tresq’as talons” (Branch II *laisse* 124 v.2662). The sea works on God’s behalf throughout the narrative to make Alexander exceptional, turning red at his birth to celebrate his future bloody conquests. Alexander’s imagined blood bath here establishes his exceptionalism, as demonstrated by God’s tribute at his birth. His refusal of Perdicas’ advice—even though it was solicited—is in part due to the fact that he will not allow another to share in his renown, since his renown (Old French “nons”, v.2663) is linked to his name and his actions are bound by his legendary reputation, not by his promise to heed the advice of his “peers.” If he were Perdicas—or indeed anyone else—expectations would be different, and he admits that in such a case he would accept the peace treaty. However, as it is hard to forget, he is Alexander, without true equal: “Mais je sui Alixandres si ne le ferai mie / Ne per ne compaignon n’avrai ja en ma vie” (v.2670-1) (Stoneman 109). These lines draw attention to Alexander’s peculiar positioning beyond feudal hierarchy. The text uses Alexander and his fate—killed by two “serfs”—to underscore with didactic fervor the untrustworthiness of those not born noble, but Alexander even shies away from reliance on noble companions, a dissonance in the text that arises in later episodes, as we will see in the case of the undersea voyage, which gives a didactic interpretation to Alexander’s observations of fish-society in the depths.

Alexander has defeated Nicolas, and then Darius in Persia, and he has punished the traitorous serfs that killed Darius. Now Alexander enters “India” and journeys across the desert (Harf-Lancner, “From Alexander to Marco Polo, From Text to Image: The Marvels of India” 235–36). Before arriving at the coast, Alexander and his men encounter thirst and monstrous Eastern fauna in that inhabitable desert. The tradition of monstrous creatures and races in the

East goes back to Pliny the Elder, which was later augmented by Isidore of Seville and other tales of the marvels of Asia like the Alexander romances (Hamilton 15–16). These fabulous beasts of the desert are inventoried and described with a great deal of restraint in the *Roman d'Alexandre* compared to the contemporary *Roman de Toute Chevalerie*, or the Classical and medieval encyclopedic writings concerning India and the East. Regardless, Alexandre de Bernai's treatment of the monsters of India seems extensive compared to the paucity of detail offered for the sea life observed by Alexander beneath the waves. But Alexander's goal for his underwater voyage is not "exploration" in today's sense of the term, or an exotic elaboration of the East's alterity. He seeks to add to his list of conquests the "truth" of the seas: "Segnor, dist Alixandres, je ai molt conquesté [...] Or vous veul aconter que jou ai en pensé [...] De ciaus de la mer voil savoir la verité" (Branch III *laisse* 19 v.389, 395, 397).

Just as the identity of Darius' murderers evokes Alexander's fate—to be killed by two non-noble underlings—so the way of the world beneath the sea is a microcosm for ours. The undersea landscape is garnished with recognizable features: mountains, valleys, and plains (Branch III *laisse* 23). The behavior of the fishes will also reveal to Alexander war strategies and vices applicable to the human world. By imposing his interpretation of the scene, Alexander "reads" the landscape and its inhabitants, and "writes" his version of its hidden truth, not unlike Alexandre de Bernai's crafting of the Alexander *materia* (D. Kelly, *The Art of Medieval French Romance* 37ff).

Despite the active role that God delegated to the sea to ensure Alexander's success, Alexander doesn't recognize the sea as his instructor during the undersea voyage, the all-important moment foreshadowed from his birth. The fish living in the sea are the active participants in this scene, and the sea serves as a showcase for their behavior, like the glass

vessel in which Alexander descends beneath the waves. When he arrives at last at the sea after traversing the desert, he orders a team of skilled artisans to create what we might call a diving bell made from glass so that he might descend into the sea (Branch III *laisse* 20) (Stoneman 111ff). The glass vessel separating Alexander from the liquid element and the fish he observes reinforces the human/nonhuman hierarchy, set in place during the divinely instigated storm when the earth trembled before its (temporary) master (Branch I *laisse* 3). The glass also allows Alexander to bring his “imperial gaze” to bear, unencumbered by obstacles, to see human society reflected in piscine conduct, but not himself (Warren, *Take the World by Prose: Modes of Possession in the Roman d'Alexandre* 146).

In this “diving bell” lowered into the depths, Alexander observes the big fish catching the small ones, by force or by trickery (“*par force et par engien*” Branch III *laisse* 23 v.457).¹⁴ Alexander finds didactic value in his undersea voyage: his observations show him how to recognize traps in war, and thus avoid defeat (*laisse* 23 v.461). Initially, the behavior of the piscine hierarchy outrages Alexander: the larger fish eat the little fish, just as the rich dispossess and victimize the poor (*laisse* 26 v.510). This initial reaction feeds into the interpretation of Alexander presented by the prologue and epilogue. For his noble audience, de Bernai's romance is meant to demonstrate how to govern land justly, how to conquer, and how to tell right from wrong: “*Segnor, ceste raison devroient cil oïr / Qui sont de haut parage et ont terre a baillir*” (Branch IV, *laisse* 72, v.1630-31); “*cil qui par proëce veulent riens conquerer*” (*laisse* 74 v.1677); “[*Alexandre*] *De droit sot et de tort faire division*” (*laisse* 73 v.1671). God's favor at Alexander's birth supports Alexander's positive characterization by the narrator, and justifies the

¹⁴ The cleverness or intelligence suggested by the Old French “*engien*” (v.457) has ambivalent connotations, due to its association in the text with the sorcerer Nectanabus. Necromancy, however, could be put to positive use as a higher order of knowledge, a facet of scientific *merveilleux* embodied in figures such as Thessala in Chrétien de Troyes' *Cligès*. For more on Thessala's medical knowledge, see (Doggett 39–84).

claim that Alexander's generosity, his bravery and his wisdom, make the world a better place during his lifetime. This positive, surface reading of the episode—and of Alexander as king—is troubled by an inherent contradiction that the narrative seeks to circumvent: the fact that Alexander seems simultaneously to identify with the treachery of the big fish, and to deplore the plight of the small fish. This apparent oscillation, observed by Catherine Gaullier-Bougassas, reflects Alexander's contradictory position as a pagan praised by God, with a destiny to conquer Babylon but not to hold it for long.

According to Catherine Gaullier-Bougassas, the way in which the narrative unfurls gradually to reveal Alexander's observations and interpretations—with a string of similar *laisses* lacking narrative clarity—may reflect Alexander's own dearth of logic, or at best, his intermittent awareness of his harmful excesses, as he aligns himself with the beleaguered little fish and with the vicious big fish alternatively (Gaullier-Bougassas, *La réécriture inventive* 14). However, if we look more closely at the sequencing and respect the aesthetic appeal of *expolitio* at the sentence level,¹⁵ his attitude appears not to shift at all, but rather he positions himself so that the apparent contradiction noted by Gaullier-Bougassas is resolved—so that he can simultaneously learn from the big fish and condemn their actions toward the small fish. This is in part possible because neither the big fish nor the small fish seem to reflect Alexander's unique position in society.

When Alexander emerges from the vessel after the undersea voyage, we can catch glimpses of the two visions of kingship that Alexander inhabits alternatively, and sometimes concurrently. Upon his return to the surface, Alexander explains his interpretation that the world

¹⁵ *Expolitio*, or *exergasia*, is a type of parallelism, wherein one idea is repeated, but with different phrasing (at the sentence level) or with “elaboration by repetitive or incremental statement” (D. Kelly, *The Art of Medieval French Romance* 56).

is damned: by the avarice of the “big fish”, who rob the poor (“little fish”) of their goods (*laisse* 25-26). Alexander anthropomorphizes the fish hierarchy into a human one and identifies among the large fish “prevos” and “voiers” whose “mestiers” or occupation it is to swallow the little fish (*laisse* 24). Gaullier-Bougassas notes that the “prevos” and the “voiers” are royal administrators from modest origins. They are similar to the non-noble advisors who will be Alexander’s undoing (*laisse* 24) (Gaullier-Bougassas, *La réécriture inventive* 12). In aligning himself with their prey, Alexander is the ideal king, a model of generosity, Jacques Le Goff’s father-figure kindly receptive to those lowest in the hierarchy, and disapproving of the greed of those who exploit the weak (Le Goff 97-98).

Next we see Alexander dismissing the counsel of his noble peers. When Alexander’s men scold him for risking his life and thus the safety of his men, who would be left leaderless in the event of his death (*laisse* 26), Alexander brushes the criticism aside and offers justification for the risk: he has learned ruses from the big fish, prized chivalric knowledge. In order to put those principles and “sens de chevalerie” into practice, he declares war on Porus, Darius’ vassal in India (*laisse* 27 v.529). Next, Alexander launches into his condemnation of cowardly kings, which culminates in *Laisse* 28, wherein he equates kings who rely on their counselors with “villainous” low-born peasants, since both are cowardly and unable to defend themselves in battle. Yet it is from fish equated with midlevel advisors that he learns the wartime strategies that will allow him not to rely on others. The undersea voyage reveals how the human world works, but Alexander has no reflection in this hierarchy that is meant to be the mirror of the world above the waves. Alexander cannot see himself as one of the outwitted small fish any more than he can take on the non-noble identity of the “big fish” standing in for advisors like Antipater and Divinuspater who will kill him with poison at the end of the romance.

As is revealed by the manner of his death, Alexander mistakenly admires the *prevos* and *voiers* that the big fish represent, since he is blinded to his forthcoming betrayal by non-noble advisors. This also confirms Catherine Croizy-Naquet's reading that Alexander envisions a royalty not dependent on nobility and knights, a vision that Alexander directly expressed at the end of this episode by his criticism of kings' dependence on advisors. The encouragement given by God and sea to shape Alexander into an exceptional conqueror has side effects: he doesn't see his equivalent or equal in any feudal or piscine hierarchy, and his authoritarian tendencies are symptomatic of this belief in his own exceptionalism. As Gaullier-Bougassas observes, Alexander is "difficilement assimilable" to de Bernai's twelfth century noble audience who, in part because of this absolutist kingly attitude, could not help but feel "un sentiment d'altérité face à Alexandre" (15). Here as elsewhere in the *Roman d'Alexandre*, it proves impossible to idealize Alexander's representation.

The fact that Alexander's descent beneath the sea's surface has led us to this discussion of models of kingship is noteworthy, and unlikely to be accidental, since the undersea voyage episode in other versions of Alexandrian romances has been assigned different meanings, underlining for example Alexander's repentance for hubris before his angry gods in the Greek romance tradition (Stoneman 111-12). This episode is a late arrival to the gamma recension of the Greek manuscript tradition, in which Alexander finds a giant pearl-containing crab on the beach, sparking his descent, during which a giant fish nearly swallows his diving bell. Upon safe return to the beach, Alexander renounces exceeding human limitations. But there is no undersea threat to de Bernai's Alexander, and no realization that this time, Alexander has gone too far. God and the sea succeed in helping Alexander fulfill his ambitious destiny. The environment shapes the narrative development of Alexander, the sea as a force to give him succor with God's

approval, the Eastern landscape as ineffectual resistance to his conquest. The material experience of the landscape informs these realistic and symbolic obstacles and aids.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown how the medieval European experience of the environment is inextricably linked to the physical and the spiritual by performing a close reading of the Oxford *Chanson de Roland* and the *Roman d'Alexandre* (c.1180). In these two texts, the environment is an active force, not just a backdrop for characters and plot. In the *Chanson de Roland*, the landscape is always already complicit with God's wishes, but the hierarchy of God, gods and environmental forces is more complicated in the *Roman d'Alexandre*. In both cases, France, Nature and the sea are distinct entities, not completely collapsed within the realm of God's agency. Neoplatonic and apocalyptic reasoning help to make sense of these phenomena in the *Roman d'Alexandre*, and to explain firstly how the agency of such as the sea could be tolerated by a medieval Christian worldview and secondly how agencies other than God's remained troubling.

Christian Neoplatonic thinkers like Alan of Lille in the twelfth century theorized a personified Nature to whom God delegated certain tasks in the material world, such as regulating procreation. Medieval Christianity as an "inclusive monotheism" (Barbara Newman's coinage) permits the agentic environments that are independent, potentially troubling forces to be tolerated and subsumed into the Christian hierarchy. Once Alexander leaves his native Greece and advances East of Jerusalem, however, the landscape—including water—expresses cultural and topographical alterity and hostility to the European conqueror. Physical familiarity with different environments—or lack thereof—in medieval experience explains the discrepancy in

these two modes of non-human agency in the narrative. The sea, which is a positive influence in Alexander's life, would have been familiar to a medieval audience, whose knowledge of the Mediterranean region resulted from pilgrimages and the Second and Third Crusades in the twelfth century. East of the Holy Land, however, was beyond first-hand or second-hand experience for most Europeans. Although the legendary monstrous races rumored to live there make a cursory appearance in the narrative, Alexander's experience with Eastern landscape centers on concrete details of climatic difference: undrinkable or scarce water in the desert, and the contrast of the hot sun and the deep cold river's current. The hostile Eastern environment offers resistance to Alexander's invasion, to no avail. Medieval attitudes toward nature, geography and the material awareness of topography contextualize agentic environmental forces in the *Chanson de Roland* and the *Roman d'Alexandre*.

Chapter Two: Moral Pollution in the Grail Romances

In Chapter One, we saw how a topos like Roncevaux could be a geographical and rhetorical location, a material reality and a “*lieu commun*,” a shared idea, a place that is good to think with. In Arthurian romances, the topoi of the Grail and the Wasteland have been invested with symbolic meanings of fertility and sterility, particularly by thirteenth century French grail romances like the *Queste del Saint Graal*. In Chrétien de Troyes’ *le Conte du Graal*, human peace or violence is directly correlated with ecological prosperity or devastation, and the grail’s first appearance accompanies the most concrete depiction of a wasteland resulting from a war-time siege at Biaurepaire. In later texts like the *Queste*, the moral valence of one sinful action, murder or rape, causes the same physical damage that would result from all-out war. Based on shared vocabulary and symptomology, I argue that moral pollution in the grail romances is not completely abstract, but rather based (more or less) in material realities of war, famine, trade, etc. that would have been familiar to medieval audiences. Before moving on to consider wastelands in the first section and waste forests and moors in the second section, I’d like to demonstrate the material underpinning of the grail in my corpus.

The wasteland is subject to multiple and sometimes contradictory associations, including famine, as we’ll see below, but its companion the grail is inextricably linked to food, even in texts that endow it with spiritual connotations. In the *Conte*, the grail in its original meaning as a plate is as materially grounded as is the wasteland. During the Grail Procession at the Fisher King’s castle, its physical luminosity overcomes the candles in the same way the sun or the moon outshines the stars: “Atot lo graal qu’ele tint, / Une si grant clartez i vint / Qu’ausin perdirent les chandoilles / Lor clarté comme les estoilles / Qant li solaux luist o la lune. / Après celi en revint une / Qui tint un tailleor d’argent” (Chrétien de Troyes, *Le Conte Du Graal Ou Le*

Roman de Perceval 3163–3169). The fact that Perceval was meant to ask whom the grail served, in addition to the fact that a grail as a serving dish in common parlance is found in close proximity to a “tailleur”, cutting plate, in the procession, reinforces the link with food that other authors develop. After the grail procession, the meal is served, venison cut on the “tailleur”, while the grail (“li graaux” v.3228) uncovered (“descovert” v.3239) passes before them, preceding the arrival of each course, (v.3237-3240). At the other end of the sliding scale from the grail’s association with actual food, the *Queste*’s depiction of the Grail as provider of celestial meat or spiritual sustenance still fails to escape a connection to the grail’s first material context. The light accompanying the *Queste*’s Grail is associated with the Holy Ghost, but the Grail is not only the source of the delicious smells of spices (“si bones odors come se totes les especes terriennes i fussent expandues”), but as it passes (self-propelled) before the tables, each seat is served with the desired meat: “tout ainsi come il trespasoit par devant les tables, estoient eles maintenant raemplies endroit chascun siege de tel viande come chascuns desirroit” (Pauphilet 15). The fact that the grail is representative of agricultural success and the wasteland, of ecological devastation, makes sense given the history of the human-environmental relationship leading up to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

By human-environmental relationship, I mean the embodied way in which humans live in the material conditions of their world, and the reciprocal way in these conditions provoke human behavior and human actions have ecological consequences. For example, the climatic “warm period” of the ninth to twelfth centuries had favored agriculture, resulting in human population growth. This incited human work to clearing forests to create new farmland, which led in turn to a degradation of the soil and to famine into the thirteenth century (Bloch 270–273). The rise of cities and pollution in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries inspired increased recognition of the

impact of human waste and industry on the environment: contemporary sources reference a fear of “corrupted” air or water (Leguay 8).¹⁶ The medieval audience for the grail romances were also familiar with environmental devastation wreaked by battle. The early thirteenth-century disputes of Philip Augustus with his vassals, including Chrétien’s patron for the *Conte du Graal*, Philip of Flanders, resulted in the gradual, violent expansion of the kingdom of France toward its present-day borders (Spiegel 16–17; Bartlett 24–59; Baldwin 189–304). This chapter will track lexical and narrative conjunctions of this Wasteland topos to suggest the imbricated nature of human violence and material environmental destruction in medieval texts, as well as the ability of human morality to “pollute” the surrounding environment.

Wasteland or “terre gaste” is a complex concept, comprising ambivalent and contradictory elements. First, “gaste” is infertile land, farmland or cities which have been destroyed and their subsequent famished state (Biaurepaire), the non-human damage has human economic consequences on supply chains and trade networks. Secondly, wastelands are isolated from human population centers, often described as “soltain” or solitary. Their isolation is indicated with a certain vocabulary that complicates the distinction between human and non-human environment. The most frequently used terms to describe wastelands, “deserter,” “essillier,” and “gaster”, all incorporate an element of human absence into the environmental desolation. Cognates for “deserter” and “essillier” retain this sense today: “to desert” and “to exile (or be exiled)”. We will see that the grail romances under consideration here use the same language to describe environmental consequences of human violence, whether the human cause and environmental effect are proportional or symbolically exaggerated. The third kind of

¹⁶ See also (Bechmann 99–134; Hoffmann 288–294; Green 419–420; Lavedan 24–27; Classen, *Rural Space in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age* 51ff; Guillerme 153–155; Verdon 124–129; Classen, *Urban Space in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Age* 19ff)

Wasteland is the result of a metonymy of violence, like the Dolorous Blow in the *Queste* and the rape of the damsels of the well in the *Elucidation*, which results in the same level of ecological destruction as all-out war. These first three aspects will be considered in the first section of this chapter.

The second section will focus on the fourth aspect. In the fecund environs of the Waste Forest in the *Conte du Graal*, “gaste” or “waste” is an adjective that indicates lack of urban utility to harvest resources like timber, perhaps due to geography limiting access. This is a quality of the wasteland that also applies to the Fisher King’s realm in the *Conte*, in addition to its isolation. Since the Fisher King’s men are able to hunt waterfowl and forest game, he is able to provide for the people living in his castle, nothing more, making his realm more like the Waste Forest of Perceval’s childhood, fertile but unable to be exploited by a larger human population center (v.3463-65). This discourse of the social utility of the Waste Forest bleeds onto the characterization of its human inhabitant, Perceval, in the *Conte du Graal*. Perceval’s and the Waste Forest’s societal worth is inextricably linked to geographical isolation by the label “lande” or moor given by visiting knights to indicate the Waste Forest’s poor value. All the implications of the moor return in episode of the Tent Damsel, specifically in the name of her “ami,” Orgueilleus de la Lande, and in his and Perceval’s disrespectful treatment of the damsel. The idea of a “lande” as a remote area conducive to rape returns later in the *Conte* during Gauvain’s unchivalric intentions toward a bad-tempered damsel. Based on these associations, it makes sense that “lande” would become representative of a state of sin in the *Queste del Saint Graal*. The *Queste* exploits the biblical language of vegetal metaphors for human spirituality. Because an individual’s “spiritual health” is expressed with the vocabulary of thriving or ailing

vegetation, this metaphorical or allegorical mode remains connected with the material reality of agricultural concerns, the latter of which predominates in the *Conte du Graal*.

Wastelands

In the *Conte du Graal*, the first wasteland the audience encounters is the material consequence of human warfare, and the conflict between Arthur and Rion, King of the Islands, provides the subtext for the situation. Biaurepaire is under siege by Clamadieu, King of the Islands (v.1963: “Clamedex des Illes”), who may be the successor to Rion “Li rois des Illes” (v.810) defeated by Arthur’s forces before Perceval’s first visit to Arthur’s court. Arthur’s campaign against Rion, only referred to in narrative whispers, is thus at least indirectly responsible for Biaurepaire’s predicament. Upon its resolution, Arthur’s vassals abandoned their king and his court for their own lands, leaving him in a sorrowful mood at the moment of his initial encounter with Perceval (v.811-815) (Pickens 22–23). These conditions allow Clamadieu, the King of the Islands, to siege the isolated castle of Biaurepaire unopposed.

The seclusion of the castle is emphasized by the “solitary” forests (“ forez sotaines” v.1661) through which Perceval rides and by the sea, water and wasteland that surround it, to the exclusion of all else: “Mais ors des murs n’avoit noiant / Fors mer et eve et terre gaste” (v.1666-1667). Biaurepaire, like the Fisher King’s castle and the Waste Forest, is “sotaine,” hidden away in solitude from human population centers (Hinton, *The Conte du Graal cycle* 138). This scene which contains the most concentrated usage of “gaste” in the *Conte du Graal* has the most concrete context of warfare’s impact on human and non-human networks. Beyond this initial reference to the wasteland surrounding the castle (v.1667), “terre gaste” also describes the ruined city inside the outer wall (v.1708), and a third occurrence of “gaste” describes the famished castle, lacking resources (v.1769). The siege has agricultural and economic consequences for

Biaurepaire. Trade is disrupted, and only the arrival of merchants who are literally God-sent, blown off course with a boat filled with food and supplies, save those citizens not killed or carried off by Clamadieu's men. Fittingly, Perceval, child of the Waste Forest, will find love with Blanchefleur, the lady of the waste castle, whose face he will later see in blood drops in the snow. Both situations, of their initial meeting and of his later reverie, are far from the traditionally idyllic setting of courtly love poetry.

Blanchefleur, thin and pale, opens the outer door to Perceval, beyond which Perceval finds a few starved people remaining (v.1702-1706) and an abandoned city in ruins: "La terre gaste et escoee, / Dedanz rien ne li amanda, / Que partot la ou il ala / Trova enhermees les rues / Et les maisons toz dechaües, / C'ome ne fame n'i avoit." (v.1708-1713). Beyond the horror of the gutted houses and ravaged, deserted streets, Perceval also finds the city bereft of industry in the form of mills for grinding flour or ovens for baking bread: "Molins n'i most ne n'i cuist fors / An nul leu de tot lo chastel, / Ne n'i avoit pain ne gastel / Ne rien nule qui fust a vandre / Don l'an poïst un denier panre" (v. 1724-1728). This lays out the misery of their famine in material, financial terms: there is nothing to sell and nothing to buy. The wasteland surrounding the castle underlines the lack of "grist" for the mill even if it still stood, since the enemy army has destroyed any crops in the vicinity and depopulated the castle first by force and then by starvation. The word describing their ruination ("gaste") lurks inside the word for the cake that they no longer have ("gastel"), an irony which emphasizes the lack of resources at the waste castle ("chastel gaste") (Bloch 274, n.20). In this scene, the breakdown of the supply chain escalates from the lack of raw materials to the lack of artisans to make the finished product to the lack of merchants to sell or customers to buy.

At the moment of Perceval's arrival, Clamadieu's army cut off Biaurepaire from any trade networks that might have brought aid, and the situation can only improve after Perceval defeats the aggressor in single combat. In the meantime, Clamadieu's plan to starve them out is foiled by the miraculous arrival of a merchants' boat. God willed that a boat laden with wheat and other supplies be blown to shore to replenish the stores of this famished castle: "Cel jor meïsmes uns granz vanz / Ot par mer chacié une barge / Qui de fromant porte une charge / Et d'autre vitaille estoit plaine. / Si com Dé plot, antiere et saine / Est devant lo chastel venue" (v.2464-69). The people are recognizant of God's gift, the arrival of the merchants with bread, wine, salted pork, and live cattle and pigs ready to be butchered (v.2477-2481). The people of Biaurepaire are generous, offering liberal payment for the merchants' entire stock of wheat, wine and meat (these latter two more expensive fare, worth the offer of a cartload of gold and silver) (v.2486-2495).¹⁷ While this could paint the merchants in a positive light as the God-sent saviors of Biaurepaire, juxtaposing this episode with one later in the text from Gauvain's narrative offers a potentially critical perspective. In the episode of the tournament at Tintagel, Gauvain is mistaken for a merchant or a money changer who is accused of taking on the appearance of a knight to avoid taxes and free passage fees: "Por ce que ainsin cuide anbler / Les costumes et les pasaiges" (v.5012-13). The penalty would be hanging (v.5016-18). Because of these accusations, Gauvain will now have to take part in the tournament, which he had hitherto avoided because he feared being taken prisoner or wounded, which would delay his arrival at the castle of the king of Escavalon to face a murder charge (v.5019-5032). This suspicion of the lower classes is but one indication of the aristocratically-inclined viewpoint of these grail

¹⁷ Since meat is the rarer and more prized foodstuff, it is logical that it should become the placeholder for spiritual sustenance or "celestial mean" as we'll see in the *Queste*.

romances. Regardless, the Biaurepaire episode demonstrates the necessity of every link in an economic and social support system by describing its failure.

The rich and successful trade networks of Arthur's enemies offer a stark contrast with the famine and socio-economic disorder at Biaurepaire. The former presence of the merchant or artisanal class in Biaurepaire—and the suffering quality of life as a result of its absence—finds its opposing portrait in the bourgeoisie that is in revolt elsewhere, when Gauvain arrives unawares at the castle of his accuser, the King of Escavalon, who encounters him while hunting and grants him hospitality without recognizing him. The Castle of Escavalon houses a rich city bustling with artisans, including some of the most polluting professions, cloth makers and leather workers (v.5688-5708) (Leguay 11). A “vavasors” (v. 5758) working for Escavalon recognizes Gauvain, provoking the bourgeoisie (“la commune de ceste vile” v.5805) to attack the tower where the lady of the house is entertaining Gauvain. In contrast with the famished people of Biaurepaire, the bourgeoisie of Escavalon appear plump and well-fed, demonstrating their (distasteful) profit from this rich city: “Qu’il estoient et gros et gras” (v.5837). The lady of Escavalon calls them “vilennaille”, “chien enraigié” and “pute servaille” for not honoring Gauvain’s (mistakenly given) guest status (v.5881-2). This underlines the narrative perspective privileging the aristocracy and the people directly under their protection, with little sympathy for the “entitled” bourgeoisie supported by the economy of Arthur’s enemies. This scene with the bourgeoisie revolting despite economic success serves to underline the desperate situation of Biaurepaire as a waste castle. Its isolation would not have been unusual for a human population center in the Middle Ages. As Jacques Le Goff observes, the medieval city was an compact economic center of dense population located in the midst of vast rural areas (Le Goff 9). The

First Continuation shows us another vision of successful trade and commerce which serves to underline the poverty of the wasteland.

On his way to a deserted castle, where Gauvain will encounter a different enemy who had accused him of murder and rape (v.4340-44), the *First Continuation* offers the description of an idealized but deserted marketplace. The first aspect of this fantasy is clean well-paved streets. In his book on pollution in medieval France, Jean-Pierre Leguay begins by noting how the pristine depiction of medieval cities in manuscript illuminations belies the reality. Pollution has of course existed since at least Antiquity, but the degrading state of the paved Roman roads and the uptick in urbanization in medieval France resulted in accumulated human and animal waste, reflected in the “toponymie vicinale” established by the twelfth century, and the frequency of road names involving a variation on “merde” (Leguay 6–7). Richard Hoffmann adds that “merderon” at Troyes in 1208 “was but the first to enter written record” (Hoffmann 310). Leguay also provides anecdotal evidence from the *Chroniques de Saint-Denis* to prove medieval awareness of the problem. In Philip Augustus’ Paris (early thirteenth century), the smell resulting from a cart disturbing accumulated waste near the road drifts up to the king’s window, resulting in the king’s immediate order that Paris’ streets be properly paved, with the implication that gutters be included for wastewater to flow away (Leguay 8–9).

In the fantasy deserted city in the *First Continuation*, its dirtless roads feature decorated paving-stones: “De cortines rices ouvrees / Furent totes encortinees / Les rues par ont il passa” (Coolput-Storms v.4007-09). In the deserted marketplace, Gauvain sees rich silk fabrics or “pailles,” gold- and silverware, “vaisele d’argent et d’or,” laid out, along with money exchange tables “[r]ices tables a cangeors” including currency from many different places, but no people in sight (v.404-4018). All these rich products and currencies are proof of an extensive trade

network like at Escavalon in the *Conte du Graal*, in which the members of Arthur's court do not take part. In the *First Continuation*, Gauvain rationalizes the absence of people in the city by speculating that the people have gone to greet their lord who had just returned with his troops (v.4028-32). Although this happens to be the case, there is nevertheless a preponderance of deserted castles in the grail romances, from the expected and realistic scenario of Biaurepaire to the mysterious and unexplained absence of people in the Fisher King's Castle the morning after Perceval's failed viewing of the Grail Procession. This is perhaps evocative of the audience's contemporary history and experience of famine and warfare, and is certainly consonant with the war-torn backdrops of these narratives (Pickens 148). The mismanagement of the Fisher King's resources provides the whispered context to the Hideous Damsel's scene which continues to link human and environmental dis/function.

Critics like Brigitte Cazelles and Kisha G. Tracy credit the Hideous Damsel with the rhetorical invention of the future Wasteland in the *Conte du Graal* as a consequence of Perceval's failings in the Fisher King's realm (Tracy 109; Cazelles 143). In her "social" reading of the text, Cazelles posits that the Hideous Damsel fabricates this bleak future in an attempt to lure Perceval and other knights away from Arthur's service (Cazelles 144). These critics argue that the Hideous Damsel's description of the Fisher King's realm as wasteland is an unsubstantiated reality in the text (Hinton, "New Beginnings and False Dawns" 44). However, the Fisher King's castle, often associated with the Celtic otherworld, shares one quality with the Wasteland in its uncanny place in Chrétien's text: the absence of human population. Just before arriving at the Fisher King's castle, Perceval travels a day from Biaurepaire without seeing any Christian man or woman who could tell him which way to go: "Et tot jor sa voie tint / Qu'il n'encontra rien terrieine / Ne crestien ne crestieine / Qui li saüst voie ensaignier" (v.2914-17).

Leaving the Grail Castle, Perceval meets a young woman (who turns out to be his cousin) who was surprised at the speed with which Perceval had reached her current location, since there was no shelter to be had for fifty miles (“[c]inquantés liues” v.3408) in that direction (v.3404-3411). The impossible distances and hidden status of the Grail Castle are part of its supernatural charm, but the deserted nature of its environs recalls the basic vocabulary of the Wasteland, “deserter,” “essillier,” and “gaster”, all of which incorporate an element of human absence into the environmental desolation. The Fisher King’s realm is otherwise not currently a wasteland in the way that Biaurepaire is “terre gaste”, since his lands possess game to hunt, and the Fisher King appears able to provide sufficiently for his immediate dependants (v.3463-65). The rebuke that Perceval receives from the Hideous Damsel reveals the presupposition that the health of the people (including successful governance) and the productivity of the land are interdependent, and moreover the importance land holds for nobility as a major form of wealth.

In the *Conte du Graal*, Perceval’s portion of the narrative sees him leave his secluded childhood in the Waste Forest to become a knight. Initiation interpretations (whether in a human or mythic context) show Perceval’s gradual acquisition of societal norms, chivalric technique and courtly love along the way (Bruckner 92–94; Walter 36–55). Perceval’s meteoric rise to chivalric fame peaks with his return to Arthur’s court, which is interrupted by the arrival of the Hideous Damsel. Like Perceval, she is another “outsider” to society; no damsel like her has ever been seen at court: “Ainz mes tes damoisele nule / Ne fu a cort de roi veüe” (v.4572-73). She fits well into the pattern of Perceval’s peripheral wanderings (receiving instruction at Gornemant’s secluded castle, then aiding Biaurepaire under siege with no one else near enough to notice, then the incongruous distances separating the Grail Castle from the outside world). The Hideous Damsel’s animalistic ugliness, with her eyes like a rat’s, her nose like a cat’s or

monkey's, her lips like a cow's, "si oil estoient [...] / Petit ensin com oil de rat, / Ses nes fu de singe o de chat / Et ses levres o de buief" (v.4556-59), echoes the characterization voiced by a knight upon meeting Perceval in the Waste Forest, that Welshmen are as senseless (or idiotic) as beasts in pasture: "Galois sont tuit par nature / Plus fol que bestes en pasture" (v.237-38). She greets everyone but Perceval (demonstrating a degree of social grace that Perceval lacked upon his first visit to Arthur's court) and then berates him for not asking why the lance at the Fisher King's castle bleeds nor who was the rich man ("riche home", v.4593) served by the grail (v. 4574-4593). According to the Hideous Damsel, Perceval's failure means that the king will never regain his kingdom, a proclamation reversed by the *First Continuation*, which preferred that Gauvain effect a partial rectification of the wrong. In the *Conte du Graal*, however, this lack of a healthy ruler will lead to the breaking-down of society: women will lose their husbands, lands will be destroyed, young girls will remain orphans, and knights will die: "Dames en perdront lor mariz, / Terres en seront essilliees / Et puceles desconseilliees, / Qui orferines remanront, / Et maint chevalier en morront : / Tuit cil [mal] av[en]ront par toi!" (v.4608-4613). Although these words are uttered by the Hideous Damsel, a similar message is delivered by Perceval's female cousin, the Hideous Damsel; these female figures including Gauvain's "male damoisele" all play the same role for the men in the narrative, pointing out the truth, however unkindly. Since the reference to destroyed land occurs in a series of predictions concerned with the fate of the human population, there is a logical connection between the destruction of the land and the absence of people, which we find supported in the vocabulary orbiting wastelands, particularly toward the beginning of the text, when Perceval's mother tells of the social disintegration in the aftermath of Arthur's father's death, when knightly violence claimed first her husband and later her two older sons.

In her speech above, the Hideous Damsel does not actually use the literal equivalent for “wasteland” in Old French, “terre gaste”. Instead, the Hideous Damsel envisions environmental damage by describing the lands as damaged or “essillies” (v.4711). Earlier in the text, Perceval’s mother’s use of “essillier” establishes a parallel between human and non-human damage in her account of the ruin of the aristocracy and its land following Uther Pendragon’s death. She begins with her husband’s wound, similar to the Fisher King’s, “par mi les anches navrez”, which results in the loss of his original wealth: “Si chaï en grant provreté” (v.408; 413). Next she recounts how the fate of Perceval’s father became the fate of all nobility: “Apovri et desserité / Et essillié furent a tort / Li gentil home après la mort / Uter Pandragon, qui rois fu / Et pere lo bon roi Artu. / Les terres furent essillies / Et les povres gens avillies” (v.407-21). The main meaning of “essillier” is “to exile,” from the Medieval Latin “exiliare,” which applies to its first use here to describe the wrongful exile of the impoverished and disinherited nobility during the chaos following Arthur’s father’s death. By extension “essillier” can also mean “to ravage, to devastate, to pillage, to ruin, to waste,” which applies to the fate of aristocratically-held lands. Here as above in the speech of the Hideous Damsel, the fate of the people and the land are tied together: the destruction of the land leads to the fall of the nobles and vice-versa.

In the context of realistic wastelands like Biaurepaire, the Hideous Damsel’s warning may serve another purpose: to force Perceval (and the other knights, and the audience) to look at their surroundings, to see the material consequences of war, trade disruption, and ineffective leadership. The Hideous Damsel’s prediction of a dire future for the Fisher King’s land has very concrete causes associated with it: a wounded king cannot enforce peace or manage his subjects’ resources.

Perceval's cousin reveals to him the identity of his host, "lo riche Roi Pescheor" (v.3433), and explains how the Rich Fisher King was wounded in battle by a javelin "between the two thighs," a euphemism for castration: "Si fu navrez d'un javelot / Parmi les anches amedeus" (v.3450-3451). We have seen that Perceval's father suffered the same kind of wound as this king. There is a metonymical symmetry in the fact that the Fisher King was struck by a javelin, an uncivilized weapon and Perceval's weapon of choice at the beginning of the narrative, and the fact that Perceval is unable to ask the questions that would heal the Fisher King, who is also his cousin. If the "dolorous blow" from the javelin stands in for Perceval's ineptitude and brutality, the Fisher King may be returning the favor blow for blow: the Fisher King gave Perceval a sword destined to betray him by breaking in battle, as the young lady (his cousin) reveals afterward (v.3592-3601). Either way, unchecked violence is at the origin of this "failure of sovereignty" (Bloch 260). Even if the Fisher King is not responsible for his weak leadership resulting from his wound, Perceval fails to accept responsibility for the land and people of his kin. Perceval reveals a disinterest in the mysteries of power when he does not ask questions about these lines of authority: who is served by the grail? He should have also asked about the Lance that Bleeds, which is later revealed to be the potential vehicle for the destruction of the kingdom of Logres, and in other texts receives a religious coding. Gauvain, who stands accused of murder, is given a quest: to bring the Bleeding Lance to the King of Escavalon, enemy of King Arthur (v.6084-6117). This is the idea of "un saiges vavasors" (v.6075), who then specifies the future harmful effect of the Bleeding Lance on Arthur's kingdom of Logres: "Que toz li realmes de Logres, / Qui jadis fu la terre as ogres / Sera destruis por cele lance"(v.6095-6097) (Pickens 134). In Chrétien's text, the continued activity of Arthur's enemies at Biaurepaire, war's refugees populating the Roche de Champguin, and the mismanagement of the

Fisher King's resources all reveal the human and environmental cost of violence. The vocabulary of desolation supports this linking of the human with the non-human in the grail romances.

In the *Conte du Graal* and in an even earlier text, the *Chanson de Roland*, wasteland terminology such as “deserter,” “essillier,” and “gaster,” are almost exclusively used for material environmental damage linked to human absence. In Chapter One, in the context of *chansons de geste* and their setting of epic war, we saw France damaged (deserted, depopulated) in the *Chanson de Roland* by the slaughter of its people in the mountain pass: “Tere de France, mult estes dulz païs, / Oi desertet a tant rubostl exill” (*laisse* 140 v.1861-2). Similarly, in Saracen-held Spain, the city of Galne that Roland attacked will remain as he left it, uninhabited in a state of ruin, for one hundred years: “puis icel jur en fut cent anz deserte” (*laisse* 53 v.664). The Latinate heritage of this early example of French literature is visible in its language, and the word “deserte” resonates with meanings in common with the Medieval Latin verb “desertare”: to desert, to devastate, to waste or allow to become waste. We will see that the grail romances under consideration here use the same language to describe environmental consequences of human violence, whether the human cause and environmental effect are proportional or symbolically exaggerated.

Again in the *Chanson de Roland*, a variation on “gaster” is used for environmental destruction in conjunction with Charlemagne killing Marsile's men and destroying Spain: “Mort m'ad mes homes, ma terre deguastee” (*laisse* 198 v.2756). Although the degree of damage implies the inability of humans to inhabit the area, in this early text “gaster” seems to apply exclusively to literal environmental destruction. This is also the case in the Biaurepaire section, where “gaste” is plugged into a material supply network of agriculture, trade and commerce

disrupted by war. In the thirteenth-century *Queste del Saint Graal*, however, two kingdoms, one of them Logres, became wastelands (“Terre Gaste”) because of a Dolorous Blow in the past (in contrast with the *Conte du Graal* where Logres and the Fisher King’s realm will be wastelands in the future, by the Bleeding Lance or by Perceval’s ineptitude). In the *Queste*, a cursed sword arrived in an unmanned boat in the kingdom of Logres during a time of war between King Lambar (father to the Maimed or Fisher King) and Varlan, a newly converted Saracen. Varlan jumped into the boat and killed Lambar with the sword, and this one murder by the sword’s first blow, “le premiers cox de ceste espee,” has ecological consequences for two kingdoms, which results in both becoming wastelands: “Si en avint si grant pestilence et si grant persecucion es deus roiaumes [...] Et por ce a len apelee la terre des deus roiaumes la Terre Gaste, por ce que par cel doulereus cop avoit esté agastie” (Pauphilet 204). The focus is on the sterility of the land, as if corrupted by human sin, and the lack of production of crops, fruit in the trees, fish in the streams, instead of on the human cost of this lack of natural resources, starvation, poverty and economic stagnation, as we have seen in Biaurepaire: “les terres ne rendirent as laboureors lor travaux, car puis n’i crut ne blé ne autre chose, ne li arbre ne porterent fruit, ne en l’eve ne furent trové poisson, se petit non” (Pauphilet 204). This description does not resemble a natural disaster like the drought in the *Elucidation* (below); however, the loss focuses on commodities, fish, fruit, wheat, and the unsustainability of medieval fishing practices to sustain urban demands (particularly during Lent) is well documented (Hoffmann 301–04; Magnusson 192). The *Queste* uses similar vocabulary based on “gaster” in this metonymical wasteland, where two kingdoms are not realistically destroyed from the clash of two armies, but rendered mysteriously infertile by the murder of one king. In the *Queste*, this focus can be explained in part by the discourses of spiritual sterility and fertility that infuse the text, using vegetal metaphors and agricultural

models, which will be discussed in the second section. The spiritual sterility expressed by this sin of murder polluted the land of the two kingdoms involved in war, and the metonymical logic is supported by material realities of environmental desolation during combat.

The past destruction of Logres receives a more logical if still metonymical explanation in the *Elucidation*, a short “prologue” that precedes the *Conte du Graal* and three of its continuations in the Mons manuscript of the thirteenth century (Hinton, “New Beginnings and False Dawns”). In this version of events, Logres became a wasteland when the way to the wells was lost, along with the damsels that brought travelers food and drink there: “Li roiaumes torna a perte, / La tiere fu morte et deserte, / Si que puis ne valu .ii. nois; / Qu'il pierdirent des puis les vois / Et les puceles k'ens estoient” (Thompson and Chrétien v.29-33). The author of the *Elucidation* uses the word “deserte” to describe a dead and deserted third of the kingdom, worth less than “two nuts” now, due like in the *Queste* to the misbehavior of a king. The editor of the text has noted the fairy-like behavior of these damsels of the wells, and there is even a taboo that “Rois Amangons l'enfraint premiers” (v63), that King Amagon transgressed with his vassals by raping the damsels and stealing their golden cups, with which he was ever after served (v71) (Thompson and Chrétien 39–44; Harf-Lancner, *Les Fées Au Moyen Age* 87; Gallais 6; Bloch 258). Just as Laurence Harf-Lancner has observed the formula present in fairy narratives, so Hinton notes a dynamic in the Old Testament tale of Adam and Eve or the Greek myth of Cupid and Psyche that resembles the *Elucidation*: “The rape scene ... characterizes desire as dangerously transgressive. It also introduces the familiar notion that transgression leads to loss,” not of Paradise this time, but of water (Hinton, “New Beginnings and False Dawns” 47).

Similar to the destruction or appropriation of resources by Arthur’s enemies in the *Conte du Graal*, King Amagon acquired the cups with a “fonction nourricière” which had previously

been attributed to the damsels, and which were now reserved for his own personal use, not offered freely to passers-by as before (v69-71) (Meneghetti 57). “Fors del puis une damosele / ... / Coupe d'or portoit en sa main / Avoec lardés, pastés et pain” (v45; 47-48). Not unlike the Grail of another thirteenth century text, the *Queste*, these cups provided the requested meal: “Li més ke cil requis avoit / Qui pour le més estoit venus” (v.52-53). This abundance of foodstuffs is reminiscent of flourishing markets and trade routes in the *Conte du Graal* and the *First Continuation*, which stands in opposition to Biaurepaire.

In the *Elucidation*, the environmental consequences of the loss of the wells, the plants withering and the waters receding, seem causally linked to the economic distress inflicted on the region when the court of the Fisher King is lost, which was as generous with gold and other goods (rich furs, meats, falcons, etc.) as the damsels’ golden cups were with food of all sorts: “Li roiaumes si agasti / K'ains puis n'i ot arbre fuelli; / Li pre et les flor[s] essecierent / Et les aigic apeticierent, / Ne on ne peut puis trover jor / Le cort au rice Pescheour” (v.95-102). The environment dried up and wasted away (“agasti”), morally polluted by these acts of rape sanctioned by a king, and the abuse of the damsels’ “cornucopian service” erased well-trodden paths to the wells (Hinton, “New Beginnings and False Dawns” 48). Since monetary wealth of the nobility was dependent upon agricultural prosperity, there is a kind of logic behind the fact that water and financial sources dry up in tandem. We have already seen in the Biaurepaire episode the extent to which agricultural concerns like land and water are linked to economic ones, so it is to be expected that the kingdom’s source of financial support, the Fisher King, vanishes along with the water, without which a kingdom cannot generate produce for sustenance or trade (Verdon 124–129). These episodes of moral pollution are still anchored in material realities of commerce, agriculture, and war that would have been familiar to medieval audiences.

There is no thought in the *Elucidation* for the fate of the people living on this land; unlike in wasteland descriptions in the *Conte du Graal*, their unhappy fate is implied. The material language of environmental and economic impact is appropriated for this figurative usage to condemn royal misbehavior and socially irresponsible violence. As we'll see in the next section, rape falls into the category of "socially irresponsible violence" mainly because it damages relations with the woman's male relatives, but the subjectivity of these damsels whom the men "force" is not at stake here. The damsels vanish from the narrative immediately thereafter, and the children of these rapes appear later as challengers to the authority of the Round Table. It is perhaps also telling that this kind of wasteland—morally polluted but anchored in material realities—is the kind that can be healed in the texts orbiting the *Conte du Graal*, even if not in the *Conte* itself. This discourse of dryness is reversed with the curing of the wasteland in the *Elucidation*, a re-writing of what is only partially achieved in the *First Continuation*.

The *Elucidation* describes the restoration of the land following Gauvain's Grail Castle visit in uncomplicated terms, delighting in the re-discovery of the Fisher King's court which results in the waters and fountains running again "les aigues qui ne couroient / Et les fontaines ki naissoient," the lushness and verdure of the vegetation, "furent li pre vert et dru, / Et li bos fuelli et vestu" and the "peopling" or stocking of the realm (with humans and other animals, one presumes): "Par coi pupla si li regnés" (v.388-394). Gauvain's success in reversing the Wasteland is incomplete in the *First Continuation*, and is thus recounted with more restraint. Contrary to the *Elucidation*'s version, where the agency for environmental restoration is mysterious, in the *First Continuation* God is the power that returns life to the land overnight because Gauvain asked one question correctly at the Grail Castle (about the Bleeding Lance): "Nule terre plus bel garnie / D'aigue, de bos, de prairie. / C'estoit li roiaumes destruis" (v.7755-

57). As in the *Elucidation*, the return of longed-for water (“As aiges leur cors el país”) is a crucial step to the wasteland’s recovery, which results in the desired re-greening of the forest (v.7761). But the cure goes no further than the non-human environment, since he asked no other questions: “Par ç’avint que plus n’en pepla / Par ço que plus n’en demanda” (v.7766-7768). The people living there call out to him, their reactions ambivalent, happy to have a limited healing of the wasteland, but unhappy he didn’t ask why the Grail serves: “Del Graal por quoi il servoit” (v.7779). An unspecified “grant joie” (v.7780) would have resulted from that question: spiritual salvation for humanity that, in the audience’s eyes, would have made mere material resources pale in comparison.

In these late twelfth-century and thirteenth-century grail romances (the *First Continuation*, the *Elucidation*, and the *Queste*), the description of wastelands lingers on the environmental symptoms, to the exclusion of the social and economic consequences for the human population, which tends to be the focus of wasteland sequences (the Fisher King’s realm, the Roche de Champguin, Biaurepaire) in the *Conte du Graal*. In these later texts, the focus on the non-human environment stands in for the state of humanity in the eyes of God. In these three texts, human moral actions are key: murder (using a blade reserved only for the righteous) and sex (outside the social and religious confines of marriage) provokes overt or implicit divine retribution that one can read on the landscape, as in a book: “la nature médiévale est le livre où se lit la présence du Dieu chrétien, qu’elle ne parle que de ce Dieu” (Zink 25). Creation functions not only as a mirror of the Creator in Christian thought during the twelfth century and after, but it also reflects humanity’s life, destiny, condition and death, as in Alain of Lille’s “The Book of Creation”: “Omnis mundi creature / quasi liber et pictura / nobis est in speculum; / nostrae vitae, nostrae sortis, / nostri status, nostrae mortis / fidele signaculum” (Lille, “The Book

of Creation” v.1–6).¹⁸ The instances of environmental revivification in the *First Continuation* and the *Elucidation* are equally motivated by metonymical equivalences, giving human actions (asking one correct question and listening to the answer, or finding the Fisher King’s court) the power to undo the moral pollution resulting from human misbehavior. This represents the symbolic or divine abridgment of a wasteland’s natural ecological recovery, given time, as seen with Biaurepaire in the *Second Continuation*. Perceval’s second voyage to Biaurepaire finds it fully recovered and unrecognizably flourishing in every respect, and Thomas Hinton notes that “the transformation is the logical consequence of Perceval’s previous passage at Biaurepaire, where he had freed the town from a crippling siege,” as we will see below (Hinton, *The Conte du Graal cycle* 138). The restoration of trade has undoubtedly helped the inhabitants as their devastated land recovered.

The Dolorous Blow topos is the more realistic kind of metonymy, one stroke of a blade or lance standing in for the devastation of war, and it also resonates with the biblical context of Cain and Abel, wherein God curses the earth which Cain had soaked with his brother’s blood. As the story is retold in the *Queste*, this murder takes place at the base of a cutting from the Tree of Life that Eve removed from the Garden at the moment of the Fall. After this event, the Tree of Life turns red and bleeds when cut, like the material damage done during warfare, to human bodies that bleed and to vegetal bodies which are similarly destroyed. This stage also evokes the Bleeding Lance, although no *rapprochement* is made in the text between these two objects associated with the grail quest. The aftermath of the Dolorous Blow often results in a broken sword, such as the one at the dead knight’s feet in the Grail Castle in the *First Continuation* (v.7188), also mentioned in the *Elucidation* (v.251-254), and a broken sword is also in Perceval’s

¹⁸ Translation by Wetherbee.

future in the *Conte du Graal* (as we saw above). Add in the *Queste*'s cursed sword in the boat, and this topos seems to suggest the ineffectiveness of violent solutions. From a material perspective, destruction of the land and the people eliminates avenues which conquerors could appropriate for economic benefit, via trade if not through direct exploitation of local structures or systems. However, there are acceptable forms of violence that differ from text to text. In the *Conte du Graal*, the Bleeding Lance would destroy the Kingdom of Logres. In the *First Continuation*, however, the Lance is specifically said to be the one that pierced Christ's heart when he was crucified, and it will bleed until the day of Last Judgement (v.7435-7448). As the Fisher King explains, that blow saved humanity from hell, but the blow that broke the sword destroyed the kingdom of Logres. The text enumerates the destruction of many kings, counts, barons, ladies and damsels, "Qu'il a mis a destrusion / Maint roi, maint conte et maint baron, / Mainte dame et mainte pucele / Et mainte gentil damoisele" (v.7469-72). The social upheaval that normally results from war is attributed to "just this sword's blow": "Li roiaumes de Logres fu / Destruis, et tote la contree, / Par seul le cop de ceste espee" (v.7476-78). This account pays little attention to environmental damage, unlike the *Queste*'s account of the "doulereus cop" or Dolorous Blow above. With the exception of the deployment of a bit of wasteland vocabulary, "essilie," just before Gauvain falls asleep, this is the only suggestion of the desolated state of the Kingdom of Logres before the moment of its healing, which is linked to sin: "Ce fu damages et peciés, / Car par cest cop fu essilie / La terre qui tant fu prisie / De Logres et tos li roiaumes" (v.7700-7703). Since Gauvain hadn't slept the night before, neither he nor the audience gets to know the full story of who struck the blow, whom the sword killed as it broke, nor whose sin ("peciés") wasted Logres and all the kingdoms.

But violence is not the only sin that is morally contagious, infecting the surrounding environment and society. After the first murderous blow of the cursed sword in the *Queste*, those who attempted to pull the sword from its sheath committed a sin of pride more than a sin of murderous intent, since the sword bore an inscription warning that only the one who could act better than any other and be most courageous (“se il ne doit mielz fere que autre et plus hardiement”) could pull it out without being killed or maimed (“morz ou mehaigniez”) (Pauphilet 203). Galaad being the purest, most Christian knight is of course the only one able to draw out the blade without divine retaliation. The Maimed King himself, named Parlan in the *Queste*, suffered the wound that only Galaad can cure as a result of having handled the cursed sword. Parlan pulled the sword partially from its sheath as the grail heroes find it in the boat, and he would have pulled it all the way out, except that a lance came out of nowhere and struck him the castrating blow, “between and beyond” his thighs, that refuses to heal until Galaad’s intervention: “par mi oultre les deus cuisses, si durement qu’il en remest mehaigniez si com il apert encore, ne onques puis n’en pot garir, ne ne fera devant que vos vendroiz a lui” (Pauphilet 209). In spite of this litany of kingdom-wide consequences for individual human transgressions, which reflect the material reality of war, which causes all to suffer its consequences, some violence receives divine sanction in the *Queste*. The demonic slaughter that Galaad, Bohort and Perceval enact at Castel Carcelois is God’s punishment for rape and murder; yet as we will see in the second section of this chapter, even Gauvain, flower of knighthood, is in a marginal position of morality in the *Conte du Graal*.

In the Castel Carcelois episode, Galaad is mistaken for a demon (“anemis”), so fiercely do he and his companions fight Arthur’s enemies (Pauphilet 230; Black 152–3). As Nancy Black has observed, the guilt of the grail heroes, who briefly considered themselves sinners for having

killed so many people (“se tienent a pescheors [...] il ont ocis tant de gent”), is quickly assuaged by the arrival of a priest, who explains the backstory of this castle. A year ago, three brothers raped their sister and killed her when she told her father. When the brothers put their father in prison, God assured the father that three “sergeants of Jesus Christ” (“trois serjanz Jhesucrist”) would avenge this wrongdoing: the grail heroes. Upon dying the father transmits a message from God, that Galaad should now go to Parlan the Maimed King and restore his health by his arrival (Pauphilet 233). Here violence is a divinely sanctioned means to rectify human wrongs and indirectly results in the healing of the Maimed King, but Black is quick to point out that despite two justified wars, “the dominant image of war projected in the *Queste* is that which resulted in the Wasteland. [...] Because so much of the *Queste* turns on the restoration of health to the Wasteland and the Maimed King, the most prominent view of war to this point is a negative one” (Black 156). We have already seen that this adverse view of war is painted by the wasteland of besieged Biaurepaire in the *Conte du Graal*, entirely due to human agency. This is perhaps evocative of the audience’s contemporary history and experience of famine and warfare, and is certainly consonant with the war-torn backdrops of these narratives (Pickens 148). The *Conte du Graal* in particular begins with Perceval’s mother’s account of the social upheaval following Uther Pendragon’s death, and this unfinished text trails off with the Roche de Champguin episode, whose inhabitants, like Perceval’s mother, are those displaced and dispossessed by war, including two queens believed to be dead.

We have seen how in late twelfth and thirteenth century grail romances, the ecological damage sometimes stands in for the human cost of war. To finish up this section, I’d like to return to the *Conte du Graal*, and The Roche de Champguin episode, which acts as a bookend with the Fisher King’s future Wasteland in the *Conte du Graal*, providing a visualization of the

human damages to come (Bruckner 114). In addition to men of all ages with no one to make knights of them (v.7479-89), noble women who lost their husbands and were disinherited have sought refuge here, as well as orphaned girls: “Et si a dames ancienes / Qui n’ont ne mariz ne seignors, / Ainz sunt de terres et d’enors / Deseritees a grant tort / Puis que lor mari furent mort / Et damoiseles orphenines / Et avec les does reïnes, / Qui molt a grant honor les tienent” (v.7490-97). These two queens, the orphaned girls, the widows and the men await a knight who will right these wrongs and restore them into human society, who will return land to the widows, give husbands to the young ladies, and make knights of the men. These are the flotsam and jetsam of wars in Arthur’s realm, and they find refuge in this castle at the cost of isolation.

Gauvain (riding a “roncin”, nag) arrives at the “la Roche del Chanpguin”¹⁹ after passing through lonely waste forests (“Par forestz gastes et soteignes” v.7139) before seeing the castle on the other side of a river so wide no catapult or crossbow shot could reach the other side: “Sor une riviere parfonde, / Ensi lee que nule fonde / De mangonel ne de perriere / Ne gitast outre la riviere, / Ne harbeleste n’i traissist” (v.7141-45). The castle on the other side of the river must assure its own protection as its inhabitants await the arrival of a morally perfect knight. Since Arthur was unable to protect them in Logres, this castle is well guarded: “il i a molt bone garde” (v.7434). The isolated and self-sufficient status of Roche de Champguin resembles the realm of the Fisher King that Perceval entered earlier. In the *Queste*, the search for Galaad, virtuous and chaste, is successful, but Gauvain will undo the enchantments of the castle, including the Marvelous Bed, but will not stay. In the next section, we will see Gauvain’s questionable morality revealed in conjunction with an isolated location far from civilization.

¹⁹ (Chrétien de Troyes, *Le Conte Du Graal Ou Le Roman de Perceval* 610) v.41-42 in Ms A, which fills the lacuna in Ms B.

In this section, we have seen that moral pollution in these medieval texts is never conceived as being purely symbolic; even in the *Queste*, the material and spiritual are conjoined. Whether human action equals environmental damage or whether the destruction was exponential to the act, this violence links together agricultural and economic ruin. Sometimes the Wasteland awaits us in the future, but more often it was incurred in the narrative as the result of human actions in the near or distant past, by realistic war or Dolorous Blow (Mahoney 101).²⁰ The way in which these authors deploy the Wasteland topos underlines the causal relationship between human violence and environmental destruction. From the images of sterility in the Wasteland, we turn our attention now to unexpected images of fertility in the Waste Forest, where the vocabulary of the wasteland raises the question of social utility, of Perceval's home place, and of Perceval himself.

Waste Forests and Moors

From the very first lines of his *Conte du Graal*, Chrétien introduces themes of fertility and sterility, ostentatiously of the written word and its ability to communicate meaning or *senefiance* to its chosen audience. “ / Et qui auques recoillir viaut / En tel leu sa semence espande / Que fruit a cent doble li rande / [...] / Crestiens seime et fait semence / D'un romanz que il encomence / Et si lo seime en sin bon leu / Qu'il ne puet estre sanz grant preu” (v.1-10) (Hinton, *The Conte du Graal cycle* 111). Critics have seized upon the spiritual implications of this prologue, which goes on to praise his benefactor Count Philip of Flanders as a shining

²⁰ A comparative table of grail romances across time and language fits with the findings in this chapter's limited corpus.

example of Christian charity, as opposed to Alexander the Great's prideful vices (v.11-58). Rupert T. Pickens in particular notes the biblical intertext for this "seminal word topos" that will be picked up by later texts inspired by the *Conte du Graal* like the *Queste del Saint Graal* (Pickens 11). St. Paul's II Corinthians 9:6 and the Parable of the Sower (Matthew 13:22-23) use agricultural metaphor to convey success in spiritual and verbal communication. Chrétien's first words, "Qui petit seime petit quiaut," clearly mirror the Vulgate Latin version of the Second Epistle of Saint Paul to the Corinthians: "qui parce seminat, parce et metet: et qui seminat in benedictionibus, de benedictionibus et metet" ("He who soweth sparingly, shall also reap sparingly: and he who soweth in blessings, shall also reap blessings") (Challoner 9:6). Chrétien goes on to specify that he will sow his words "in good soil," in a receptive audience, and the return on his effort will increase a hundredfold, "fruit a cent doble li rande," (v.4). He is obviously playing on the Parable of the Sower, in which a person open to God's word is like rich earth: "Qui vero in terram bonam seminatus est, hic est qui audit verbum, et intelligit, et fructum affert, et facit aliud quidem centesimum, aliud autem sexagesimum, aliud vero trigesimum" / "But he that received the seed upon good ground, is he that heareth the word, and understandeth, and beareth fruit, and yieldeth the one an hundredfold, and another sixty, and another thirty" (Matthew 13:22-23). Chrétien imagines an audience resistant to his literary prowess as "useless earth" or "en terre qui rien ne vaut" (v.5), just as God's word cannot bear fruit "among the thorns" in the Parable of the Sower: "Qui autem seminatus est in spinis, hic est qui verbum audit, et sollicitudo saeculi istius, et fallacia divitiarum suffocat verbum, et sine fructu efficitur." / "And he that received the seed among thorns, is he that heareth the word, and the care of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choketh up the word, and he becometh fruitless" (Challoner Matthew 13:22). The *Queste* will consistently exploit this biblical language of vegetal

metaphors for human spirituality. But in the *Conte du Graal*, this prologue also announces parallels in material environmental concerns. Pickens focuses on Perceval's mother's harrowers working the fields, but there is also the idea of worthless land (“terre qui rien ne vaut”) that is at stake in Perceval's first encounter with the knights, and in the characterization of his home, the Waste Forest (Pickens 18).

After all the environmental and human desolation associated with the term “gaste” in the first section of this chapter, it is shocking to return to the beginning of the *Conte du Graal* to find the lonely Waste Forest, “la gaste forest soutaine,” with flourishing foliage, “arbre florissent,” birds singing “an lor latin”, crops being planted, and Perceval out hunting game with his javelins (v.73; 67; 69). Zink has observed how the springtime beginning of Chrétien's text and the “latin” of the birds evoke no desire in this young man (Zink 177). Perceval does not think of love in this remote world of the Waste Forest that has no other people in it, according to the later addition to the *Conte du Graal* cycle of a second prologue, the *Bliocadran* (Wolfgang v.742–47). Instead he intends to visit his mother's harrowers or “hercheors” who are covering over oats in the fields, a very concrete agricultural association for this time of the year, elsewhere reserved for courtly love: “li filz a la veuve dame / [...] / Se leva et ne li fu paine / Que il sa sele ne meist / Sor un chaceor et preïst / Trois javeloz et tot ensin / Ors do menoir sa mere issi / Et pansa que veoir iroit / Hercheors que sa mere avoit / Qui ses avaines li erchoient. / Bues .X. et .V. erches avoient” (v.72-82). The richness indicated by the six harrows drawn by twelve oxen in Perceval's mother's field is offset by social sterility in the human realm (Pickens 18). Perceval is introduced as the son of the Widowed Lady (v.72) in the “soutaine” or solitary Waste Forest. The hunter (“chaceor”) type of horse that Perceval mounts is as Welsh (and thus uncouth in French court society) as Perceval's javelins and clothing (Pickens 24). The qualification of

Perceval's forest as "gaste" becomes clearer now, given that isolation and human absence are well-established qualities of the wasteland. The use of "soutaine" could also indicate the fact that the Waste Forest appears at the start of the story—and the end of the *Bliocadran*—to be a hidden "other world" with regards to Arthur's court, through which only lost knights venture.

When Perceval's mother first arrived in the Waste Forest in the *Bliocadran*, it is not environmental fertility lacking, but the presence of human society. In order to avoid death by chivalric violence for her son, Perceval's mother retires with her small household staff to "la gaste forest" (v.476), which is by definition deserted of other people: "Si que il ne veïst nului / Fors cex qui seroient o lui" (v.481-82). The Waste Forest in the *Conte du Graal* lacks resources to export that would support large-scale urban production that was rampant in the twelfth century. This is not necessarily changed in the *Bliocadran*. Upon Perceval's mother's initial arrival in "la gaste forest" (v.674), the area surrounding the Waste Forest is deserted, lovely and green. In its vicinity, there is a moor, or "lande", and a prairie, and a large river which lends itself to local human industry in the form of a mill: "La lande, et desos ot un pre / Qui molt fu biax et avenans, / Et desos une aigue molt grans / Qui de la forest descendoit ; / Et saciés que molt bele estoit, / Et çou vos puis dire en la fin / C'om en feïst morre un molin" (v.671-684). The people that Perceval's mother brought with her also have enough wood from the forest to build their lady a house: "assés mairien / De la forest que ci veés" (v.702-3). They set to clearing a section of earth by removing the wood: "essarter / Et de[l] mairien faire aprester" (v.709-10). After the house, they prepare the earth and sow wheat (v.721-24). Although Perceval's mother's household continues to be able to plant a field in the Waste Forest in the *Conte du Graal*, the knights that Perceval encounters for the first time bring with them a different conception of the environment that Perceval calls home.

The knights that Perceval in his ignorance mistakes for angels, demons or gods come into the Waste Forest in search of five knights and three damsels (“*.V. chevaliers et .III. puceles*”, v.179), and their entrance into these surroundings changes the audience’s perception of Perceval’s environment. As the knights ride through the forest, the trees (oaks and hornbeams) are small enough to batter the knights with their branches: “*sovant hurtoient as armes / Li rain des chanes et des charmes*” (v.103-104). Roland Bechmann has noted that these trees are too small to be valuable for construction (Bechmann 28). Although we have noted the small-scale agricultural fertility of Perceval’s home, the legal definition of a waste forest is the opposite of valued land, and the text hints at ways in which the area is unsuitable to widespread agricultural exploitation to fuel urban consumption (Green 419–420; Hoffmann 288–294). The mountain pass that Perceval eventually points out to the knights indicates the Waste Forest’s proximity to mountains, which might make the land difficult to farm, and the knights’ unfamiliarity with the area might indicate a prohibitive distance required to transport produce to population centers: “*La sont li destroit de Valdone*” (v.292). The contrast between the limited fertility of the Waste Forest, able to support one household, and the obvious sterility of the Wasteland, can best be reconciled by considering the differing senses of “*gaste*” at stake in the naming of the Waste Forest: depopulated and useless. This determination of societal worth in the environmental realm migrates to the human characters, and the knights’ definition of Perceval’s home as a “*lande*,” a moor or heath, uncultivated and desolate by their thinking, underlines Perceval’s isolation from Arthurian ‘civilization’ (v.178). This topographical category and its implications creates a parallel between Perceval and the Tent Damsel’s “*ami*,” *Orgueilleus de la Lande*, who share uncouth and often barbaric conduct, particularly toward the damsel. We will also see how unpopulated areas like the moor lend themselves to violence.

The first conclusion possible is that Perceval's secluded childhood in the Waste Forest at his mother's behest and the resulting societal inexperience is completely responsible for his disrespectful and violent attitude towards those he meets, the Tent Damsel in particular. The name of her "ami" contains the same indicator of geographical and social marginality as the label given to the Waste Forest, "lande." However, this view of geographical determinism is complicated by observation in the *Conte du Graal*, the *First Continuation* and the *Queste* of the morally compromised position occupied by Gauvain, normally the flower of knighthood at Arthur's court. Although the Waste Forest is free from the violence that Perceval's mother fled, other remote locations enable encounters of questionable morality, so frequently present in these narratives that Peggy McCracken has theorized the ritual "sacrifice" of women as an integral part of initiation into knighthood (McCracken, "The Poetics of Sacrifice" 158). Marjorie Curry Woods has observed that the use of classical rape narratives (*Acheilleid*, Ovid, etc.) to teach Latin to boys in the Middle Ages introduced similar intellectual modes of thinking about rape that we will find echoed in the Tent Damsel episodes below. In these classical texts, the young hero as rapist received sexual initiation, and "forcing" a protesting woman was a seduction technique between two implicitly willing participants (Woods 61).

Both Perceval and Gauvain have encounters with damsels left alone in tents on the geographic margins of society in the *Conte du Graal* and the *First Continuation*, respectively. In the "liminal spaces of tents," Perceval acts out the "simulacrum of rape" by stealing kisses from the damsel he finds there, and later saves her from the punishment of her "ami" (Bruckner 91; Hinton, *The Conte du Graal cycle* 134). Gauvain meets a damsel in a tent who has fallen in love with his image and impregnates her, but Gauvain turns this "tale of female desire" in his later retelling "into a story of rape" (Bruckner 107). This ambiguous morality finds an uneasy

existence in these texts, because of where the events took place and medieval attitudes toward rape.

Medieval legal cases of rape into the thirteenth century begin to include an element of abduction to a remote, non-domestic location, to a wood, a park, or a moor, an action which Gauvain is guilty of considering when he sees the “male damoisele” (v.8385) in the *Conte du Graal* (Phillips 134–135). Upon seeing Gauvain rush toward her, she orders him to slow down, and then voices aloud his unchivalrous intention of carrying her off on his horse, presumably to a more secluded location: “Vos me volez/ Prandre et porter ci contr’aval / Sor le col de vostre cheval” (v.6608-10), which Gauvain confirms, “Voir vos avez dit, damoisele” (v.6611). Gauvain admits a desire to abduct this evil-tempered damsel, she who had already fallen victim to abduction and rape at the hands of Greoreas, “who violated the custom of Logres that protects women traveling alone (the same custom that led to the death of the Male Pucele’s beloved, as she will later reveal)” (Bruckner 100). In the Tent Damsel episodes, however, the women in question are already vulnerably alone in remote locations.

Towards the beginning of the *Conte du Graal*, shortly after abandoning his mother and the Waste Forest, Perceval finds the damsel asleep in a tent in a beautiful prairie by a fountain, which he approaches from the direction of the forest: “Tant il vit un tref tandu / En une praarie bele / Les lo sort d’une fontenele” (v.602-04). In the *First Continuation*, Gauvain rides for a long time without seeing anyone and then arrives in a moor (“lande”) where he sees the tent by a fountain: “Adonc entrai en une lande, / Fols est qui plus bele demande /.../ Si vis dejoste une fontaine / Qui molt ert clere et doce et saine / Tendu un si cier pavellon” (v.4213-14 ; 4227-29). These beautiful settings by water at a distance from court or city resonate with locations where fairy lovers traditionally await their knights, even if the Tent Damsel episodes often involve

questionable consent (Gallais 307; Harf-Lancner, *Les Fées Au Moyen Age* 65). Gauvain's tent damsel is in love with him before meeting him, as is the fairy mistress of Marie de France's *Lanval*. Circa 1187-89, however, rape is defined by violence done to the woman's body, and the woman's consent does not become an issue until the last quarter of the thirteenth century (Phillips 129; 135–36). The fact that Perceval ignores the damsel's protests at his kisses aligns him with the same misogynistic rhetoric spouted by her "ami," Orgueilleus de la Lande, at their next meeting.

Orgueilleus de la Lande (of the Moor) assumes the woman's consent if there is no sign of violence done to her body, and goes even further to assert that kissing a woman leads to getting the "surplus" from her that Perceval's mother warned him against: "Fame qui sa boche abandone / Lo soreplus de legier done" (v.3796-97). Not unlike Ovidian seduction technique, Orgueilleus enumerates the resistance possible that nonetheless signifies her desire to be conquered: scratching, biting, and trying to kill him (v.3800-3810): "Et bien soit qu'ele se desfende / ... / Si esgratine et mort et tue" (v.3800; 3805). The damsel's "ami" does violence to her body by starving her and denying her proper clothing, which will continue until he kills the one who slept with her, "celui qui l'ot esforciee" (v.3831). The verb "esforcier" literally means "to force" and is one of the euphemisms for rape in Old French, "*fame esforcer* (to force a woman)," which appears in the *Elucidation*: "Des puceles une esforcha" (v69) (Gravdal 2). The thirteenth-century *Elucidation* underlines the lack of consent in the king's deflowering of the maiden, which he commits against her will: "Sor son pois le despucela"(v.70). In the *First Continuation*, there is a hint of the concern for the damages done to male family members of raped and deflowered women, which will enter medieval law in the later Middle Ages (Phillips 138–141). The first section of this chapter mentioned Gauvain's visit to the deserted castle with the unrealistically

clean city streets. This deserted castle displays the shield of Bran de Lis, the knight whose sister Gauvain impregnated earlier (Coolput-Storms 312). Despite her apparent consent at the time, since she was waiting for him in the tent, and had a portrait made for love of him, the knight attacked Gauvain after he'd left the tent and accused him of killing his father and uncle and of having ravished his sister's virginity (v.4340-43) (Coolput-Storms 308).

Unlike with the rape of the damsels in the *Elucidation*, there is no divine backlash for Gauvain's and Perceval's encounters with damsels in tents, excused in part perhaps by their ambivalent location outside societal boundaries. At the end of the *Conte du Graal*, the hermit (who is also Perceval's uncle) specifies Perceval's "sin" responsible for his inability to ask the correct questions at the Grail Castle: "Por le pechié que tu en as / T'avint que tu ne demandas / De la Lance ne do Graal" (v.6325-27). Perceval killed his mother with chagrin upon his departure from the Waste Forest: "de ce duel fu ele morte" (v.6324). In the *Queste* and the *Elucidation*, errant human sexuality has spiritual or environmental consequences, respectively. The Tent Damsel narratives are not like the moral pollution paradigm we saw with regards to the Wasteland. The location's distance from civilization provided an opportunity, and there seems not to be much other human-environmental interaction. The dynamic is reversed with the *Queste*, which has internalized and spiritualized the environmental devastation wreaked by polluted human morality, which resulted in the Wasteland.

In the *Queste*, there are two kinds of relationships between spiritual discourse and their vegetal metaphors. In the Tree of Life interlude, vegetation is literally synced with the material state of human bodies. The first cutting of the Tree of Life planted by Eve outside the Garden is white as snow and signifies Eve's virginal state at the time: "si fu toz blans come noif en la tige et es branches et es fueilles. Et ce ert senefiance de virginité" (Pauphilet 213). The tree turns

green and produces flowers and fruits for the first time when Abel is conceived beneath its shade, at God's command: "Mes cil fu toz coverz de verz colors amont et aval, et des lors en avant comença a florir et a porter fruit, ne onques devant ce n'avoit flori ne fructifié" (Pauphilet 216). The tree loses the fertility it shared with Eve when Cain kills Abel at its roots, turning red and bleeding when cut as we saw above, a sympathetic reaction to the death of Eve's flesh and blood and to the sin of murder committed in its proximity: "il ne porta ne flor ne fruit puis cele hore que li sans Abel i fu expanduz" (Pauphilet 219). Elsewhere in the *Queste*, vegetal imagery becomes figurative, openly allegorical: in the case of Galaad, flower imagery has little to do with base human sexuality, and is instead a mark of his abstinence and moral purity, in contrast to Gauvain. This vocabulary of vegetal fertility and sterility connects the spiritual to the material reality of medieval dependence on agricultural production in spite of extensive trade networks and the rising urban economy.

In addition to curing the Maimed King, Galaad also heals King Mordrain's sight with his mere presence, and Mordrain dies happily in his arms, equating Galaad's virginal purity to the fleur de lys: "tu es ausi nez et virges sus toz chevaliers come est la flor de lys, en qui virginitez est senefiee, qui est plus blanche que totes les autres. Tu es lys en virginité, tu es droite rose, droite flors de bone vertu et en color de feu, car li feus dou Saint Esperit est en toi si espris et alumez que ma chair, qui tote estoit morte et envieillie, est ja tote rajuenie et en bone vertu" (Pauphilet 263). The fire of the Holy Spirit in Galaad finds its vegetal equivalent in the rose, reclaiming this flower from its degrading associations with carnal desire in the *Roman de la Rose*. In the *Queste*, the opposite model, of vegetal sterility and spiritual sinfulness is found in the description of Gauvain, who is an "old tree" or "vielz arbres" of which Gauvain has given the flower and fruit to the enemy ("li enemi en a eu la flor et le fruit"), leaving only the "marrow"

and the bark for the Creator: “Nostres Sires en eust la moele et l’escorce” (Pauphilet 161). Just as the morally reprehensible actions of an individual could lay waste to kingdoms in other sections of the grail romances, so the author of the *Queste* uses the image of vegetal decay to communicate an individual’s moral degradation.

The environmental equivalent of Gauvain’s spiritual sterility is the “lande,” as seen in one of his visions. In this vision, the knights participating in the Quest for the Holy Grail are as bulls searching for “good pasture,” which represents the celestial meat served at the Grail Table: la viande celestiel que li Sainz Esperiz envoie a cels qui sieent a la table dou Saint Graal. La est la bonne pasture” (Pauphilet 156–57). Only the three Grail heroes head for this good pasture, the other knights are prideful and head for the “lande” or moor, which is also characterized as “gastine,” a variation on wasteland. In this ravaged and uncultivated place, vegetal and spiritual infertility combine to signify hell: “alerent par la lande, par la gastine, en la voie ou il ne croist ne flor ne fruit, ce est en enfer, ce est en la voie ou totes choses sont gastees qui ne sont covenables”(Pauphilet 157). In this chapter, we have seen how the imbrication of the spiritual and the material for medieval Christian France also extended to the moral and physical pollution of the environment by individuals or by armies.

Conclusion

In the first section, a close study of “wasteland” vocabulary revealed that these twelfth and thirteenth century authors used similar terms to link human violence to agricultural and economic ruin. Realistic situations where concrete human actions lead to material environmental destruction co-exists in the grail romances with a metonymical relationship whereby one act of war-like or antisocial atrocity has the same result as all-out war. This metonymical approach is

most evident in texts featuring the Dolorous Blow (“doulereus cop”), in which one murder results in the desolation of kingdoms and brings the leadership of the realm into question (Pauphilet 204). Related to the “metonymical” Wasteland is the “realistic” Wasteland of besieged Biaurepaire in the *Conte du Graal*, rooted in the material reality of urban supply “footprints” and trade disrupted by war, which is contrasted in the *First Continuation* by the presence of “healthy” social and economic networks, functioning trade routes and prosperous markets, which can be destroyed by one morally polluting act of alienating violence—murder (in the *First Continuation* and the *Queste*) or rape (in the *Elucidation*). The future Wasteland that the Hideous Damsel attributes to the Fisher King’s realm in the *Conte du Graal* has elements of both kinds of Wasteland: the metonymical failure of Perceval to ask the correct questions at the Grail Castle, and the ways in which an infirm leader is literally unable to protect his kingdom and manage its resources.

In the French grail romances of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the environment as a material setting and intellectual construct has justified and condemned violence, celebrated physical and spiritual fertility. Discourses of social utility governed agricultural fertility and human sexuality. Located near a mountain pass and containing small trees (unsuitable to construction) whose branches are low enough to batter knights on horseback, the Waste Forest is a location of minimal utility to an urban society whose resource “footprint” is ever expanding into the rural landscape (Hoffmann 288–294; Bechmann 28). Similarly, narratives of rape (or pseudo-rape, in Perceval’s case) exist geographically and morally at the limits of society. In Arthurian literature, the Wasteland, the Waste Forest, the “lande” or moor, all serve as sites where human society and the non-human environment co-constitute designations of utility and

worth, sterility and fertility that apply equally to the human and the non-human, in literal and spiritual registers.

Chapter Three: Artificial/Nature

The fate of the automata guarding the bridge to the flower-damsels' realm in the *Roman d'Alexandre* demonstrates the precarious balance between the natural, the artificial and the supernatural performed by twelfth century French literature. Thanks to an old Persian's intervention, one of the moving metal statues will fall into the water and be swallowed by a fish, and the other will be carried off by demons: "Je en ferai ja un en l'eaue trebuchier, / Que vostre oel le verront a un poisson mengier, / Et l'autre en porteront diable et avresier" (Paris Branch III, laisse 197, v.3428–30). In French medieval literature, human crafts are similarly balanced on the edge of nature and the supernatural. The first two chapters of this study have focused on the material reality underpinning medieval literary interactions between humans and their non-human environment. What remains to be considered in a range of human-environmental relations are crafts or the "mechanical arts," human modification of the non-human world. The

“mechanical arts,” including metal-based automata, hydraulic and fabric technologies, have long been lauded and disdained in turn for their imitation of natural forms. In texts such as the *Roman d’Alexandre*, *Floire et Blanchefleur*, and the *Voyage de Charlemagne*, crafts are often located in exotic climes, sometimes suspended in the atmosphere of a demonic supernatural, but always in dialogue with the material context in which they traveled. As the subject of trade, display and technologically-based power-plays between East and West, the mechanical arts are the receptacle for all the tension bound up in this complicated relationship.

Western classifications of the “mechanical arts” had remained more or less ambivalent since Classical Antiquity, strongly influenced by Plato and Aristotle, with individual crafts assigned, based on their perceived merit, to the virtuous liberal arts or the negative “banausic” arts (Whitney 50–51). Hugh of St. Victor in the twelfth century, however, is part of a larger trend of Western thinkers who viewed mechanical arts like fabric-making, armament (including metalworking) and agriculture as a worthy and distinct kind of knowledge, an early milestone of which is John the Scot’s coining of the term “artes mechanicae” in his ninth-century commentary on Martianus Capella’s *Marriage of Philology and Mercury* (Whitney 70). As Elspeth Whitney explains, “[a]ccording to Hugh, the mechanical arts supply all the remedies for our physical weakness, a result of the Fall and, like the other branches of knowledge, are ultimately subsumed under the religious task of restoring our true, prelapsarian nature” (Whitney 81-82). Even though Hugh was not immune to inherited scorn toward human crafts, he makes only a passing mention of a mistaken ninth century Greek etymology linking “mechane” (machine) to “moichos” (adulterer), which led his predecessors to believe that crafts were “‘adulterate’ because they concern human labor and are imitative of nature” (Whitney 84-85). The distrustful or ambivalent reception of the mechanical arts in twelfth century French literature owes something

to this Classical inheritance. However, the material realities of automata, hydraulic and silk technologies—which prospered in Islamic and Byzantine civilizations before being (re)introduced into the Latin West—provide a more contemporary context for their associations with deceit and ambivalent magic, and explain the frequency with which such mechanical arts are placed in exotic climes. This selection of crafts will be examined in turn, beginning with the automata made from molded metal and ending with a consideration of silk, passing through garden technologies such as pipes and fountains.

Automata

In the first book-length monograph on the subject, E.R. Truitt points out the unique ontological status of the automata that populate twelfth century French romances. They often take the form of golden human- or animal-shaped moving “ymages” or statues, “self-propelled metal copies of natural forms” (Truitt 40). Their creators don’t belong to the simple artisan class that their building materials suggest—metal that has been “tregeté” or poured into a mold. My intention here is to hold automata’s connection to metalworking and other crafts in the foreground, as inseparable from the “intellectual [...] endeavor” of which automata are a result (Truitt 41; 50). Their creators are “philosophers as well as sorcerers,” and their magic closer to the work done by the authors of these romances: the *Roman d’Alexandre* automata are powered by a magic inscription on the bridge they guard, and in the *Roman de Troie*, the makers of the

automata in the Alabaster Chamber are authors knowledgeable in necromancy (Truitt 8). Nevertheless, these automata are based in a material reality, on a technology lost to the Latin West between Classical Antiquity and the fourteenth century but cultivated continuously in the Islamic world and the Byzantine empire (Truitt 2; 8). Negative views of crafts and distrust of unfamiliar foreign technology combine to explain the often demonic flavor of automata and the frequent association between crafts and deceit, as seen in *Floire* and the *Voyage de Charlemagne*. And yet automata exist on a sliding scale from the most esoteric of language-based magic (the *Roman d'Alexandre* and *Roman de Troie* automata) to the most concrete craft-based structures. The mechanics of Hugo's spinning palace is compared to the wheel and the windmill, ubiquitous technologies in eastern and western medieval civilizations (Ruggles 72–74). The mundane and the magical fuse in the pneumatic technology described without understanding in *Floire*, the *Voyage de Charlemagne*, and the *Roman d'Alexandre*, knowledge adapted from ancient Greek texts that regularly powered court displays in Islamic and Byzantine societies.

In the *Voyage de Charlemagne*, the wind-powered technology that causes Hugo of Constantinople's palace to spin and copper children to laugh and blow trumpets is demystified for the audience by comparing the turning to a chariot wheel rolling downhill or to a mill shaft: “De quivre et de metal tregeté dous enfanz:/ Cascun tient en sa buche un corn d'ivoire blanc. / Si galerne ist de mer ; bise ne altre vent / Ki ferent al paleis de devers occident / Il le funt turner et menut et suvent / Cumme rœ de char qui a tere decent. [...] / Altresil fait turner cum arbre de mulin” (Picherit v. 352–58; 372). However, this display completely disorients Charles and the Franks both physically and mentally, and as Truitt has observed, “part of the comedy may derive from the fact that Charles and his entourage are taken aback by such mundane technology”

(Truitt 53). Beyond its humorous effect in the text, this display could also have been “based on contemporary descriptions of the actual Constantinople. [For example,] twelfth-century Constantinople had a pair of musical statues over the Boukloeon Gate” (Truitt 63). The Franks’ astonishment before the marvels of Hugo’s palace is matched by Hugo’s consternation before the miracles facilitated by Charles’ relics, which Hugo interprets as sorcery. This mutual incomprehensibility of cultural knowledge brings nuance to the power play between the two kings, which the Christian Charles is destined to win.

Hugo is similarly amazed before Charles and company’s ability to fulfill their boasts, thanks to their prayers before the relics to God, and upon hearing his daughter swear that Oliver took her one hundred times that night (“ad le vus fait .C. feiz” v.726), Hugo accuses Oliver of being a sorcerer: “Encantere est, ço crei!” (v.733). Aggrieved by Count William’s proof of impossible strength, facilitated by God (“par la Deu vertud” v.751) which destroys his palace, Hugo repeats his belief that they are enchanters: “Ces sunt ancanteür qui sunt entrez ceenz” (v.756). Hugo’s spinning palace and automata and the Franks’ boasts of superhuman feats accomplished by divine grace are both in the register of the unknowable for the other party. Part of the explanation for this cultural misunderstanding falls to differences of religion, Latinate versus Greek Orthodox Christianity, relics versus icons (Vance 179). And yet, there is also a disparity in technological knowledge at play here, since pneumatic technologies pioneered by the ancient Greeks had been lost to the Latin West but maintained by the Byzantine Empire and the Islamicate world through the Middle Ages.

As E.R. Truitt explains, “[t]he most famous example of Byzantine automata is the Throne of Solomon, attested as early as the tenth century,” which involves a gilded metal tree with singing artificial birds and roaring lions surrounding a throne that rises into the air (Truitt 22).

All of this was powered by counterweights and pneumatic technology first pioneered in “the third century before the Common Era [when] engineers and architects based in Alexandria began designing automata to illustrate mechanical principles, and documenting their creations in texts that detailed their construction”(Truitt 4). These included designs for pneumatic birds from the earliest of their number, Ktesibios and Philo of Byzantium (Truitt 4). This wind-based technology would inspire bird-shaped automata in twelfth-century French medieval texts: the Egyptian “amiranz”’s garden in *Floire et Blanchefleur* and in the *filles-fleurs*’ orchard to the East in *Roman d’Alexandre*, not to mention human-shaped pneumatic automata like Hugo’s trumpeters, and the effigies of the lovers on Blanchefleur’s false tomb. In *Floire*, artificial birds sing when the wind blows in the enclosed garden of the “amiranz”: “Li vergiers est et biaux et granz ; / El monde n’est nus plus vaillanz ; / De toutes parz est clos a mur, / Tout paint a or et a azur, / Et desus seur chaucun quernel / Divers de l’autre a un oisel / D’arein ouvrez tresgeteiz ; / Quant li vente, si font hanz criz / Chaucuns oisiaus a sa maniere” (v.1746-54). An example of court pageantry similar to the Byzantine Throne of Solomon is left behind after Alexander chases Porus from his palace in Bactria. Alexander finds a hall filled with artificial sculpted trees decorated with artificial birds: “Ains Dieus ne fist cel arbre qui entaillies n’i sie / Ne maniere d’oiseil n’i soit a or sartie / Et ont or en lor ongles, en lor bes margerie” (Branch III laisse 51 v.933-35). Artificial birds similarly decorate a carob tree in the *filles-fleurs*’ garden : “Alixandres regarde desous une cepee / D’un vermel cherubin [caroubier] qui ot la fuelle lee / Et iert a oisiaus d’or menüement ouvree” (Branch III laisse 199 v.3482-84).

There is proof that Charlemagne and his line had direct experience of this mechanistic technology that had become foreign to the West. E.R. Truitt continues, “Diplomatic contact between the ‘Abbasids and the Frankish rulers goes back at least to 768, when, according [to] the

continuations of the *Chronicle of Fredegar*, Pepin the Short, Charlemagne's father, received emissaries and gifts from al-Mansur, the caliph and founder of Baghdad," and Harun al-Rashid sent an esthetically and mechanically ingenious water clock to Charlemagne in 807 (Truitt 20; 21). "Hero of Alexandria's detailed treatise *On Automaton-Making* from the second half of the first century of the Common Era would later be used at the 'Abbasid court, inspiring caliph al-Ma'mun's artificial tree with mechanical birds as early as 827 (Truitt 20). This court of Arab Muslims in Baghdad also employed "three engineers and automaton-makers known as the Banu Musa", authors of the *Kitab al-Hiyal* (Book of Ingenious Devices) around 850 (Truitt 20). This tradition produced a court marvel similar to the Byzantine Throne of Solomon, at the Palace of the Tree in Baghdad, with attestations "described thirty years earlier by Lekapenos in 917" (Truitt 22). The trade and display of automata and other technologies has long been implicated in the diplomatic relations between these cultures, and a certain level of distrust is inherent to this technological disparity. Twelfth century French texts have inherited this suspicion along with the wonder inspired by these marvels. The actual dishonesty practiced by Hugo and the Franks echoes the parallelism present in the *Chanson de Roland*, since the *Voyage de Charlemagne* also permits troubling similarities between the two opposing parties.

Hugo's palace, "which mimics the earth by harnessing the celestial forces" was "built using *cumpas* [v.348], and as there is no mention of any supernatural involvement, it seems likely that the palace would have been understood to be built either by Hugo himself (as Cosmocrator) or by learned men at his court" (Truitt 52). Since "cumpas" was also used to build the hideaway for Hugo's spy in his guestroom, the discovery of which provokes the Franks' "moral outrage", "*cumpas* here seems to have a morally negative valence, connoting not just difficult and highly specialized learning but also trickery and knowledge used for dishonorable

ends” (Truitt 52-53). A certain level of deceit is also practiced by the automata, in appearing to be real live children and in making angelic music with their trumpets: “Cil corn sunent et buglent et tunent ensement / Cum taburs u toneires u grant cloches qui pent ; / Li uns esgardet l’altre ensement en riant / Que ço vus fust viarie que tut fussent vivant” (v.358-61); “C’est avis, qui l’ascute, qu’il seit en paraïs, / La u li angle chantent” (v.376-77). Hugo’s duplicity in spying on his guests and in making angelic children-seeming automata is echoed by Oliver’s own treachery with regards to Hugo’s daughter. First, he is unable to complete his boast of taking her one hundred times in one night (he only manages thirty), and second, he extracts the daughter’s promise to back his story by promising in turn to make her his only love, which turns out to be a lie since he does not take her with him at the end of the narrative. The *Voyage de Charlemagne* is steeped in the material context of technologies foreign to the West as embodied by Charles, and in the distrust garnered by the inequality of knowledge. In texts like *Floire*, the *Roman de Troie*, and the *Roman d’Alexandre*, however, the mechanical and the magical are fused.

In *Floire et Blanchefleur*, the text hints at the mechanistic explanation for the wind-powered automata that decorate the false tomb of Blanchefleur, Floire’s Christian slave lover. Four tubes on each corner of the tomb catch the wind, at which point the robotic semblances of the two lovers kiss, hug, and talk to each other: “En la tombe ot quatre tuiiaus / A quatre cors bien fez et biaux / Es quieus li quatre vent feroient / Chaucuns issi conme il ventoient; / Quand li venez les enfantz tochoit, / l’un beisoit l’autre et acolait / Si disoient par nigromance” (Pelan v.584–5). There is also, however, occult knowledge behind the fact that the automata speak, “nigromance,” not to mention the “stunning [...] verbal irony” behind the Blanchefleur automaton’s exhortation that she loves the Floire automaton more than any living thing: “Ge vous aim plus que rien vivant” (v.591; Truitt 99). Beyond the mimetic duplicity of imitating

living things, as we saw above with Hugo's trumpeters, these automata also participate in a larger deceit effected by Floire's parents. As good Muslim parents residing in Spain, they have no desire to see their princely offspring in love with a Christian slave, and so they have sold her to merchants and faked her death (Burns 212). The centerpiece of this deception is an elaborate tomb for Blanchefleur, decorated with automata that "mimic the lovers in speech and action and also commemorate the love between Blancheflor (supposedly dead) and Floire (still alive)" and thereby "expose the association of esoteric foreign knowledge, mimesis, and trickery" (Truitt 99). But not all automata are attributed to far-away lands or non-Latinate Christian cultures.

In the *Roman de Troie*, the automata of the Alabaster Chamber are a part of the Classical inheritance of the Latin West, preserving and upholding courtly values until their destruction during the Trojan War. Their creators' authority comes in part from their literary prowess as poets, in part from their magical knowledge, which combine to allow them to create "ymages" or statues in the form of young men and women, perched atop four pillars in the Alabaster Chamber: "Treis pöetes, saives autors / Qui molt sorent de nigromance, / Les asistrent par tiel senblance / Que sor chescun [pilier] ot tresjeté / Une ymage de grant biauté. / Les dous qui plus esteient beles / Aveient formes de puceles, / Les autres dous de jovenceus" (Benoît de Sainte-Maure v.14668–14675). The beauty of these human-shaped automata is compared, without implied deceit, to angels, because of the coding of these creations as a legacy of western civilization: "Onques nus hon n'en vit si beus ; / E si esteient colorees / E en tiel maniere formees, / Quis esgardot, ce li ert vis / Qu'angel fussent de Paredis" (v.14668-80). We have arrived at the other end of the scale, from the concrete materiality and half-glimpsed mechanisms in the *Voyage de Charlemagne* and *Floire*, to the occult knowledge implied in the creation of the Alabaster Chamber automata in the *Roman de Troie*, which lacks any demonic flavor because

this technology that flourished in more or less distant lands has been re-written and re-claimed as the Trojan legacy of the Frankish people.

In these texts, automata are objects that convey information about their historical, cultural, and material context. They also tend to fulfill the role of the mechanical arts according to Hugh St. Victor by compensating for human weakness after the Fall, not only physically (as for those automata that guard liminal spaces like bridges and tombs) but also for the wisdom of that paradise lost. Although the *Roman d'Alexandre* automata are connected to a diabolic supernatural, Hugh's trumpeters are reminiscent of angels, and the automata of the Alabaster Chamber comprise a storehouse of courtly knowledge that would have continued to endure if not for the Trojan War. In the *Roman d'Alexandre*, automata protect access to the *filles-fleurs'* Eden-like existence in a garden without any need for human crafts. Automata are linked to discourses of pre-lapsarian fantasy, lost Classical knowledge, Eastern exoticism and deceit. Bound up in that representational magic that is language, their world is also grounded by material craft references.

Garden Technology

We have seen how depictions of medieval automata exist on a scale from mundane to magical explanations. Medieval literary approaches to garden technologies reflect degrees of exoticism of building materials and deflection of the reality of human governed spaces, including orchards and the working medieval forest discussed in Chapter Two. This section will begin with a brief consideration of the human determined structure of garden plantings before moving on to the pipes and canalizations required to supply water sources for said gardens.

Elise Gesbert identifies the main features of medieval European gardens as the carefully controlled organization of the plants (whether for vegetable or for pleasure gardens), the wall separating “cultivated” from “wild” nature, and the incorporation of artificial water sources (either for irrigation or for fountains): “On ne plante pas les végétaux dans l’anarchie, la géométrie est de rigueur” (Gesbert 401); “La clôture est un des éléments clés des jardins de la chrétienté : elle isole le jardin de la campagne, la nature sauvage de la nature cultivée” (Gesbert 398). This second feature, the enclosure, causes every medieval garden to recall that first Christian garden, Eden. In this section and the following one on fabric technologies, I’ll be considering the orchard of the *filles-fleurs* or flower damsels in the *Roman d’Alexandre* as a curious echo of Eden. Firstly, this episode seems to replace Alexander’s discovery of Earthly Paradise that occurs in other medieval Alexander romances (but to which he cannot gain entry). Secondly, the author’s attempt to distance the *filles-fleurs*’ orchard and the surrounding forest from known medieval realities of human intervention with the plant life results—intentionally or not—in a *rapprochement* with Paradise.

The *Roman d’Alexandre* emphasizes the great age of the *filles-fleurs*’ orchard, “un vergié de grant antiquité,” and also claims that its trees, endowed with marvelous virtues, grow there naturally without having been planted: “mil arbres de bonté / I vinrent par nature, ainc n’i furent planté” (Alex. Branch III laisse 190 v. 3299, v.3302-03). The forest surrounding the *filles-fleurs*’ orchard also eclipses the medieval reality of the “working forest”, one that was regularly harvested and maintained to satisfy the food and lumber needs of the human population, as Roland Bechmann has detailed. However, the *Roman d’Alexandre* denies that men have ever dared to cut this forest: “Arbres i ot plantés de diverse maniere, / Ainc n’en fu uns trenchiés ne devant ne derriere / Ja n’iert hom si hardis qui un seul caup i fiere” (Branch III laisse 189 v.3288-

90). This seems consistent with the theorizing of paradise as a place and time before human labor and crafts, favored by those with a negative view of crafts. Hugh of St. Victor, however, posited that the human ingenuity represented by the mechanical arts began with the invention of clothes in the Garden of Eden, and celebrated this moment as man's "opportunity to invent 'better things' for himself" (Whitney 90). Even Augustine, who unlike Hugh "regarded restoration as an exclusively spiritual task [...] would conceive of a Paradise in which Adam and Eve not only had a sexual nature but performed physical labor and practiced the art of agriculture" (Whitney 90). We will return to this discussion in the section on fabric technologies, but first, let us return to water and its transportation via pipes, necessary for gardens.

Just as the Islamic world was known for automata and mechanical technologies, it was also well-known for hydraulic technologies, which accounts for the exotic locale and marvelous functionality of water sources in texts like *Floire* and the *Roman d'Alexandre*. Their authors are particularly astonished by piping that carries water to the upper floors of buildings, as in Porus' palace in Bactria in the *Roman d'Alexandre* or in the Tower of Damsels in *Floire*. Gesbert notes that in contrast, European medieval hydraulics follow the landscape as much as possible: "l'hydraulique médiévale travaille à fleur de terre et suit le plus possible les pentes naturelles du relief" (Gesbert 402-403). Preservation of ancient Greek scientific texts via translation into Arabic means that the Archimedean screw and eastern forms of the waterwheel could be used to lift water vertically, with the distinct limitation of manpower that is not reflected in the fantastic technology portrayed in *Floire* and the *Roman d'Alexandre*. The exaggeration of the increased complexity of Islamic hydraulic technologies is logically extended to the materials of which pipes are made, now made fantastically from crystal or precious metals.

In a chapter on *Floire et Blanchefleur*, Sharon Kinoshita notes that “[i]nside [the Tower of Maidens], crystalline pipes [...] carry water to the third floor: an engineering marvel that conjoins the beauty of Fatimid [Egyptian] rock crystal with the wonder of Islamic hydraulic technology” (Kinoshita 93). The mechanism for achieving this “marvel” is hinted at only obliquely, with a reference to a clever engineer making the water turn upward (“amont”) through a channel in a pillar made of crystalline marble that stretches from the foundation to the third floor: “En cele tour a trois estages; / [...] / Cil piliers sourt del fondement, / Jusqu’a l’aguille
amont s’estent ; / De marbre blanc est con cristaus ; / Dedenz est bien fez uns chanaus / Par quoi
sus monte une fontainne / Dont l’eve est froide, clere et saine ; / Droit monte amont el tierz
estage ; / Moult tien l’engineor a sage / Qui fist amont l’eve torner / Par une coste d’un piler”
(v.1647-1661). The idea of moving water up a central column by “turning” is reminiscent of the Archimedean screw which was “used throughout the Islamic world. This was essentially a thick pipe with two to four internal partitions around a central shaft. The partitions spiraled around the central shaft like a modern helical drill bit and, being tightly fitted, formed a series of troughs up the length of the pipe” (Ruggles 73–74). The Archimedean screw was not in reality very effective, requiring human power to turn it, and the design was limited by angle and length. Like the materials of which the pipes were made, the water movement systems at stake in these texts are idealizations of existing hydraulic technology, and the idea of a turning mechanism to raise water would have been familiar to a medieval audience, since waterwheels of various designs were common in Islamic and European contexts. The reality of medieval European pipework is modest compared to the complex water systems achieved in Islamic contexts, since the former was normally made from wood, lead or pottery, when open channels or stagnant pits were not the norm (Gesbert 402-403). Pipes made of precious metals or crystal are unrealistic, but their

presence anchors these literary fantastic garden spaces in contemporary material realities, however drab may be the latter.

Despite the exoticization and exaggeration at play in these texts, medieval Westerners might have had first-hand experience of this foreign hydraulic technology. As Roberta J. Magnusson has observed, “Western Crusaders passed through, conquered, and settled in eastern cities such as Antioch, Caesarea, and Constantinople, which had highly sophisticated water systems” (Magnusson, *Water Technology in the Middle Ages* 9–11). She also notes that “[t]he spread of nonspecialist knowledge about water systems would have been relatively easy: although conveyance networks were hidden, distribution structures [like public fountains] were highly visible”, which may be at the origin of the fascination displayed in literary texts for exotic water systems (Magnusson 9). Porus’ palace in the *Roman d’Alexandre* possesses remarkable plumbing and is located in Bactria in India. Possibly by a game of literary chance, its possessor owed fealty to Nicolas of Caesarea, which is one of the eastern cities known for its complex water systems. Healing balm for Porus’ imperial bath circulates in crystal pipes and runs uphill, against gravity: “une chambre ital / Tous jors i sont tempré li baing emperial / Qui d’amont par conduit descendent contre val / Et montent en la tour la desus par chanal. / Li basmes qui cort ens par conduit de cristal / Raplenist si le lieu d’odor esperital” (Branch III laisse 49 v.903-908). The exoticism of the functionality of Islamic hydraulic technologies evident in *Floire* is compounded in the *Roman d’Alexandre* with the addition of healing balm as the circulating fluid, never mind that clean water was enough of a fantasy in the increasingly urbanized twelfth century.

Fabric Technologies

We have already mentioned how thinkers leading up to and after Hugh of St. Victor have valorized the mechanical arts. Hugh himself grants crafts legitimacy by establishing a biblical precedence and origin for fabric production: “Hugh explicitly identifies the mechanical arts with the first act of Adam and Eve in the fallen world—the making of clothing” (Whitney 93). He also imagines the natural forms which must have inspired the first inventor of proper clothing: “qui usum vestimentorum primus adinvenit, consideravit quod singula quaeque nascentium propria quaedam habeant munimenta quibus naturam suam ab incommodis defendunt” ; “He who first invented the use of clothes had considered how each of the growing things one by one has its proper covering by which to protect its nature from offense” (Hugh of St. Victor 1.9). Hugh cites bark, feathers, scales, fleece, and the hair of cattle and wild beasts as sites of inspiration. In *Floire et Blanchefleur* and the *Roman d’Alexandre*, a different aspect of the plant world, namely flower petals, serves to evoke a troubling echo of Eden as origin of clothing and human desire.

As Peggy McCracken has observed, there seems to be some confusion over the flower-damsels’ attire in the *Roman d’Alexandre* (McCracken, “The Floral and the Human” 73). When Alexander and his men first encounter these welcoming, sexually rapacious creatures, they are dressed as young European noblewomen in rich silk fabrics of eastern origin: “Les unes sont vestues de bon pailles rões / Les pluisors d’ostorins et li mains de cendés / Toutes ont dras de soie tout a lor volentés” (Branch III laisse 193 v.3382-4). Dyed with “*osterin*,” the filles-fleurs appear to be dressed in cendal, a light cloth like taffeta, and the heavier and more prestigious cloth called “*paille*”. And yet, as Alexander is later told, the flower-damsels’ garments are in fact

the outer part of the flower from which they are reborn in the spring: “Celes qui dedens naissent s’ont des cors la figure / Et la flors de dehors si est lor vesteüre, / Et sont si bien taillies, chascune a sa mesure, / Que ja n’i avra force ne cisel ne costure, / Et chascuns vestemens tesq’a la terre dure” (v.3535-39). This means that craft does not imitate nature in this garden. Instead the artificial manufacture of clothing becomes a natural part of the flower-damsels, which explains how each garment fits each damsel so precisely.

Alan of Lille’s *De Planctu Naturae* performs a similar collapsing of craft into nature. The rhetorical personification Natura wears shoes which fit her so well as to have been born with her, in the same way the *filles-fleurs* are born with their dresses: “Calcei vero, ex alutea pelle traducentes materiam, ita familiariter pedum sequebantur ideas, ut in ipsis pedibus nati ipsisque mirabiliter viderentur inscripti. In quibus, vix a vera degenerantes essentia, sub picturae ingenio flores amoenabantur umbratiles” ; “But her shoes which took soft leather as their material, traced the form of the feet so intimately that they might have been born there, inscribed on the feet themselves in a wondrous way. To these the images of flowers, scarcely inferior to flowers truly alive, lent their beauty through the painter’s skill” (II:34). The description of her shoes further muddles the divide between artificial and natural. Her shoes are decorated with life-like flowers, which according to the text serve as clothing for spring meadows. The color of said flowers is compared to white linen and expensive purple dye, and Favonius, the gentle west wind of springtime, is said to be the weaver of said flowers: “Hae sunt veris opes et sua pallia, / telluris species et sua sidera, / quae pictura suis artibus edidit, / flores effigians arte sophistica. / His florum tunicis prata virentibus / veris nobilitat gratia prodigi. / Haec bissum tribuunt, illaque purpuram, / quae textit sapiens dextra Favonii” ; “These are the riches and robes of spring, stars on the fair face of the earth, which the skills of the artist brought forth, imaging the flowers with

subtle skill. The kindness of prodigal spring ennobled the meadows with these flourishing floral garments. Some contribute the whiteness of linen, others a purple robe, woven by the knowing hand of Favonius” (III:21-28).²¹ Alan of Lille describes the natural world of flowers using a vocabulary of fabric technology, unlike the flower-damsels episode in the *Roman d’Alexandre*, which does its best to naturalize the mechanical arts.

In the *Roman d’Alexandre*, a moment which might have re-created the invention of clothing in the Garden of Eden finds itself deprived of artisans, of humans whose ingenuity might have triumphed over the limitations imposed by the Fall. And yet the unique positioning of the flower-damsels also seems to dodge criticisms lobbed by anti-craft partisans. As E. Jane Burns observes, “well-dressed ladies in the courtly world often issue a challenge to the gestational history of the Edenic fall as a fall away from innocence into fleshly sin and sexual differentiation, a fall marked, on women especially, by deceptive and superficial clothing” (Burns 150). Because the *filles-fleurs* are born with their clothing, because they are unable to leave the shadow of their forest, because they are, quite probably, ever virginal, not only do they escape traditional paradigms of possession, but they are also no threat to it (McCracken 87). Alexander is unable to replace his rightful queen Roxane with a flower-damsel plundered from the East. The flower-damsels are as much protected as imprisoned by their isolation in their timeless forest whose trees have never been cut, with their orchard that was not planted.

Floire et Blanche fleur has an episode featuring a similar confusion of clothes and flowers combined with sexuality colored a positive valence. In order to reach his beloved Blanche fleur, imprisoned in the Tower of Damsels by the Egyptian “amiranz,” Floire puts on a red garment, a

²¹ All translations from Latin are Wetherbee’s unless otherwise noted. Discussion of *De Planctu Naturae* continues in the following section.

“bliaut,” to hide in a basket filled with flowers of the same color, in order to sneak through the “amiranz”’s garden to reach the Tower (v.2088). Patricia E. Grieve has noted how *Floire et Blanchefleur* “inverts the imagery of Eden. Here, the sexuality associated with the Garden, the fall of Adam and Eve, leads to [the] conversion [of Floire to Christianity, by love of Blanchefleur], so it is a kind of reversal of the Fall, signalled, perhaps, by the physical ascent of the basket to the top of the tower” (Grieve 136; Delcourt S39). It is significant that these two episodes of courtly love rewriting Eden are dependent upon clothing. E. Jane Burns in *Courtly Love Undressed* reveals the interdependency of eastern and western civilizations for the material production and signification of courtly love in medieval literature: “some of the most immediately recognizable features of courtly identity—those conveyed by the sartorial opulence of luxury dress—are often marked in literary accounts as deriving in fact from eastern and often non-Christian lands rich in costly textiles” (Burns 183). Although the material origins of clothing are obscured in the flower-damsel episode in the *Roman d’Alexandre*, it is precisely these locales of the non-Latinate West rich in automata and hydraulic technologies that are also purveyors of luxury fabric, particularly silk, most famously originating in China, although others would acquire this technology.

Floire begins with a frame story in which the author of this tale overhears the story (originally read in a book) told by a lady to her sister. The details of the bedchamber of this well-to-do lady include a silken cover to the bed, a “*paile*” originating in Thessaly, Greece: “En cele chambre un lit avoit / Qui d’un paile couvert estoit; / Indes et rouz broudez par tors, / Onques plus riches n’ot estors. / Moul tinc por boen et chier le paile, / Ainc ne vint mieudres de Tessaile” (v.39-44). Evoking the Greek origins of the silk cloth summons the history of the Byzantine “silk industry,” which was established by “industrial espionage in the sixth century,”

thanks to two Greek monks who smuggled silkworm cocoons out of China and back to Constantinople (Gies 50). The Greeks remained well-known as knowledgeable in silk technologies into the twelfth century: “Chronicler Otto of Freising tells us that in 1147 Norman king Roger II of Sicily brought weavers of silk from several Greek cities to Palermo” (Gies 123). This material reality is reflected by the abundance of silk (“*paile*”) at King Hugo’s court in the *Voyage de Charlemagne*: knights and ladies alike are dressed in it (v.268, 273). Also, King Hugo plows under the protection of “un bon paile grizain”; “[a] valuable cloth of silk from Greece” (v.294).²² We can perhaps see the range of the Arab silk industry stretching from Baghdad to Spain, its reach encompassing the Middle East in the *Voyage de Charlemagne* (Gies 122). Outside a church in Jerusalem dedicated to St. Mary which is called “la Latine” (v.208) due to the marketplace where people speaking many languages “vendent lur pailles, lur teiles et lur siries”; “sell their silk cloth, their linen cloth, and their damasks” (v.210). In these texts, fabric appears as an object traded and displayed in order to establish courtly identities, as Burns has asserted. In Chrétien de Troyes’ *Le Chevalier au lion*, however, we get a glimpse of the historical conditions of fabric production prior to the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

In the Arthurian romance the *Chevalier au lion*, Yvain encounters in his travels three hundred young girls “Qui dyverses oevres faisoient / De fil d’or et de soie ouvroient” (Chrétien de Troyes, *Le Chevalier Au Lion* v.5191–5192). They are being held against their will in a silk workshop by two sons of devils, “.ii. fix de dyable” (v.5267). Chrétien notes the poor state or “poverté” of their own clothes (v.5194). Minus the supernatural spin, these conditions evoke the “slave women” who participated in clothing manufacture in “the workshops (*gynaecia*) of the great estates” in the early Middle Ages, which was still beholden to Roman methods of fabric

²² Translations of the *Journey of Charlemagne* into English are Picherit’s unless otherwise noted.

production (Gies 49). The fact that the girls in the *Chevalier au lion* are working silk in what is presumably a European if not French location may reflect the fact that “[s]ilk manufacture” had “penetrate[d] western Europe [by] the eleventh and twelfth centuries,” even if that was mainly in Norman-controlled Italy (Gies 50). We have seen how the material conditions of fabric trade and production become an underpinning to the courtly identity these fabrics, particularly silk, convey in French medieval literature. To end this chapter, I’d like to turn to a consideration of Alan of Lille’s mechanized Natura, and how her association with crafts and urban imagery performs a similar confusion of the natural with the artificial as we saw above with the flower-damsels.

Representational Technologies

Although Whitney has detailed predecessors and successors to Hugh of St. Victor’s positive attitude toward the mechanical arts, it is logical that Hugh of St. Victor and all the texts in my corpus belong to the twelfth century, which was the center of European urban development. This no doubt accounts for the overwhelming presence of city and craft imagery employed in Alan of Lille’s *De Planctu Naturae*. The organization of the human body and even the universe is thought of as a self-contained city. Human senses are like “watchmen of the bodily city” or “quasi corporeae civitatis excubias vigilare praecepi” (Lille, “De Planctu Naturae” 6:4). The universe in need of God’s governance is equated to the urban peace

maintained by city authorities: “in hoc mundo velut in nobili civitate quaedam reipublicae maiestas moderamine ratio sancitur”; “in this universe as in a noble city, a kind of majestic civil order is ensured by well-considered governance” (6:9). The mechanical arts go hand-in-hand with this urban vocabulary.

As Gregory M. Sadlek has observed, Alan depicts love’s labor as artisanal, not agricultural like Ovid: “For Alan, love’s laborers are either smiths, hammering out new ‘coins’ to keep the human race in existence, or monastic scribes, writing new life into existence with powerful pens and tablets of paper” (Sadlek 91). Alan’s personification of Nature applies an urban vocabulary to her responsibilities of regulating appropriate procreation and sustaining God’s creation, as “Dei auctoris vicaria” or “the vicar of God the creator” (Lille, “De Planctu Naturae” 6:3). She uses a vocabulary of stamping designs on coins to explain how she gave a face to humanity’s indistinct physical form: “Cuius vultum miserata deformem, quasi ad me crebrius declamantem, humanae speciei signaculo sigillavi”; “Pitying the shapeless face which so often seemed to cry out to me, I stamped it with the seal of humanity” (6:4). The text also describes Natura’s own inferior level of creation (compared to God’s) as writing which too quickly fades from the clay tablet, leaving no permanent mark: “In latericiis vero tabulis, arundinei stili ministerio, virgo varias rerum picturaliter suscitabat imagines. Pictura tamen, subiacenti materiae familiariter non cohaerens velociter evanescono moriens, nulla imaginum post se relinquebat vestigia. Quas cum saepe suscitando puella crebro vivere faciebat, tamen in scripturae proposito imagines perserverare non poterant” ; “On clay tablets, with the aid of a reed pen, the maiden was giving life to the pictured forms of various creatures. But her imagery, rather than adhering closely to this material surface, soon died and disappeared, leaving behind no trace of its forms. Though the girl was constantly restoring them to life their forms were not

able to survive in this inscriptional fashion” (4:1). The fact that Natura’s work is thought of as intensely repetitive and mechanistic, like manuscript copying or metal forging, is due to more than to twelfth century urbanization. Early medieval grammarians preserved principles of Stoic philosophy. As Jeffrey Bardzell remarks, “We see this process of [medieval Christian] co-opting the Stoic mechanistic version of the cosmic bond” in “Alan’s Natura”: “she binds God’s law to created things, and she performs this role in a mechanized, and even proto-industrial way (e.g., she uses a set of hammers and anvils to stamp matter into certain shapes)” (Bardzell 85). We can also see traces of Stoic language theory, which posits an intimate relationship between language and reality, in the way in which the “primordial discursive sin” of figurative language becomes entangled with the vice of homosexual intercourse, which is then equated with non-productive craft (Rollo 8).

For Alan’s Natura, homosexual intercourse is an error, firstly in terms of grammar: “*Activi generis sexus se turpiter horret / sic in passivum degenerare genus*” ; “The active sex is horrified that it thus falls disgracefully into the passive role.” (I.15-16). Secondly, such a man errs in terms of gender roles and “Nature’s grammar”, thus making the connection from language to reality, and then back to language, with the sin of excessively figurative language or “troping” linked to his sexual proclivities: “*Se negat esse virum, Naturae factus in arte / barbarus. Ars illi non placet, immo tropus. / Non tamen ista tropus poterit translatio dici; / in vitium melius ista figura cadit*” ; “He denies that he is a man, for he has become a barbarian in the grammar of Nature. The art itself does not satisfy him, only troping. But a translating of this kind cannot be called a trope; this figure is better defined as a vice” (I.21-24). This last point on “troping” is clarified with the connection to unproductive crafts: “*Cudit in incude quae semina nulla monetat; / horret et incudem malleus ipse suam*” ; “He strikes an anvil that mints no seed; the very

hammer detests his anvil” (I.27-28). In short, the goal of a homosexual union is not procreation, but pleasure, which connects back to troping because excessively figurative language has also lost sight of the utilitarian goal of language. As Bardzell clarifies, “Alan distinguishes between two types of writing: orthography (*orthographia*) and “pseudography” (*falsigraphia*). The former is mimetic writing, written in accordance with nature” and “falsigraphia is writing for the sake of literary pleasure itself without regard for mimesis. Literary style here seems to lead into vice” (Bardzell 92). The irony is that Natura and the narrator are both guilty of figurative language, and the long passages describing Natura’s clothing are a perfect example (Rollo 8–9).

Elsewhere in my corpus, the inclusion of the mechanical arts pulls the work in question towards the representation of a material reality, even if some episodes like that of the flower-damsels’ dresses work to obscure such a dialogue. The descriptions of the different layers of garments worn by Alan’s Natura draws attention to the artifice that is inherent in any form of representation, whether picture- or language-based. Material and symbolic levels of discourse coexist in this allegorical narrative: all creation is pictured on her robe and would seem very much to be real, and her garments are made of various fabrics, from rich silk, to humbler muslin and damask.

Her silken dress is as fine as air, and represents creatures of that element: “Haec autem nimis subtilizata, subterfugiens oculorum indaginem, ad tantam materiae tenuitatem devenerat ut eius aerisque eandem crederes esse naturam. In qua prout oculus in picturae imaginabatur sompno, aerii animalis celebrabatur concilium” ; “So subtly woven was this garment, moreover, that it evaded the scrutiny of sight, and had attained such a fineness that you might think it was of the same nature as air. On this garment, as the eye was held in reverie by the dreamlike effect of art, a council of the creatures of the air was taking place.” (II.19). The quality of the

craftsmanship in question causes the viewer to hesitate in identifying the representation as allegory, for the physical presence of the pictured creatures seems too convincing: “Haec animalia, quamvis ibi quasi allegorice viverent, ibi tamen esse videbantur ad litteram”; “These creatures, though their existence here was a kind of allegory, seemed nonetheless to be literally present” (II.24).²³ Where there is reference to the artful weaving of the silk, the text praises Natura’s skill in embroidering her humbler muslin cloak (traditional pastime of the noble lady): “Sindo, in virorem adulterato candore, quam puella inconsutiliter, ipsa postmodum dicente, texuerat, non plebea vilescens materia, artificio subtili lasciviens pallii gerebat officium. Quae, multis intricata implexionibus, colorem imaginabatur aquatilem”; “A muslin garment, its whiteness changed to green, performed the office of a cloak. The maiden (as she later declared) had woven it without seam. Rather than seeming worthless because of its humble material, it playfully displayed the subtlety of her artistry. It was covered with intricate embroidery and its color gave the impression of water” (II:25). There is a similar claim for the lifelike quality of the creatures of water that appear to swim on her humble muslin cloak, and the idea of Natura weaving it without a seam brings us back to the idea of language, since the ideal of the French romancer is to bring his various sources of inspiration or *materia* together “sans jointure,” so well that the separation between the pieces is indistinguishable (D. Kelly, *The Art of Medieval French Romance* 13).

In non-allegorical works like the *Roman d’Alexandre* and the *Roman de Troie*, moments of *ekphrasis* do similar work to blur the lines between image and language. In both texts the

²³ The *Planctu Naturae* warrants more detailed study, particularly for the way in which the descriptions of the animals (of air, water and earth) perform a collation of bestiary and “natural science” type knowledge, Christianizing and anthropomorphizing in one moment and in another, recognizing an animal’s natural behaviors (the mud-nests of swallows) or the utilitarian value of the animal (of defeating human hunger or providing human clothing like the rabbit). Similarly, see (Huot 45–72) for the representation of nature on clothing appearing at a moment when the environment is being destroyed and colonized in the *Roman de Perceforest*.

description of “art objects” like Alexander’s tent, which is covered with images, and the Alabaster Chamber, an architectural marvel, assert their construction without any sign where their individual pieces join, a metonymy for the work performed by their authors: “quant elle estoit droite n’i paroit pas jointure” (Paris Branch I laisse 91 v.1951). The *Roman de Troie* features a more literal consideration of the topos “sans jointure,” since the author lists all the components (mortar, chalk, sand, cement) that were not needed since there were no cracks in the alabaster to fill: “En la chanbre n’ot ainc morter, / Chauz ne sablon ne ciment cher, / Enduit ne maierun ne plastre: / Tot entiere fu d’alabastre” (Benoît de Sainte-Maure v.14919–22). The *Roman d’Alexandre* is attentive to the materiality of representation in a different way. In describing what is depicted on the first panel of Alexander’s tent (summer, the twelve months, the hours and days), this passage alternates between using verbs of visual representation like “pains” / “painted” and verbs of linguistic representation like “devisé” / “aconté” or “narrated”: “El premier chief devant fu pains li mois d’esté / Tout si com li vergier verdoient et li pré / Et tout si com les vignes florissent et li blé. / Li douze mois de l’an i sont tuit devisé / Ensi comme chascuns mostre sa poësté ; / Les eures et li jor i sont tuit aconté” (laisse 95 v.2010-2015). Faithful representation is literally based on what the letter shows: “Tout ce mostre la letre, se l’estoire ne ment” (laisse 97 v.2045). This vacillation between visual and linguistic terminology is also a technique that Alan of Lille used in *De Planctu Naturae*, as we can see in the description of the water animals that appear to swim on the muslin cloak: “Haec picturae tropo eleganter in pallio figurata sculpturae natate videbantur miraculo” ; “These creatures, elegantly depicted on the cloak by artful imagery, through a miracle of sculpture appeared to swim there” (II:27). As translator and editor Winthrop Wetherbee notes, “The reference to ‘sculpture’ is in keeping with Alan’s several references to pictures as writing or speech. Compare the

indeterminate medium of the panorama of Virgil, *Aeneid* I.453-93, and the carved *visibile parlare* of Dante, *Purgatorio* 10.95” (Wetherbee 574, n.27.20).

We come full circle in this chapter, when we consider the acrobat-damsel automaton from the Alabaster Chamber that does the work of an author, creating the semblance of anything that anyone could imagine, out of thin air: “Sor une table d’or recuit / Qui davant li est lee e granz, / Fait merveilles de tanz senblanz / Que nel porreit cuers porpenser/ [...] / Que n’i face le jor joier / E lur nature demostrer. / Conoistre fet bien e apert / De quei chascune vit e sert” (v.14720-23; 14737-40). However, medieval authors never considered their work as pure invention, but rather the elaboration of existing *materia* in order to accentuate what the author considers to be its hidden truth. They were influenced by the material reality in which they lived, and under their influence objects like automata, piping, and fabric acquired historically and culturally specific signification, becoming representative of the tension bound up in the trade and display of technologies cultivated primarily in the non-Latinate West. The frequent absence of its artisan is probably symptomatic of resistance to the increasingly urbanized economy of the twelfth century, a reinforcing of class structures. And yet there were factions that were pro-technology, like Hugh of St. Victor. A certain level of respect for artisans is even written into that origin narrative for the Latin West that is the *Roman d’Alexandre*. Alexander is not only the originator of ideas for a “diving bell” and a griffon-powered chariot to explore the depths of the sea and the reaches of the skies. He also anticipated the need for master glassmakers and carpenters on his march from Macedonia, who take the necessary precautions to seal the glass sections of the diving bell with lead, and to make the chariot light and strong: “Li touniaus fu en l’eaue en un batel portés / Et fu de toutes pars a plonc bien seelés” (Branch III laisse 22 v.434-35); “Nos la ferons legiere et fort de grant vertu” (Branch III laisse 278 v.5004). I think that

Hugh would agree that Alexander is the very image of human ingenuity, using the tools and crafts available to make his way in the fallen world.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this dissertation, I asked two questions: what is the degree of faithfulness of depictions of material reality (such as geography, pollution or technology) to contemporary realities or knowledge levels, and what do any alterations tell us? Combining an awareness of environmental history with attentive readings of French twelfth and thirteenth century texts has yielded insights into the texts' interpretation through their material subtext. The valence of agentic topography in the *Chanson de Roland* and the *Roman d'Alexandre*

depends on the relative familiarity of the landscape in question, whether it is France as Christendom mourning Roland or the eastern desert and the Cowardly Hill resisting Alexander's conquering advances. Analysis of wasteland vocabulary and other narrative elements has established the "realistic" wartime devastation of Biaurepaire as the model for wastelands symbolically caused by individual acts of violence in the French grail romances. The textual appearances of automata, hydraulic and silk technologies, because of their "foreign" origins in Islamic and Byzantine civilizations, are often implicated in intercultural deceit, ambivalent magic, and their alterity is further exaggerated by the use of exotic materials, including precious metals and crystal. This project has emphasized what continuity exists between medieval material realities and depictions in literary texts, so let's take a moment to reiterate some of the main differences and the corresponding significance.

In Chapter One, we have seen how non-human agency expressed itself in material manifestations. Changes in geography contribute to the narrative told by the rest of the landscape. In the *Chanson de Roland*, Saragossa is incorrectly located on a mountain, but this placement underlines the existing symmetry not only between the Franks and the Saracens but between the French and Spanish landscapes. The height of Saragossa now corresponds to the height of the mountains surrounding the mountain pass, where the slaughter of the Franks takes place. Charles then chases the Saracens to the site of the corresponding killing spree, which occurs in the Shadowy Valley, on the wrong side of the Ebro river from Saragossa. Hostile agentic topography is located in the uncertain geography beyond the Middle East, in the *Roman d'Alexandre*. Its location captures the disorientation experienced by Alexander and his men in the nearby desert and combines it with local efforts at resistance.

In Chapter Two, Gauvain's discovery of a deserted castle, whose clean city features beautifully paved streets in the *First Continuation*, deflects from the urban reality of fetid water and waste accumulating in the streets, which were unlikely to be paved or have gutters. It is particularly telling that this city at first appears to be deserted. It would be easy to have a clean city in any time period without people, without artisans and assorted livestock to foul its air, water, and walkways. The idealistic depiction of this city, which belongs to one of Arthur's enemies, participates in the dystopic rhetoric of wastelands in Arthur's realm by providing a shining counterexample of what Logres is not.

In Chapter Three, the way in which texts do not correspond to a given reality can reveal anxiety about crafts, or about other cultures' unfamiliar technologies. For example, in the *Roman d'Alexandre*, the flower-damsels episode obscures the presence of human work in the forest or in the production of the flower-damsels' clothing (with which they are born), and the exotic nature of the materials that automata and hydraulic systems are made from (crystal and precious metals) reveals the wondrous yet intimidating "otherness" of both the technology and the culture responsible for creating said automata and assemblies of pipes.

Thus we have seen that material realities surrounding these twelfth and thirteenth century texts remain helpful for their interpretation, whether the depictions are accurate or not. Now I'd like to discuss how the work accomplished by this dissertation fits into existing criticism. The introduction to this dissertation discussed some of the work being done on English medieval texts. For those considering specific French medieval texts, non-human environmental agency has not been much addressed by the critics. Details like the Shadowy Valley in the *Chanson de Roland*, or the recurrent agency of the sea in the *Roman d'Alexandre*, are often overlooked by critics, and even less often integrated into a global understanding of the text's relationship to the

material and conceptual world of its author and audience. Consideration of space, spatiality, and place appears with regularity in criticism of the *Chanson de Roland* and the *Roman d'Alexandre*. Spatially oriented critics, like Molly Robinson Kelly, have done well to note the agency of the mountain pass that is complicit with the Saracen Marsile, but have not addressed the corresponding topography of the Spanish Shadowy Valley (M. R. Kelly 138). Stephen G. Nichols has asserted that in poetic renderings of the ambush, “Roncevaux is not actually assumed to be a physical presence to the audience; it is the site of action of the *historia*, and therefore a function of the story” (Nichols 158). Chapter One has shown that the mountain pass and the Shadowy Valley can be both. The material aspects of the landscape contribute to the affective register that the narrative wishes to impart. Spatially-minded critics like M. R. Kelly are more receptive to the presence of non-human environmental agency in these texts, but do not necessarily perform an in-depth reading of how entities like landscape act on humans in the narrative, with attention to the material and symbolic levels of significance that coexist in the text.

In the introduction to this dissertation, we have seen that *topoi* are grounded in material topography, etymologically and in my corpus. R. Howard Bloch’s article on wastelands was of great inspiration for Chapter Two. As a literary critic, however, Bloch used environmental history as a side-note while focusing on the symbolic significance of the Wasteland *topos*. Similarly, Roland Bechmann, whose focus was on the environmental history of the working forest in the Middle Ages, made a passing and very useful reference to the small stature of the trees in the *Conte du Graal*’s Waste Forest without pursuing it further (Bechmann 28). This dissertation combines detailed analysis of literary texts with knowledge gleaned from works on environmental history and archaeology, which results in surprising insight into the texts

themselves. By extending the idea of isolation and the lack of social utility (qualities of the Waste Forest) onto its inhabitant, Perceval, we can see that he shares his anti-social behavior with other characters that are associated with remote landscapes, Orgueilleus de la Lande and Gauvain.

Some critics have profited from research into medieval industry and technology to perform extensive analysis of a literary corpus, among them E.R. Truitt and E. Jane Burns. Their inspirational insight into a single subject, medieval automata and courtly clothes respectively, was foundational for Chapter Three, which had a different objective: to provide a general impression of attitudes toward crafts in the twelfth century with a detailed examination of a few. This sampling of crafts—automata, hydraulics, and silk—and the texts in which they are depicted, were selected for the interaction of Latin West, Byzantine, and Islamicate cultures. The foreign origins of this technology account in part for the use of precious metals and crystal in their construction. Exoticism, however, is not restricted to these kinds of geographical and religious boundaries. The marvelous (fairy-supernatural) fountain in the *Chevalier au Lion* is made of emerald with a golden ladle (Chrétien de Troyes, *Le Chevalier Au Lion* v.417–18; 422). However, there is certainly work to be done on the more mundane crafts in medieval literature, such as the mill which represents small-scale human industry in the *Bliocadran*, or the plow, which is bound up with kingship and sexuality in the *Voyage de Charlemagne* and Jean de Meung's portion of the *Roman de la Rose*.

The work that this dissertation has begun could certainly be applied to other texts. The fountain episode in the *Chevalier au Lion* as a demonstration of the supernatural disruption of “nature” and the elements could offer additional perspectives to the storm discussion in Chapter One. The storm that is provoked when one spills water on the edge of the fountain also causes

physical damage to the trees, and the lightning and hail are potentially dangerous to the human who caused this damage by spilling the water, which provides an interesting counterpoint to the idea of the metonymical wasteland in Chapter Two (Chrétien de Troyes, *Le Chevalier Au Lion* v.437–446). The Brocéliande Forest, also in the *Chevalier au Lion* among other works by Chrétien de Troyes, would offer an interesting comparison with Perceval’s Waste Forest in the *Conte du Graal*. Brocéliande is mostly deserted except for the occasional hermit, and this lack of substantial human habitation corresponds to one of the possible definitions for “gaste.”

Besides expanding the corpus of possible texts (to which one could certainly add texts written in Latin), more work could be done from an animal studies point of view, which is the logical extension of a spectrum of non-human agency. This would necessitate increased examination of fish and hippo agency in the *Roman d’Alexandre*, among others. There is also the matter of animalistic guide-figures like the Hideous Damsel (*Conte du Graal*) and the wild man (*Chevalier au Lion*), both of whom point out future paths of environmental destruction to the protagonists (the fate of the Fisher King’s realm and the way to the tempest-causing fountain). Their liminal positioning between human and animal and their ugliness contrast with the insight they provide in the narrative. The material experience of animals in the Middle Ages would also need to be taken into account. It is this combination of material and symbolic readings that has proved so fruitful for the interpretation of French medieval literature.

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