

Digging into Romance *An Introduction*

A knight, destitute, falls to his knees atop a hill, praying for salvation: in response, he discovers the hill's role as a source of iron ore, and begins seven years' labor as a miner and smith.¹ Gazing upon formerly profitable property gone to waste – its parks destroyed, its buildings collapsed – a wrongfully disinherited brother decides to take matters into his own hands, and reclaim the land that should be his.² Having given away his last coin, a knight is directed by a helpful ghost to the scene of a dramatic shipwreck, where he strips the carcasses and loots the strongboxes of his drowned peers to obtain the material riches requisite to his status.³ A mother's corpse, coated in swamp matter, rises from a woodland tarn to warn of the unseen realms and consequences encompassing mortal experience.⁴ A great king spends months in an exotic undersea realm, learning how to defeat his foes by observing the workings of local oceanic currents, aquatic ecosystems, and natural resource development.⁵ Seeking to prove himself to his beloved, a lovesick knight defeats a fairy adversary upon an "eldritch" hill, reclaiming valuable wasteland and enforcing a Christian hierarchy over the boundary of the fairy realm.⁶

These examples are just a few from among the many scenes of human interaction with landscapes and waterscapes in late medieval English romance.⁷ Taken together, they bear witness to a variety of ways for understanding the economic, spiritual, cultural, and ecological character of topography. Engaging in didactic fantasies of status and conduct that foreground landed property,⁸ popular romances encourage readers to reflect on their own relationships with, and understandings of, their local landscapes. This book establishes a new framework with which to interpret the textual landscapes and ecological details that permeate late medieval English romances from the period c.1300–c.1500, focusing on the ways in which such landscapes reflect the diverse experiences of medieval readers and writers.⁹ In particular, I identify and explain fourteenth- and fifteenth-century English and Anglo-Scottish Border conceptions of the

relationships between literary worlds and “real-world” landscapes.¹⁰ I concentrate primarily on texts whose forms or rates of survival indicate enduring popularity with a broad array of medieval audiences – especially where that popularity has not translated into comparable scholarly attentions.¹¹ Thus, while the artful *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* has understandably drawn the lion’s share of interest from modern ecocritical readers of romance – which I will consider in my conclusion – I seek to develop and expand such approaches by focusing on “pulpier,” more widely read romances, searching for clues regarding contemporary conceptions of the relationship between genre conventions and human experiences of English environments. As such, a secondary goal of this study is to bring these primary works to a broader modern audience, and encourage future scholars to utilize such texts as generic, yet valuable sources of evidence regarding widely held medieval perspectives. My work concentrates on passages describing natural resource management, the assignment of activities or mindsets to certain spaces (such as “play” and scavenging on beaches), the desire to recreate foreign landscapes with familiar features, the relationship of the Anglo-Scottish Border landscape to a sense of regional independence, and fears regarding the human roles in, and consequences of, landscape degradation and climate change during the onset of the Little Ice Age.¹² Many of these issues remain pertinent to modern discourses across a variety of disciplines, and thus invite an interdisciplinary approach that combines literary criticism with environmental history and cultural geography. Through historical and cultural analyses of these textual landscapes, I explain how romances not only reflect the concerns of their medieval audience, but also provide some enduring motifs that appear in the popular ballads of later periods.

Ultimately, my claim here is that the ecological contexts of late medieval England influenced the development of environmental descriptions even in the highly generic and motif-dependent Middle English romances. I posit that these literary landscape and waterscape descriptions, through the reflection of real-life experiences and anxieties, invited contemporary readers to layer their motif-laden narratives across real-world environments. These romances thus emphasized a perspective that cast the natural world of medieval England as one of boundaries with other worlds and alien, non-human actors, and cast forces of weather and climate as anthropomorphic adversaries and Divine agents. In addition to reinforcing the anthropocentric perspectives on the environment that dominated most discourses in Christianized medieval Europe, then, Middle English

Defining Landscape in Middle English Romance

3

romances in aggregate cast the landscapes and environments of the island of Great Britain as the “natural” setting for such fantastical literature, and an integral part of the romance genre.

Defining Landscape in Middle English Romance

Description of topography and the environment in literature is by nature a human mediation of the non-human world: a reflection and product of human experiences – mental, social, and physical – of space and place. Indeed, “Nature . . . can never be understood independently from the specific contexts in which it is embedded, narrated, and represented. Nature ultimately depends on our ways of seeing” – and “ways of seeing are in turn the product of cultural histories and spatial traditions.”¹³ While it is not my goal in this book to rehearse recent analyses of conceptions of nature and space in medieval English culture, such work is an important starting point for my own. In *Scribes of Space: Place in Middle English Literature and Late Medieval Science*, Matthew Boyd Goldie contends “that the area that was most meaningful to people at the time – the space that the sciences, literature, and other discourses engaged with in the most depth – was an immediately local one . . . not ‘space’ as in the cosmos or a spatial abstraction but concrete and physically smaller geographical areas.”¹⁴ Preceding this claim, Goldie explains how the context of literature shapes the communication of space, since

[l]iterary and artistic presentations alter, interpret, and compose the spaces that audiences experience in narratives and images. The literary works also do not commonly present accurate portraits of how people saw the spaces around them. . . . It is because of, not in spite of, these complexities that literature and other forms of artistic production are revealing about space. The Middle English texts set characters and objects in specific places with which they are forced to interact . . . [and] in turn reveal to their audiences the consequences of particular spaces.¹⁵

Goldie’s admonition not to take literary representations of space as direct reflections of actual practice is apt. Yet medieval authors and audiences occupied real-world environments, which influenced the presentation or reception of literary spaces and places. My study examines the “localizing” impulse as it manifests in the landscape descriptions of popular Middle English romances, tracing the influence of lived ecological contexts even on such generic texts. In this way, I hope to reveal the categories of reactions to (and anxieties about) the natural world that such literature prioritized during the onset of the Little Ice Age. It is important that

I begin by defining what I mean by the term “landscape” (and, by extension, waterscape) in the context of medieval romance.

In order to craft this definition, I want first to acknowledge and build upon the productive critical conversation on this topic in the study of art history. While literary and visual landscapes are distinct categories of artistic creation, the conventions dictating the latter certainly influenced the development of the former, and both provide valuable insight into how medieval individuals conceived of their environments. In particular, recent developments in art history have helped to pinpoint what “landscape” represents in the process of human mediations of lived environments, as well as the important distinctions between medieval and later understandings of the perspective(s) inherent in the label “landscape.” Edward S. Casey, for instance, posits that “[n]ature . . . may be said to *face us* in the form of a literary landscape” – and further, that “[a] given landscape, whether actually experienced or entirely imagined, *holds narrated events together*,” for “[i]t is in landscape that this intertwining of place and historical event is most intimately and completely realized.”¹⁶

Casey’s idea of “landscape’s” conceptual origin in the intersection of place and event integral to the construction of narrative complements the approach that I have adopted in the present study. That said, Casey’s work focuses predominately on postmedieval media. To move the discussion into the specific context of conceptions of landscape in late medieval northwestern Europe, I turn to the insightful work of Margaret Goehring. Examining medieval media produced in northern France and the southern Netherlands in *Space, Place and Ornament: The Function of Landscape in Medieval Manuscript Illumination*, Goehring avers that modern readers need to “recognize the multiplicity of landscapes that exist within medieval art.”¹⁷ In accord with my own work, Goehring points out that most scholars of medieval landscape art have defined or evaluated it predominately through the lens of postmedieval (and especially renaissance) conceptions of “[t]he ‘pictorial landscape,’” which “may be defined as the painting of nature in a naturalistic manner according to culturally defined aesthetic criteria for the composed ‘view.’”¹⁸ In particular, she criticizes scholars who examine such created landscapes as symbols only, and cogently cautions that “[w]orking within a paradigm that privileges naturalism . . . ignores the multifaceted reasons for which landscape imagery was employed in medieval art.”¹⁹

Most relevant to my own work with literary landscapes are two points that Goehring makes when framing her own approach to their visual analogs. First, she clarifies the scope of the definition she employs, positing

Defining Landscape in Middle English Romance

5

that “[l]andscape is far more than the human perception of nature, but rather it is the perception and construction of environment in general: it is a stage for human action and interaction, a continuum between past and present and between the urban and rural.”²⁰ Second, she outlines the medieval, northwestern European perception of landscape, noting how,

for the medieval mind, there was no concept of absolute, objective, homogenous “space”. Instead, the medieval world was conceived as a series of overlapping spaces, both real and imaginary, that were heterogeneous, the boundaries of which were mutable and flexible as required by shifting cultural patterns and social practices. . . . Place and space are as much social constructs as they are physical entities, structured by social practice and the accumulation of capital – be it cultural, ideological, economic or theological – that allows for the articulation of its boundaries, which can be both physical and social in nature.²¹

This book, then, seeks to build upon the definitions of landscape that art historians, especially Goehring and Casey, have developed in the course of studying landscapes in visual art, and develop a framework for understanding the passages of environment description that appear in Middle English romance.²²

For the writers and readers of medieval romance, any concept of “landscape” meant the local, and even more the personal. Landscape, even as an idealized vista of a diverse estate, could only be seen while one was a part of it, within it; looking down meant acknowledging soil and dung, a tower’s mortared stones, or a ship’s weathered decks. Environments in the romances, subsequently, most often arise as a parade of highly individualized details: a stone beneath a tree, a single hill, the bank of a river, a field that soldiers stop to admire.²³ Forests and seas especially abound in these texts. Yet, more often than not, sweeping panoramas of woods or estates are outnumbered by focused, almost depthless snapshots of specific topographical characteristics, presented on an intimate, human scale.

The values attributed to topographical detail in medieval English romances are, as I discuss in the following, often decidedly anthropocentric and utilitarian in origin. Consequently, these descriptions often veer away from “realism” in a modern sense, though some do at times include enough specific visual detail to seem fairly “naturalistic.” I include these terms in quotes since, as Stephen Perkinson observes, “present-day western culture tends to elide the distinction between naturalism and realism,” and modern critics need to remember that both concepts are culturally contingent.²⁴ Specifically, “naturalism” for Perkinson designates (broadly) “images [which] incorporate references to the visible world, i.e. to objects as they

are experienced by the human eye.”²⁵ Indeed, as Sebastian Sobceki has noted, critics may betray “the vanity of our own modernity” when we insist on reading the detailed landscape scenes of premodern texts as “realistic” in the sense that we regard the term today, and summarily disregard their other meanings for medieval readers.²⁶ Considering these semantic distinctions, I focus in the following pages on scenes that include identifiably naturalistic elements of landscapes and waterscapes – while simultaneously interrogating such scenes to decipher what information they convey regarding the values and characteristics “seen” or understood by medieval viewers to reside in topographical features.

While human experience and the materials of manuscripts root Middle English romances in the lived environments of late medieval England, their passages of landscape description are first and foremost artistic constructions; their meaning derives primarily from their generic context. Yet, they also encode and adapt various conceptions of lived environments. As Rachel DeLue observes of the modern world,

it is well nigh impossible to see anything as *not* landscape, given that we cannot detach our looking from the culturally constructed lenses and frames that make what we see look like what we expect to perceive and, also, given our wish to provide ever more inclusive definitions of the term “landscape” such that it attends to everything from the land itself to the economies and networks of goods and people that circulate throughout and across the globe.²⁷

Landscape is a historical formulation. In the words of W. J. T. Mitchell, landscape “naturalizes a cultural and social construction, representing an artificial world as if it were simply given and inevitable, and it also makes that representation operational by interpellating its beholder in some more or less determinate relation to its givenness as sight and site” – a process to which both modern and medieval readers are subject.²⁸ Looking at the landscapes of romance thus means acknowledging our own “cultural constructions” at the same time as we seek to identify the insights such passages provide on medieval mindsets. In that vein, I posit that examining how medieval English romances construct the environmental and topographical aspects of landscape description reveals three basic divisions between our own ideas of landscape and those of medieval readers and writers – namely, differences of scale, perspective, and potential.

First, the term “landscape” itself derives from the Anglicized “landskip” of the Dutch “landscape” style of painting which, according to the *OED*, “represent[s] natural inland scenery, as distinguished from a sea picture [or]

Defining Landscape in Middle English Romance

7

a portrait.”²⁹ This meaning, of course, enters English in the late sixteenth century, and is thus postmedieval in its use. It also connotes the specific array of preconceptions regarding visual perspective and composition discussed previously. Consequently, it has come to influence how contemporary English speakers think about the real-world topography they see every day as well: “landscape” is also “a view or prospect of natural inland scenery, such as can be taken in at a glance from one point of view; a piece of country scenery.”³⁰ When, for instance, one encounters descriptions of landscape in post-Romantic, English-language literature, a sentimentalized version of such a view is often assumed. While an appreciation for vistas certainly existed in late medieval England, as work by landscape historians (and passages in some romances) amply demonstrate, such appreciation was of a decidedly different sort than a modern desire for the sublime.³¹ As Goldie notes, “[r]omances . . . and other literature occasionally contain figures who ascend towers or other high points and look over areas of land . . . [but t]hese vistas are not to be confused with Enlightenment aesthetic preoccupations with the sublime or landscape painting.”³² Instead, medieval viewers appreciated such perspectives for their ability to bring together disparate topographical features into an emblem of Divine or human action (along with its social or economic significance).

Second, as John Stilgoe and other scholars explain, advances in photography and aviation technology mean that our understanding of the natural world (and our relationship to it) is significantly altered from that of pre-flight cultures.³³ Consequently, landscapes, and words denoting particular categories or features thereof, have often come to be defined from a perspective of separation. The ability of airborne viewers to look straight down and see the surface of the earth spreading away from them, apart from them, shapes in turn an understanding of landscape as something immense but also distinct from human identity; unanalyzed, it powerfully reinforces a human/nature divide even as it often purports to bring the viewer a greater understanding of the interconnectedness of terrestrial environments. Moreover, photography and video alter our sense of the landscape in time; a photograph can freeze it, while a time-lapse video can translate weather and erosion to a human scale.³⁴

Third, as the *OED* notes, one modern meaning of “landscape” distances the term from a purely artistic sense, defining it instead as “a tract of land with its distinguishing characteristics and features, esp[ecially] considered as a product of modifying or shaping processes and agents (usually natural).”³⁵ Medieval readers would have seen these processes and agents

through religious and folk-belief lenses, and not as the results of impartial and objective natural forces. Further, the verb “to landscape” (perhaps most popular in its noun derivative, “landscaping”), denotes either to depict or, more commonly, “to conceal or embellish (a building, road, etc.) by making it part of a continuous and harmonious landscape.”³⁶ It is this final category of meanings that, I argue, hits closest to the medieval concept of landscape that exists in the romances,³⁷ even if their “londes speche” lacked a specific word for it:³⁸ an understanding of pre-existing features as always susceptible to, or already included within, the realm of human or (anthropomorphic) Divine action.³⁹ Moving forward, my use of the term presumes this sense of potential for action – performed, as I shall show, by both human and non-human actors.

Indeed, action is central to these romances’ presentations of landscapes and waterscapes. Whether overt or merely implied, the natural spaces of these texts are largely understood in terms of human activity – be it travel, resource management, agricultural labor, warfare, or trade. Such everyday understandings of practical human values inherent in non-human topographies, flora, and fauna serve to familiarize the purportedly foreign spaces of many romances, and render their worlds as identifiably English. Yet along with this feeling of familiarity comes an anxious sense of threat. Unlike the purely managerial, scientific, or artistic mindsets explored in medieval representations of landscape by scholars such as Chris Fitter,⁴⁰ these English romances couple such understandings of local environments’ practical values with anxieties over human inability to control absolutely the production or utilization of such values. As the human societies and individuals of these texts are shown to be dependent upon their ecological contexts, so too do those contexts appear as grounds for hope and dread. This dread manifests in a variety of ways: as destructive neighbors, that disrupt the productivity of one’s holdings; as storms that penetrate the boundary between purgatory and the mortal realm; as God-given signs in the natural world that characters struggle to interpret; and as fairy knights, armies, and prophecies that reveal the landscape as a realm of alien knowledge and experience beyond the pale of human understanding. These struggles in turn represent the continuing hardships evoked by the particular ecological contexts of Britain in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, as the island suffered both from the inclement weather and falling temperatures resulting from the onset of the Little Ice Age and from the political and cultural upheaval that (perhaps consequently) characterized these centuries.

Landscape in Middle English romances, then, is a collection of topographical and environmental features imbued with multivalent significance,

Modern Perspectives: Critics Read Medieval Literary Landscapes 9

presented at an intimate scale of personal action. Individual romances give voice to diverse perspectives on landscape, a small sample of which I hope to provide in this book. Yet throughout these myriad variations (of landscape detail and textual tradition), one factor holds true: the personal scale of understanding landscape means that it is almost always embodied in anthropocentric terms, participating in human lives as an extension of human, divine, or fairy forces. Speak to the land, and the land might very well speak back – with resources, with weather, with prophecy – or with war.

Modern Perspectives: Critics Read Medieval Literary Landscapes

The conceptual and lived experience of landscape in (and as) narrative that emerges from the medieval romances examined in this book can be difficult, initially, to inhabit. As one critical inroad, Alfred Siewers links the “overlay landscapes, in which the world of everyday human constructions of reality interweaves an imaginative dimension of larger natural contexts” of earlier Celtic texts to environmental depictions in Middle English works such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Le Morte Darthur*, and *The Canterbury Tales*.⁴¹ Regardless of how distant Middle English romances may or may not be from such Celtic models of environmental description, Siewers’s concept of the “overlay landscape,” linked by narrative to specific real-world geographic locations (such as burial mounds) provides a versatile model for considering the presentation of topography in Middle English popular romances. These texts, in my reading, encourage readers to resituate literary landscapes across the audience’s own, local environs (wherever in England those may be). As Gillian Rudd posits, studying literary allusions alongside “direct descriptions of landscape . . . reflects the way we humans, as creatures formed by stories and traditions as well as landscapes and environs, experience and respond to the world around us,” while “such social concerns as affect us individually or collectively . . . doubtless tint how we read both text and landscape.”⁴² Speaking of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Rudd observes that, as Gawain travels into the wilderness, an “increased lack of precision regarding actual geography coincides with, or even creates, an increased familiarity in terms of imagined geography” – and, further, that “as a figure of romance he [Gawain] is also always already riding through the actual landscape of the time of the poem’s composition.”⁴³ While *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a text concretely connected to a specific real-world area, I posit that the free-floating nature of popular romances, circulating in their various versions, allows their descriptions of landscape to be reimagined to an even greater degree as the environment local to each new audience and scribe – environments

themselves shaped by the context of the Little Ice Age and shifting economic conditions.

Such an understanding of the experience(s) of landscape is akin to that suggested by modern theorists following Henri Lefebvre's understanding of space's three layers: "the perceived, the conceived, and the lived."⁴⁴ Topographical description in romances, tracing identifiably British landscape features, draws into the realm of fantasy the everyday environments of medieval audiences. Importantly, these experiences are transferable to new geographical locations; not locked to particular points of latitude and longitude, they invite reinscription across the reader's local contexts. Such a move could subsequently elevate mundane interactions with familiar landscape features. This repetition of lived narrative, in turn, helps to integrate the natural world within the hierarchical guidelines of anthropocentric narratives, composed (and evaluated) by humans. Yet the reliance of the romance genre upon encounters with alien forces imbues the non-human elements of the everyday natural world with a sense of mysterious otherness – perhaps hiding secret roles as Divine symbols or gateways to a fairy realm. The active, augmented reading experience of landscape passages in medieval English romance thus proves a double-edged sword for texts that seek to establish the dominance of their protagonists over human and non-human alike.

The analysis of landscape in medieval literature, as I have already suggested, necessarily takes its cues from work in a variety of different disciplines. With the development of analyses of the natural world in medieval art by Derek Pearsall and Elizabeth Salter in the 1970s, archaeologically based studies of the medieval environmental history of human settlements and natural biomes, and considerations of "space, place, and landscape" presented in Laura Howes's recent collection, tools for analyzing the textual, "real-world" settings for medieval narratives have begun to take shape.⁴⁵ Environmental historians such as Oliver Rackham, Tom Williamson, and Oliver H. Creighton demonstrate that medieval people were physically engaged with shaping the material and symbolic realities of their ecological contexts, pursuing interests as diverse as agricultural strategies, natural resource management, and landscape design.⁴⁶ Recent studies in cultural geography, meanwhile, foreground the ongoing relationship between human imagination and how we experience the physical world – and how we communicate that experience to others. As Denis Cosgrove states, "written narrative and description hold as significant a place as cartographic representation in the history of geographical practice: the graphic can be textual as much as it can be pictorial."⁴⁷ Sociologist