

May 2016

## Water, Prestige, and Christianity: An Ecocritical Look at Medieval Literature

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WATER, PRESTIGE, AND CHRISTIANITY: AN ECOCRITICAL LOOK AT MEDIEVAL  
LITERATURE

By

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Bachelor of Arts – English  
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2012

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the

Master of Arts – English

Department of English  
College of Liberal Arts  
The Graduate College

University of Nevada, Las Vegas

May 2016

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**Thesis Approval**

The Graduate College  
The University of Nevada, Las Vegas

April 14, 2016

This thesis prepared by

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entitled

Water, Prestige, and Christianity: An Ecocritical Look at Medieval Literature

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## **Abstract**

This thesis examines four Medieval works, *Beowulf*, *Pearl*, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, and *Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart* from an ecocritical perspective. Specifically, it looks at how water affects the human culture described within each work, how the characters and their culture affect the water in return, and how they position themselves in regard to nature. This examination includes any relevant influences which affect the characters' perception of the various bodies of water, such as the religion, technological advances, and historical background of the time period during which the authors wrote each work. It discusses each work in chronological order, and looks at how the characters' and audiences' attitudes toward bodies of water have changed from the 10th to the 14th century.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank my advisory committee members Dr. Phillip Rusche, Dr. John Bowers, Dr. Timothy Erwin, and Dr. Elspeth Whitney for all of their comments on my rough drafts and the time they took to help me find relevant sources, focus my purpose, and organize and improve my writing.

## **Dedication**

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my loving husband Janno, who supported me during the stressful hours of writing, helped me to maintain confidence, and loved me through it all.

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## Chapter 1: Theoretical Approach

In 1972, Joseph W. Meeker introduced the idea of “literary ecology” to the world and defined it as “the study of biological themes and relationships which appear in literary works.”<sup>1</sup> He posits that literature affects humans’ perception of and reaction to nature, that things in nature as represented in literature form a “complete system in which human beings find or create their proper places,” and that mankind’s role in the world most often connects to biological nature.<sup>2</sup> He suggests that literature plays a role in the welfare of mankind and offers insight “into human relationships with other species and the world around us.”<sup>3</sup>

Not until 1978 did any other scholar provide more information on the influences of nature in literature when the term “ecocriticism” appeared in William Rueckert’s “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism.” By this term he meant, “The application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature.”<sup>4</sup> After Rueckert’s article, scholars did not publish anything on the subject until over a decade later. In 1989, a graduate student by the name of Cheryll Glotfelty called for an ecocriticism at the Western Literature Association (WLA) meeting at which Glen Love, a University of Oregon professor, supported the idea. From then on, the term has retained its place in academic vocabulary. Only three years later, the WLA formed the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) which has

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1 Joseph W. Meeker, *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1972), 9.

2 Meeker 8-9.

3 Meeker 3-4.

4 Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, ed., *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 107.

since promoted numerous resources for research on the topic and interconnections of scholars interested in this research and which grows larger every year.

Ecocriticism is a political mode of analysis. Because ecology is essentially a scientific pursuit and ecocritics work mainly in the arts, they do not deal with the specific problems and solutions of ecology. Instead, they look into the cultural context of nature and the relationships humans have with their environment. The value in ecocriticism lies in the aid it gives to its scientific counterpart: spreading awareness. While scientists engage in discovery and problem-solving, ecocritics expose the problems of ecology by giving them a face for the public to see. Once the people become aware of environmental problems through popular culture and media, they become legal, political, and human issues.<sup>5</sup>

Since Meeker and Glotfelty, several have explored what they felt constituted ecocriticism. For example, Alfred K. Siewers examines the St. Guthlac poems and *Beowulf* from an ecocritical standpoint and describes contemporary ecocriticism as the foregrounding of a narrative's background while contextualizing the cultural attitudes toward nature expressed in it. He states that applying this approach to early Insular narratives reveals Anglo-Saxon constructions of literary landscape which support the "appropriation of nature for nation-building."<sup>6</sup> Alternatively, Vera Norwood suggests that "Survival in a hostile natural environment is an ego-gratifying achievement and feeds the achievement-oriented male psyche,

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<sup>5</sup> Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* (London: Routledge, 2004), 3-10.

<sup>6</sup> "Landscapes of Conversion: Guthlac's Mound and Grendel's Mere As expressions of Anglo-Saxon Nation Building," in *The Postmodern Beowulf*, ed. Eileen A. Joy and Mary K. Ramsey (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2006), 199-234.

enabling men to return to civilization and improve their culture. Thus, nature is preserved because it is useful to culture.”<sup>7</sup> While many academics vary in the details of their ecocritical examinations, they do have an unmistakable common thread. “Despite the broad scope of inquiry and disparate levels of sophistication, all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it.”<sup>8</sup> But of course ideas and cultural influences change over time.

This examination looks at medieval British texts from the tenth, twelfth, and fourteenth centuries and follows the variances of cultural attitudes toward bodies of water in particular. While forests, fields, and mountains had great impact on the lives of the people, water especially exposes the psychology behind the medieval ideas of what constitutes nature and the human experience within it. For example, medieval seafaring cultures, such as that in *Beowulf*, honored their dead by casting them off to sea in a small type of skiff with their valuable possessions without knowing where their dead were headed, into the depths or into another realm. The variance of the bodies of water also complicate the human’s placement and function in nature. Geoffrey of Monmouth, in *The History of the Kings of Britain*, describes rivers, lakes, and the sea, and as the characters encounter each form, they experience different emotions such as security at a lake, fear and anticipation at a river, and they behave differently toward the various forms of water by building cities on rivers and draining groundwater. The ideas about water and the role of the human change over the centuries due to advances in science and changes in

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7 Glotfelty 323.

8 Glotfelty xix.

religious outlooks among other things such as the background of the author, his purpose for writing, and political inclinations.

The theologians and scientists of the Middle Ages recognized the significance of water, but many formed their own theories about the habitability of the regions of the earth due to the presence or absence of it. Ptolemy (90-168 AD) claims in *De dispositione sphere (On the Arrangement of the Sphere)*, that only one sixth of the earth was habitable because of the absence of ocean while the rest of the earth was covered in water and therefore uninhabitable.<sup>9</sup> At this time, no one had traveled all of the world so they could only guess at such things. Pierre d'Ailly (1350-1420), in his *Ymago Mundi (The Image or Representation of the World)*, posits that the earth was heavier in some parts than others causing the lighter regions to become elevated from the center of the world and to form landmasses. Water, then, covered the heavier regions. This accounted for the roundness of the earth apart from mountains and valleys, because the water was always above the soil and sand but naturally flows downward to a lower location.<sup>10</sup> A majority of the ancient writers and philosophers who influenced the understanding of people before 1300, such as Aristotle, Pliny, Seneca, Macrobius, and Martianus Capella, believed that ocean surrounded the habitable earth upon which mankind dwelled and that the earth had come out of water or had been previously submerged and brought forth by evaporation.<sup>11</sup>

Isidore of Seville (d. 636) explained that the four elements were akin to one another in a natural way, “so that fire fades into air, air is thickened into water, water coarsened to earth, and

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9 Edward Grant, ed., *A Source Book in Medieval Science* (Cambridge, MA:Harvard University Press, 1974), 636.

10 Grant 621, 633-6.

11 John Kirtland Wright, *The Geographical Lore of the Time of the Crusades* (New York: Dover, 1965), 18.

again earth is dissolved into water, water refined into air, air rarified into fire.”<sup>12</sup> The pivotal relationship in Isidore’s idea is the relationship between earth and water where water turns into earth and reciprocally earth turns into water. Later theologians, such as Avicenna (980-1037 AD), thought that the two ways to produce rocks and mountains was the congelation of water and the hardening of clay.<sup>13</sup> This phenomenon happens when flowing water congeals drop by drop upon a spot which turns into stone or by the petrification of something in the bed of the water channel. Avicenna also believed that substances had various levels of earthiness and aquosity and whichever predominates determines its solid, viscous, or watery form.<sup>14</sup>

Aristotle (384-322 BC) suggested that the air when it enters the deep recesses and cavities of the earth becomes cooled and liquified just as it does in the atmosphere. He found evidence for this idea from the fact that mountains serve as the source for most great rivers.<sup>15</sup> Influenced by Aristotle, Bede (672-735 AD) concludes that when God formed the firmament, the water took the form of clouds, and when the rain fell, it became stored in the earth’s interior caverns. Thus, because God gathered the waters to one place, all water on earth whether on the surface or underground must be connected and unified.<sup>16</sup> Ambrose of Milan surmised that the purpose of water on a global level served as an hydraulic coolant for the axis on which the earth rotated while others argued that it screened the earth from the extensive heat generated by celestial bodies like the sun and stars.<sup>17</sup>

Because of scriptural verses such as Psalm 135 (Vulgate) which says “Praise ye the Lord of lords...Who established the earth above the waters” (*qui firmavit terram super aquas*), many

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12 Grant 26.

13 The congelation of water comes from the coagulation of blood. Avicenna believed that water collected and hardened to make stone the same way blood coagulates to create a scab.

14 Grant 616.

15 Wright 29-30.

16 Wright 59.

17 Wright 59.

people believed that the land floated on top of the water as a result of God's will. Some, such as Alexander Neckam (1157-1217) tried to explain this phenomenon while others claimed that the scripture passages should be taken allegorically, not literally.<sup>18</sup> Peter Abelard (1079-1142) described God's establishing the land on the waters as similar to that of a globe immersed in water. One side remains uncovered while water overtakes the other side.<sup>19</sup> Bede understood the difference in density between saltwater and freshwater. Because of this belief he thought that the seas did not overflow because water was constantly taken into the air and onto the land creating a natural circulation system with the rivers and streams.<sup>20</sup> While many ideas circulated through the centuries, the discussion between religious views and scientific discoveries caused people to take a look at their relationship with nature, and as more ideas appeared, that relationship evolved.

In his *Naturalis Historia*, Pliny found that all bodies of water act as a consistent circulation of water through the earth corresponding with the veins and arteries of the human body.<sup>21</sup> Often in medieval literature, characters see their connection to the world and express their spiritual hopes and identities in corporeal terms, such as in *Pearl*. When discussing purgatory, writers described the dead as embodied, simulating their unique physical forms which will be restored at the Last Judgement.<sup>22</sup> The common fragmentation of the body upon death recalls that of the earth also as it is divided by the four quarters,<sup>23</sup> but people did try to preserve

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18 Wright 60.

19 Wright 186.

20 Wright 60.

21 Wright 27.

22 Roberta Gilchrist, *Medieval Life: Archaeology and the Life Course* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2012), 20.

23 The regions of the known world were divided into four regions separated by equator-like lines running north and south, east and west. The lines were thought of as uninhabitable regions.

the continuity of the body so as to be resurrected whole.<sup>24</sup> Medieval philosophers, influenced by Classical theology such as Bede and Abelard, thought that the body contains all four elements of earth, water, air, and fire within it and thus saw the human frame as a microcosm or a miniature replica of the universe.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, the human body represented and was in balance with nature.

This ideology came from the Classical tradition of humoral theory. Fire (hot and dry) produces yellow bile and the choleric disposition while water (cold and wet) produces phlegm and the phlegmatic temperament. Earth (cold and dry) generates black bile and the melancholy disposition, and air (hot and wet) creates blood and the sanguine temperament. Each person had all four, and a healthy body required a balance, but the substances fluctuated throughout life based on age and gender. Men were thought to be hot and dry while women were cold and wet.<sup>26</sup> The woman, therefore, became associated with water. People thought that women worshipped with more pious intensity, and in the medieval Christian household, the woman's primary responsibility as the water-bearer was the care of the body and the soul. The home provided the greatest opportunity for private devotion and reading, and as implied in *How the Good Wife Taught Her Daughter*, which is a conduct manual describing how a woman should act, the wife was in charge of promoting domestic worship thus maintaining the family's spiritual well-being.<sup>27</sup> In *Beowulf* the narrator states, "a queen should weave peace" (1942) thus indicating that even the queen was responsible to some extent for the well-being of the court. In her home, the woman with her particular feminine qualities could guide her family toward pious life-paths leading to salvation.

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24 Gilchrist 21.

25 Wright 185.

26 Gilchrist 32-3.

27 Gilchrist 154-5.

Official religion recognized the importance of water through various rituals. The public ordinances performed in the parish involved the sacraments and rites of passage spelled out as baptism, confirmation, marriage, ordination, extreme unction, confession, and communion. When administered by a priest, the sacramental materials holding the promise of salvation, bread, wine, water, oil, and salt, induced the transformative power of God,<sup>28</sup> turning sinners into pure-hearted individuals. People normally participated in Holy Communion at least once annually at Easter making it a seasonal observance.<sup>29</sup> Easter was the central festival of the year, and the ritual of Rogationtide (around seven Sundays after Easter) caused the clergy to interact directly with the landscape. While parishioners paraded around with bells, banners, and crosses, the Church officials performed a ritual “blessing of the fields” by sprinkling them with holy water in an attempt to promote fertility of the soil and good weather.<sup>30</sup> The clergy disposed of the holy water used in the performance of rituals and the washing of sacramental instruments in a drain on the floor of the church where it returned to the earth.<sup>31</sup> This act suggests the cyclical relationship people and their culture have with the natural world. Though the environment functions as a useful creation, it lacked the ability to distinguish between the animate and the inanimate. Animate objects, such as relics because they were infused with divine agency, have the ability to *act* intentionally while inanimate objects, such as an heirloom valued for its biographical associations have only the occult potential to *act on* other things evoking emotions or legends.<sup>32</sup> Nature falls under the category of inanimate agent meaning that while it does not make its own choice, it has the potential to act as a result of a rational being’s will as many literary texts show.

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28 Gilchrist 181.

29 Gilchrist 169.

30 Gilchrist 170.

31 Gilchrist 80.

32 Gilchrist 217-37.



Because of the creation story in Genesis, medieval theologians believed that God created the earth out of nothing, *ex nihilo*, like mankind. One's interaction with the earth as a fellow creation must be in accordance with God's word. All humans are bound by natural law, the knowledge of good and evil, and to Thomas Aquinas that law is the rational being's participation in God's eternal law by which He governs the universe. Natural law, then, leads man to his ultimate goal, God, through instruction and increasing in rationality.<sup>33</sup> Pamela Hall delineates Aquinas' claim that three precepts to this law exist, the first two humans share with all living things while the last one pertains to humans alone: the preservation of life, the bearing and rearing of offspring, and rational thought or the desire "to know the truth about God and live in society."<sup>34</sup> Therein comes the significance of the Bible. Aquinas and Augustine, both took the passages in the scriptures literally, though Goth acknowledged that the literal sense can still have multiple meanings. For Augustine, the literal six days of creation accounted for the order of learning and nature.<sup>35</sup> The popular Christian attitude toward nature labeled the excessive enjoyment of natural beauty a sin. The righteous behavior toward the earth involved the admiration of the immensity and meticulous detail of God's creations for they stand as manifestations of His glory and power.<sup>36</sup> However, medieval Europe did experience a revival of the admiration of nature's beauty in the twelfth century.<sup>37</sup> The paradisaic depictions of Eden in the Bible perhaps helped with that revival through the thought that the rivers of paradise flowed from Eden into the world. Because the descriptions of place in the Bible are emblematic, people could see pieces of Eden or paradise in their homelands.

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33 Norman Kretzmann, ed., *Medieval Philosophy and Theology*, Vol. 2, (Notre Dame and London: Notre Dame Press, 1992), 58.

34 Kretzmann 61.

35 Kretzmann 120-1.

36 Wright 64.

37 Wright 65.

Medieval ideas about heaven, hell, and purgatory inform the analyses of the following chapters. Heaven was a golden city of light or a fertile, paradisiacal garden, calm and clean, located “above.” Hell, on the other hand, was characterized by burning and the stench of roasting of flesh, dirty, dark, and chaotic located either under the earth or on a faraway island. The entrance to hell was depicted in art as the gaping jaws of a beast, but the folklore surrounding geography suggested the Dead Sea because of its sterility, inhabitability, strangeness, and the horror stories of sin-induced destruction associated with it. As seen in many texts like *Beowulf* which I will discuss in chapter 2, the large body of water contains the unholy lair of evil beings. Purgatory is essentially the same as hell, but one’s time there is limited. People believed purgatory to be a physical location, perhaps in the earth, like hell, but unspecified.

Because the Bible became the authority on nature as well as morality, the reasonably accurate knowledge the Greeks and Romans had and the new information brought about by explorers and travelers went largely ignored.<sup>38</sup> Most importantly for people, Genesis describes the four rivers running out of Eden which corresponded with the four major rivers in Asia: Tigris, Euphrates, and later on it was supposed that the other two river no longer called by their biblical names were the Danube and Nile. The distance between these rivers caused those who had a sense of spatial geography to question how they could all have the same source.<sup>39</sup> Mapmakers embellished details to fit their theology. Some maps were fairly accurate, but others were made for contemplative purposes, not locating geographical places.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, the physical geography of the world remained unknown by the masses, but people understood the symbolic significance of the natural world and its features.

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38 Wright 43.

39 Wright 72.

40 For example, Matthew Paris’ map of Britain.

Twelfth-century historians had difficulty thinking of land as unused or uncultivated by humankind.<sup>41</sup> This mentality stems from Augustinian theology which “ensures that the nonhuman is objectified and likewise that the objectified is nonhuman.”<sup>42</sup> Augustine in his *De Doctrina Christiana* describes the distinction between that which is to be used and that which is to be enjoyed, and this separation of purposes “divides the Creator (and because of the rational soul, the human) from creation.”<sup>43</sup> Nature falls under the “to be used” category and not under “to be enjoyed” because of its status as reasonless creation manifesting the invisible things of divinity. It is thus to be “read” by humankind to edify them spiritually. Therefore, ecological desire becomes more prominent as the instrumentality of the environment becomes more apparent and the issue of the justification of conquering a supposedly inferior people arose.

During the fourteenth century when politics turned religious, John Wyclif stirred debate among Christians regarding some key Church doctrines, among which was infant baptism. He claimed that newborns do not need baptism because they have not yet been contaminated by sin. This perspective on the doctrine would give hope to those who had lost children before they were christened but was dangerous as it led to questioning the necessity of baptism and the authority of the Church.<sup>44</sup> While the clergy performed baptisms for sacramental reasons, the ordinance also had social implications for the individual. Because there was only one religion in England, an infant became saved through baptism but also became a true member of that community. It also suggested the purity and therefore Christian unity and strength of the society.

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41 Margaret C. Hammitt-McDonald, “Legible Landscapes: Interpretive Topography and the Problematics of Space in the Poems of the Pearl Manuscript,” *UMI*, 1997, 75, ProQuest LLC.

42 Michael Diaz de la Portilla, “Nature’s Musa Jocosa: An Ecocritical Reading of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Vita Merlini*,” *UMI*, May 2014, 18, ProQuest LLC.

43 Portilla 18.

44 John Bowers, *The Politics of Pearl: Court Poetry in the Age of Richard II* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2001), 50-1.

In late medieval thought, the unbaptized infant's body was a source of pollution which threatened sacred spaces.<sup>45</sup> The waters of baptism purged Original Sin from the individual upon submersion and lent grace upon emersion.<sup>46</sup> Because then individuals were freed from Original Sin, they could return to Paradise and eternal life. Underneath the water, the individual symbolically died, and upon exiting the person is reborn as a new, purified being worthy of heaven. As each individual was spiritually cleansed through baptism, society became more favored by God because the community reaffirmed its salvation by accepting only those who had been saved.<sup>47</sup> In this way, the community became more heaven-like. Therefore, the nation's leaders took interest in the spiritual and physical cleanliness of the communities, paying special attention to banishing pollutants.

Richard II of England was ahead of his time with regard to his personal hygiene and tended to it with meticulous attention. As a result of his near obsession, his court brought about such inventions as spoons instead of eating with one's hands, the handkerchief for cleaning one's nose and mouth, and bath houses furnished with taps for hot and cold water at certain royal residences.<sup>48</sup> The average person, however, did not maintain such high standards of personal hygiene. During the fourteenth century, many problems regarding the physical health and public sanitation caused the nation's leaders to take action, especially in London. City centers made up the hub of business and high-status living through which rivers would run. The local merchants disposed of their animal waste by dumping it into the river. The upper-class members who lived in the capital then complained to the king of the city's filth and resulting stench. Many poets and artists saw London as the New Jerusalem as described in the book of Revelations in the New

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45 Gilchrist 185.

46 While those on the continent practiced the sprinkling of water on the infant, the English practiced full submersion for the person being baptized. (Gilchrist 186)

47 Bowers 50-3.

48 Bowers 16.

Testament, a holy city which reflected the royal power of its lord. Therefore, King Richard could not have his capital city represented in such an unclean state. His next action involved instituting the Statute of Barnwell, England's first sanitation act, in 1388. Waterways and sewers were also created to help with public sanitation and disease control.<sup>49</sup> It was not an easy fix, but as Caroline Barron notes, "The appearance of the city was a matter of concern to the king: he wanted his capital city, his processional city, perhaps even his New Jerusalem, to be clean and impressive."<sup>50</sup>

The position and placement of the human in literature comes at the mercy of the author's upbringing and previous study, and his practical knowledge of geography and where his work was written affect his attitude toward nature. When authors understand the physical location about which they write and try to represent that space realistically, they mingle their physical experience with the subtleties of personal interpretation of the natural world. The knowledge that medieval authors had, however, becomes difficult to determine due to the lack of documents and other evidence about their lives. If an author depicted the setting similarly to modern knowledge, then we can guess that person knew the land as we do today, but artistic license gave writers leave to manipulate knowledge or ignore it altogether, further complicating our discussion. Certainly their geographical education affects their work, but it does turn into speculation as modern scholars piece together all they can regarding authors and their literature. The inclusion of third parties such as scribes and copyists, who added and took out things in the texts, also obscures the information available. Through consideration of cultural common knowledge, however, researchers have been able to suggest which authors had an accurate geographical awareness and which did not.

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49 Bowers 118-123.

50 Caroline Barron, "Richard II and London," In *Richard II: The Art of Kingship*, ed. Anthony Goodman and James L. Gillespie (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 132.

While authors live in the physical world, their characters do not, and the natural elements in literature often behave in unnatural, unrealistic ways. They do impossible things and interact in a bizarre manner with humans, but these things manifest real attitudes and perceptions of nature. For example, in Chrétien de Troyes' *Yvain, the Knight with the Lion*, the main character pours water onto a special rock and suddenly a violent storm thrashes and damages the local area, which includes the forest and a small kingdom. This incident suggests more than a magical, marvelous happening; it suggests that large meaningful events which affect both humans and nature can come from small, seemingly insignificant occurrences brought about by a human's actions. This situation is indicative of the human's desire for control over the elements, the use of nature as weaponry, and that nature affects humans just as much as other parts of the environment, all things which are true to the real world. The study of the environment in literature, including fantasy or idyllic literature, leads us to a knowledge about our own world.

## Chapter 2: *Beowulf*

Water, as the most mysterious part of landscape, actively creates opportunities for achievement and purpose for the hero in *Beowulf*. The water extends to uses beyond the hero to its boundless capacity, untameable and unpredictable behavior, and its hidden and monstrous inhabitants. It works as an instrument of Chaos. Yet the sea plays a forceful role in politics, war, travel, and social advancement, along with individual and tribal prosperity. In this essay, I will examine the relationship the characters in *Beowulf* have with water and the different religious perspectives associated with that relationship along with the Breca episode, Grendel's Mere, and the Dragon.

Both the Pagans and Christians have different relationships with. The conversion to Christianity took some of the terror out of the unpredictability of the water and its monsters while the sea maintained its cautionary construction. In *Beowulf*, religion affects people's perspective of water, and this adjusted view alters the culture associated with that faith.

The natural landscape in *Beowulf* significantly influences the text. The poet wrote for a Christian audience who looked back on their ancestors with both pride for their strength and familial connection and pity for their unsaved state. The characters in the story had to demonstrate honor and glory, but the story exists for the audience and not for its own sake. Thus for the audience to accept the work, it needed to coincide with their beliefs. If the poet wrote about pagans, he needed to write about them in regard to Christianity, or otherwise the converted Anglo-Saxons could not accept the work into their culture. Therefore religion becomes an essential part of the poem. Dorothy Whitelock explains that "the Christian element is not merely superimposed; it permeates the poem."<sup>51</sup> The poet refers too blatantly to religious beliefs and

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51 Dorothy Whitelock, *The Audience of Beowulf*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951), 4.

divine interference without explication for the poet to mention these stories with cryptic intent.<sup>52</sup>

The converted Anglo-Saxons saw their lives, world, and history from a Christian perspective which includes mercy. Thus, even though Beowulf dies bereft of salvation and of his legacy's continuation with the imminent destruction of his kingdom, he fights as the Almighty's warrior against the evil monsters showing the unfortunate state of the pagan but the mercy of God and His control over the world. The audience could have affection for their ancestors. They could look on their own forefathers with compassion and perhaps reverence, even admiration.

The characters do not necessarily have to demonstrate piety, but religious sentiments must appear throughout the scenes of the poem. The *Beowulf* poet employs these sentiments in a way that invariably ties the poem's events to the landscape. For example, Beowulf, while separated from his worthy friend Brecca, slays all of the sea monsters. He conquers them through the blessings and protection of the Christian God and cleanses the North Sea:

Pinioned fast

and swathed in [the sea-brute's] grip, I was granted one  
final chance: my sword plunged  
and the ordeal was over...

From now on

sailors would be safe, the deep-sea raids  
were over for good. Light came from the east,  
bright guarantee of God, and the waves  
went quiet (554-71).

This event eliminates the monsters of the ocean for the rest of the poem and, therefore, changes the risks involved with the sea for all people because of the interference of God's warrior. God

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52 Whitelock 20.



grants Beowulf one final chance which allows him to succeed and quiet the waves signifying that humans can affect the state of the waters.

Upon sailing the same area and route which Beowulf sailed, Gillian Overing and Marijane Osborn found that perhaps, the poet knew more than many scholars believe. In their book *Landscape of Desire: Partial Stories of the Medieval Scandinavian World*, they discuss the concept of a verbal sea-chart or “oral map” which navigators used instead of a compass. Prime examples of this include accounts by Ohthere and Wulfstan from Orosius’ *History of the World* where men sail around the northern coasts of Europe and describe the landscape, relative distance, and the amount of time travelled with what kind of wind conditions. This oral map handed down from sailors who have gone on previous voyages gave less experienced sailors an idea about what space surrounded them and which sea path would bring them to the location for which they searched. This came in the form of birds’ flight patterns, the movement of sea animals and ice flows, coastal landmarks, and the color and temperature of the water. The preservation of orally transmitted knowledge remained consistent between the historical and fictional world in which the poet placed *Beowulf*. The recounting of voyages must have come with great detail, because much of what the author described aligns with the account given by Overing and Osborn, including the sea-cliffs of Anholt which “aren’t the cliffs of Dover or the Channel, but they have a similar feel.”<sup>53</sup>

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53 For more information on sailing and the route Beowulf traveled, see *Landscape of Desire: Partial Stories of the Medieval Scandinavian World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994) by Gillian R. Overing and Marijane Osborn.

Alfred Hiatt in his article “Beowulf Off the Map” hypothesizes that the *Beowulf*-poet did not have an extensive knowledge of geography and more likely took artistic license in assuming locations based from what he heard from others: “In Beowulf there is almost no attempt to locate the events of the poem within a world geography. What is present in the poem is a shifting sense of regional space, at times relatively precise, at others vague.”<sup>54</sup> Because of this, the poet describes Scandinavian landscapes with English features such as high cliffs standing against the sea and describes the locations of places vaguely such as the mere as remote, but not far from Heorot.<sup>55</sup> The landscape, including the water, sits where the poet felt most convenient for the plot. This does not necessarily contradict Overing and Osborn’s argument, for they explain that the poet may still have gotten his information from other people, and that seems the most likely occurrence because the poet probably had a clerical profession which would not have taken him overseas.

The connection between Hiatt’s and Overing and Osborn’s points lie in the spatial reasoning of the landscape in the poem. Nothing lies very distant from each other, and travel if not impeded by the weather happens quickly. The world of *Beowulf* is relatively small except for the vast water. Therefore, places such as Grendel’s *mere* and Heorot lie somewhat near each other, but where a known monster resides, people avoid. In that sense, the *mere* could remain near and remote simultaneously without obstructing the poem’s use of logic. Geographically, only limited stretches of water separate the lands in reality and in the poetry. Quite possibly, the

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54 Alfred Hiatt, “Beowulf Off the Map,” *Anglo-Saxon England* 38 (2009): 18.

55 Stuart Elden, “Place Symbolism and Land Politics in Beowulf,” *Cultural Geographies* 16 (2009): 451.

*Beowulf* poet describes the geographical locations accurately enough through the first-hand accounts of others and leaves exact locations vague because he truly does not know for himself and so as to release the poem from the restrictions of physical place. Physical boundaries create a limited sphere in which action may occur. The poet describes the land vaguely, and indeed if he pinpointed the exact locations of events the specificity would have served as a barrier restricting where the characters may go. The poet describes both the land and the sea locations indistinctly, and the same goes for the mere. This draws a parallel between the different types of landscape in their opposition to one another. The sea surrounds the land, like an enemy army waiting to attack, as an ever-present threat of erosion, flooding, and ecological disorder while the landmasses restrict the sea from taking over the world.

The bodies of water leave significant marks on the land as it ages, but the sea itself seldom changes from generation to generation. As shown by Overing and Osborn, the landscape changed very little between the time of *Beowulf* and the time of the *Beowulf* scribe, and even today Scandinavia remains remarkably similar to that described in the poem. Because of this circumstance, we can know how accurately the *Beowulf* poet knew and portrayed the landscape. Of course he does include unrealistic components, but the water itself does nothing out of the ordinary. This information leads the reader to recognize what kind of information will be given about the relationship between *Beowulf* and the bodies of water. Because the natural elements behave normally, the attitudes toward nature expressed will come through the description and physical properties of the water and not its interaction with the characters.

Similar to the coming and going of the waves, water gives life and takes it away with only its presence, as is demonstrated in the Mere by one creature's "strange lake birth" (1440)<sup>56</sup> popping out of the murky *mere*. Beowulf explained to the men in the mead hall that he and Breca were "urging each other to risk [their] lives on the sea" (537-38). These scenes imply that both life and death come from water. Because of its merciless tendencies, mankind uses water to torture and punish other people. Water provides a convenient way to exile individuals as well, as seen in texts such as "The Wanderer" and "The Seafarer." Because of the indifference of the water, humans experience a contradiction with it, for they need water for physical sustenance, but they also can drown in it. The water holds an impartiality toward humans which can destroy and protect them.

The sea in *Beowulf* treats the Geats, Danes, and all others alike. This impartiality allows a people to hope for the extinction of enemies before they reach their lands. In this situation, geographical boundaries often determine political borders.<sup>57</sup> As demonstrated in the Finn episode, the Scandinavian nations constantly fought against each other, and the way by which each army travelled invariably involved sailing to get to these desirable foreign lands:

*Wind and water*  
*raged with storms,*  
*wave and shingle*  
*were shackled in ice*  
*until another year*  
*appeared in the yard*  
*as it does to this day,*

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56 Stephen Greenblatt and M.H. Abrams, ed., *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 8th edition, vol. A, (New York and London: WW Norton & Company, 2006).

57 Elden 456.

*the seasons constant,*  
*the wonder of light*  
*coming over us.*  
*Then winter was gone,*  
*earth's lap grew lovely,*  
*longing woke*  
*in the cooped-up exile*  
*for a voyage home— (1132-39)*

In this episode, the defeated troops could not escape until the waters were clear for sailing again. Because of the seasons and the water's utter indifference to humankind, the sailors must arrange their lives according to the state of the seas.

Common medieval ideas about land involved the objectification of the natural world. Often characters try to take over the land, equating that with taking over its inhabitants. The sea, however, is unlike earth. It cannot grow like land, but it moves and fights back. Though Beowulf comes to Hrothgar as an ally, the sea often brings enemies from other nearby nations as well. The unreliability and unmanageability of the water produce the need for skilled sailors who can fight an army as well as the waves, like Beowulf and his men. The water therefore acts as an obstruction to both hide behind and get through.

As mentioned in chapter 1, those who ascribed to Bede's belief thought that all water on Earth was connected as a part of a single unit. Water then becomes invasive when it heaves itself upon the land and overtakes it, be it in a storm, swamp, groundwater, or wetlands. Its presence on land imitates the kind of invasion that the Anglo-Saxons dreaded from another

people. It comes onto and beats against the rock and causes formations. It shapes the dry earth and controls where man may tread.

Sometimes, it stays on the land and creates a home for all kinds of beasts; in *Beowulf* water contains only the most devilish creatures. Mystery shrouds the water and its inhabitants. The landscape in *Beowulf* contains primeval monsters, and for the Anglo-Saxons “traveling through landscape is traveling through ancestry.”<sup>58</sup> Only the landscape remains from the time of the pre-Christian Anglo-Saxons. Therefore the landscape connects the audience to the characters in this poem. The audience sees the water and the warriors contending with it, and that experience takes them back to a time when their ancestors’ superstitions and fears ruled their view of the world.

Where nature represents separation and helplessness, water, vast and malicious, can symbolize invasive alienation. Alfred K. Siewers notes that sea-related imagery symbolizes earthly exile and alienation and, in the Augustinian tradition, the stage between life and death. “To the evolving Anglo-Saxon sense of identity, the sea was both an ethnic historical border and an allegory for the Christian sense of the fleeting nature of mortality.”<sup>59</sup> It also symbolizes the undesirability of death or exile, whether personal or political.

When Beowulf and his men crossed the sea to Heorot, “They thanked God for that easy crossing on a calm sea” (227-28). With such fears as demonstrated in the text by the presence of sea monsters or Beowulf’s gratitude for an easy voyage, sailors became the most suitable men for praise and honor. Beowulf and his men reach Hrothgar after employing their sailing skills to perform great deeds for his people, and they are immediately rewarded with mead as a warm welcome. Raymond Tripp Jr. connects this act of reward with the prestige of sailing:

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58 Siewers 212.

59 Siewers 226.

One might say, therefore, that the pivotal phrase *brimleade teah* links two "fluid" contexts: the ocean, and the drink, which these "pulling"-arm-bending-sailor heroes are receiving on the mead-bench as part of their reward. Such a dual context implicitly equates "good sailing" with "good living."<sup>60</sup>

This means that the water, while wild and uncontrollable, provides an opportunity for men to achieve greatness *if* they can fearlessly face and successfully navigate the sea with all of its dangers. The mead which Hrothgar provides suggests the complex relationship which humans have with liquids. Once Beowulf conquers the sea to come help the Danes, his reward comes in the form of fluid refreshment. This suggests the pain that comes with excess or abundance of that which is good. In small portions water indicates honor, and in large portions it becomes a dangerous obstacle.

The pagan characters associate the sea with death, as seen by the burial of Scyld at sea. The sea thrashes the living, but peacefully accepts and swallows the heroic dead. The poem beautifully begins and ends with this scene of equilibrium with the water. It signifies the interconnectedness of all things, which includes the inhuman as well when Grendel returns to the mere as he dies and when the dragon is cast into the sea upon its death.

The men in *Beowulf* knew well the dangers of the deep waters with lurking sea-monsters, mountainous waves, terrible storms, and its mysterious depths and frigid workings. The way in which the sea affects the people causes it to become a monster of Chaos. For these characters, the sea means wildness and destruction. Brian David Wilt states that while human culture depended on an ordered Cosmos, the sea represents Chaos.<sup>61</sup> It disturbs natural organization and

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60 Raymond Tripp Jr., "The Restoration of 'Beowulf' 1051b: 'Brimleade,' 'Sea-Lead,'" *Modern Philology* 86, no. 2 (1988): 194.

61 Brian David Wilt, "Geofon Deaðe Hweop: Poetic Sea-Imagery as Anglo-Saxon Cultural Archetype," *UMI*, 2014, 31, ProQuest LLC.

harmony. This disruption affects the culture of the people by making them cautious and even superstitious when dealing with the sea. They make extra sacrifices to their gods in order to gain protection. Hardships and threats of danger often lead people to religion, and the characters in *Beowulf* behave no differently:

Sometimes at pagan shrines they vowed  
offering to idols, swore oaths  
that the killer of souls might come to their aid  
and save the people. (175-78)

The water's inhabitants also characterize the sea, and monsters flourish in and spring from it. Not once in the text does the poet mention a gentle beast associated with water. All of the water's inhabitants are monstrous, and the sea separates them from humankind. Wilt in "*Geofon Deaðe Hweop: Poetic Sea-Imagery as Anglo-Saxon Cultural Archetype*" discusses the living spaces in which the creatures reside. He claims that their monstrosity comes from their associations with water. Because humans cannot inhabit the water, anything that does dwell in it characterizes inhumanity.<sup>62</sup> The monsters which reside in the water become like demons and ghosts: "a fiend out of hell, began to work his evil in the world. Grendel was the name of this grim demon haunting the marches" (100-103). Therefore, the people view and treat the water as cursed, resulting in their caution, but the potential and curious nature of human beings cause some to seek it out to test their bravery and skill.

If they do survive their risky encounters, they have yet another feat to handle brought once again by the water. Invaders and raiders come by ship. For this reason, the Shieldings' coast-guard interrogates Beowulf upon his arrival to the Danish shore. Peninsulas constitute both the land of the Geats and of the Danes. Thus, while both kingdoms connect to greater land,

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62 Wilt 36.



water surrounds most of their territories. Water allows for the easiest access to their lands making attacks from the sea common. In this situation, water goes back to Chaos because war, by definition, brings the disruption of harmony and order. Therefore, the characters experience the water as a chaotic force. This aspect causes them to adapt their culture accordingly. They stay on alert and express skepticism toward those “from across the water” (255).

If their enemies can use the water, then the Danes and Geats can, too. Hrothgar described sending cargo to the Geats:

A crew of seamen who sailed for me once  
with a gift-cargo across to Geatland  
returned with marvelous tales about him (377-79)

The transport of cargo allowed the Danes to prosper and excel in their business pursuits until they met Grendel’s wrath. Along with the physical goods came the “marvelous tales.” The stories which circulated about the heroes who not only braved the sea and its monsters but also conquer foreign armies only reinforced the cultural ideal of the invincible warrior and caused young men to aspire to and attempt to achieve that status. Achievement through victories in turn reinforces any pre-existing hierarchical system a means for a man’s upward mobility within the hierarchy. In this way water influenced the people’s values. They learned to highly value physical strength and skill in battle:

Behavior that’s admired  
is the path to power among people everywhere. (24-5)

Those who possess the desired traits and demonstrate them get rewarded; the greater the demonstration, the greater the reward. For example, Hrothgar promises Beowulf, “There’s nothing you wish for that won’t be yours if you win through alive” (660-61) Therefore, physical

prowess such as the great warriors possess becomes synonymous with high social status and riches earned by overcoming the sea.

A chance for reward provided by the water also brings intermittent envy and vanity, as is demonstrated in the Unferth episode. The feats require such elevated dexterity that only a select few become truly celebrated. For example, when Beowulf receives higher praise, Unferth becomes jealous. He wants to think that he is a greater warrior than Beowulf, but he could not accomplish what Beowulf ultimately does by singlehandedly killing Grendel, a water-dwelling creature. Meanwhile, the rest of the characters place great hope in the promised hero. Only when he realizes the intense level of danger Beowulf has entered into does Unferth repent of his unkindness toward Beowulf before he takes on Grendel's mother. The emotional distance from one another arises from having these cultural values but falls quickly when extreme situations loom about as in this scene.

Additionally, the water becomes a means of physical dividing. For example, it forces Beowulf and Brecca apart when trying to match each other at swimming:

Shoulder to shoulder, we struggled on  
for five nights, until the long flow  
and pitch of the waves, the perishing cold,  
night falling and winds from the north  
drove us apart. (544-48)

A driving force of separation instills an inherent knowledge of aloneness and alienation which Beowulf allows himself to embody. He goes to a foreign land and alone defeats Grendel and his mother, and when he fights the dragon, he does so once again alone. When he fights the sea-monsters in the Breca episode, he fights them unaccompanied because the waves have swept his

friend away. This alienation Hrothgar also understands as his soldiers and people remove themselves from the threatened Heorot.

Geographically, the sea also physically separates one body of land from another affecting sovereignty and way of life for the characters. The land's shape limits the inhabitants' space to live and move. War, as well, becomes rather difficult on the water and mainly takes place on land after an army crosses the sea to raid another kingdom. In *Beowulf*, the borders of the landscape as determined by the sea create complex international relations. Beowulf does not go to Heorot on his lord's errand; he elects to go in order to help Hrothgar and renew a friendship resulting in mutual loyalty between kingdoms despite the skepticism from both Beowulf's kindred and the guards encountered on the shore. The fact that Beowulf's own people doubt his errand shows the power water has over their lives and what they think possible.<sup>63</sup>

Conversely, the characters also affect the water. They use it and turn it into a tool to transport goods and themselves across the world as they know it. In addition, they disturb the water such as Beowulf and Breca do with their swimming challenge. This particular disturbance turns into an extremely important event: their horseplay arouses the sea, and the waves separate them. The motion excites the sea monsters and they attack, but Beowulf defeats them all:

“Time and time again, foul thing attacked me,  
lurking and stalking, but I lashed out,  
gave as good as I got with my sword.  
my flesh was not for feasting on,  
there would be no monsters gnawing and gloating  
over their banquet at the bottom of the sea.

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63 For more information on the inconsistencies of Beowulf's childhood, see Norman Eliason's "Beowulf's Inglorious Youth," *Studies in Philology* 76, no. 2 (1979): 101-8.

Instead, in the morning, mangled and sleeping  
the sleep of the sword, they slopped and floated  
like the ocean's leavings." (559-67)

The heroes created by the water and the prestige that comes along with its mastery subdue its insidiousness by purging it of its evil inhabitants.

In the beginning of the poem, the water discharges mystery and a feeling of blank space, a place of potential and erasure. The poet describes a funeral scene of a king:

let him drift  
to wind and tide...  
No man can tell,  
no wise man in hall or weathered veteran  
knows for certain who salvaged that load. (48-52)

While the progression of humanity and building of nations comes in part from water, it creates a blank slate for the coming generations as the previous one ends. Prior generations have built great nations, and Beowulf cleanses the water of wild beasts and makes the water safe for future sailors and travelers. "Here too we see represented a major theme of the poem, that is, the role of the hero in making safe the landscape (in this case seascape) for human use."<sup>64</sup> He and his men, however, land on Denmark "weary from the sea" (325). At this point, the water does not take away their lives, but it exacts a price for safe passage of strength and energy along with courage and skill.

The author's Christian perspective regarding water remains similar to the pagan characters' perspectives, but with some noteworthy differences. For the Christian, the sea remains a dangerous element and place, but their terror becomes subdued by religion and God's

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64 Siewers 230.

control over all elements, especially water. Anthony Fleming-Blake explains that in the Creation story known to the Anglo-Saxons in Genesis, water was not a part of the new, bright, fruitful world. “The earth was yet unadorned by vegetation: the ocean covered it far and wide, turbid waves in the eternal night. . . . our Master parted the- waves and wrought there the foundations of the firmament.”<sup>65</sup> Instead, it took part in chaos and uncertainty. In medieval texts, the sea acts in the same way whether it regards the pagan or the Christian; the difference is that the Christian God can control it. Therefore, one, like Beowulf, who calls upon the Almighty has no need to fear the water, for his God protects him and subdues the elements. The sea then becomes an ally because it submits to divine control and becomes a measurement of the power of the Christian God.<sup>66</sup>

The Christian perspective attributed to the poet and his audience sees water as connected to the beginning and ending of creation. The ending of life comes with the Great Flood and the symbolism of baptism as the death of the sinner and the birth of the saint. Interestingly, the poet describes an animal pulled out of the mere by Beowulf and his men as a “strange lake-birth” (1440). The connection to the beginning of creation comes with Christianity and scriptural reference. The poet describes

how the Almighty had made the earth  
a gleaming plain girdled with waters (92-3)

This depiction suggests that God also created the water and the earth together. Therefore, the water, like the rest of God’s creations, is subject to Him. For example, the poet states in lines 1688 - 1692 that in an older time God controlled the waters, causing them to rise and flood the earth which ended the race of giants. Throughout the text, the poet makes reference to the

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65 Genesis A lines 116-49.

66 Anthony Fleming-Blake, “Waves and Wanderers-The Anglo-Saxons and the Sea,” *UMI*, 1972, 75, ProQuest LLC.

elements and particularly water as under the power of God who calms the sea to protect the favored Beowulf. As the water dutifully obeys its creator, it even becomes an ally for the hero:

“But worn out as I was, I survived,  
came through with my life. The ocean lifted  
and laid me ashore, I landed safe.” (578-80)

The poet lets the audience see clearly that as Beowulf goes about doing good deeds and destroying evil, the Almighty restrains the sea’s wildness and compels the water to work for his survival and success.

The main difference between the relationship the water has with the pagan characters and the Christian author appears when the water becomes an element and no longer an enemy. The water becomes calm under the power of the Christian God and then becomes a tool for that God to use at will for the good of the characters and the world.

The *mere* has connections to the sea, but sits somewhere on land housing the seed of Cain. While describing the water-world, Stuart Elden states that, “While in Christian imagery it has resonances of hell, the more potent image is the intrusion of water into the solid earth.”<sup>67</sup> This penetration on the part of the water creates a contrast with the land, thus forming a parallel with the hero and monster. Because Grendel and his mother invade Heorot and cause devastation, Beowulf as the representative of those living on land penetrates the *mere* to destroy them and abolish their ability to overtake the land’s residents. Yi-Fu Tuan states, “Heroes protected the soil and stood ready to help their fellow countrymen in all their needs. The bones

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67 Elden 451.

and ashes of heroes continued to exert this power. Heroes thus provided a link between the past and the present.”<sup>68</sup>

The portrayal of the *mere* begins with the pagan perspective and ends with the Christian view of water. The *mere* intrudes upon the land. Grendel and his mother represent the water-creature invading the land when they individually attack Heorot. This depiction also appears in Ohthere’s account when “the land turned due east, or the sea penetrated the land he did not know which” and when “the land turned due south, or the sea penetrated the land he did not know which.”<sup>69</sup> The water resides where it should not, where it is alien and unwelcome. Its qualities include muddy, blurred, haunted, and infested just like the sea. The poet describes it as hellish with

wild things such as those that often  
surface at dawn to roam the sail-road  
and doom the voyage (1428-30),

but it “did not work against [Beowulf].” (1514) The *mere* as an extension of the sea and a representation of hell as described in Rowland Collins’ article<sup>70</sup> houses the enemy of God. In medieval belief, the entrance to hell as depicted in art held the gaping jaws of a beast, but the folklore surrounding geography suggests that the Dead Sea, because of its sterility, inhabitability, strangeness, and the horror stories of sin-induced destruction associated with it, contains the entrance to hell. Therefore, the underworld is located under a large body of water which contains the unholy lair of evil beings.

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68 Yi Fu Tuan, “Geopiety: A Theme in Man’s Attachment to Nature and Place,” in *Geographies of the Mind*, ed. David Lowenthal and Martyn J. Bowden (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 21.

69 Anders Winroth, “The Accounts of Ohthere and Wulfstan,” *Viking Sources in Translation*, last modified 2006, <https://classes.v2.yale.edu/access/content/user/haw6/Vikings/voyagers.html>.

70 Rowland L. Collins, “Blickling Homily XVI and the Dating of Beowulf,” *Medieval Studies Conference Aachen* (1983): 61-9.

In the Old Testament, Cain wickedly slew his brother, Abel, and in so doing became an enemy of God. The first enemy to God was Satan who reigns in Hell. Because Cain became like Satan, Cain and his descendants reside in Hell-like place also wherever they may dwell. Grendel and his mother as Cain's descendants live in an evil place with an unmistakable resemblance to the entrance of Hell described in Blickling Homily XVI which takes its influence from *Visio Pauli*:

“The description, which the homilist attributes to St. Paul, is indeed instantly reminiscent of the more famous passage in *Beowulf*, the description of the hopeless and terrifying pool of Grendel and his mother...The similarity of details is obvious: each passage boasts rimy trees hanging over dark water in which beasts dwell.”<sup>71</sup>

Again, a strong sense of fear strikes the hearts of those approaching it. This causes a relationship that, similar to the sea, stems from its inhabitants. The water brings misery and death to the animals as well as to the Danes through Grendel and his mother. As a result, fear abounds near the water, but because this water intrudes upon the face of the earth, the whole region fears when its monsters wander the land at night creating an imbalance between elements, and the hero must correct it.

As God's champion, Beowulf enters the evil lair and destroys the seed of Cain. As a result, the water becomes bloody, suggesting that the relationship between the *mere* and its resident monster later becomes cleansed by the blood spilt at Beowulf's hands. He vanquishes the evil, and the water can heal. The moment he succeeds in his quest, the water settles, no longer tumultuous. The calming of the mere emphasizes the effect which humans have on water.

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71 Collins 62-3.



As people conquer the water and defeat its beasts whatever they may be, it becomes calmer and less dangerous.

Throughout the text, the poet often describes the land as high above the water. The warriors had to walk on “ledges on cliffs above lairs of water-monsters” (1411), and to return to their ships they had to march “Down to the waves” (1888). The difference in levels between land and water suggest the goodness of land and the villainy of the water. It also suggests the balance between life and death, or perhaps good and evil in the world. The cycle of life and death revolves around water and its counterpart land. Life does not happen without water, yet humans cannot inhabit it. The model of descending and ascending for the continuation of life suggests the necessity of death and generational propagation. Water provides the means for both honoring and releasing the dead in the text. While land means life and water often means death, the liminal space on land next to the water comes with a caution.

Although the dragon is more readily associated with fire, its proximity to the sea suggests another layer in the ecological concepts of this text. The dragon does not reign in the heart of a mountain, in the plains, or in the forests. It dwells at the coast, and the text suggests that when awakened, it only destroys the coastal regions:

the fire dragon  
had razed the coastal region and reduced  
forts and earthworks to ashes. (2333-35)

As Beowulf goes to fight the dragon, a stream of scalding water gushes forth from a hole that leads to the dragon’s barrow, perhaps as a warning against the monster inside:

Hard by the rock-face that hale veteran,  
a good man who had gone repeatedly

into combat and danger and come through,  
saw a stone arch and a gushing stream  
that burst from the barrow, blazing and wafting  
a deadly heat. (2542-47)

“Though the dragon is an “eorðdraca,” its umbilical cord, the stream, is still there connecting it to the mother sea.”<sup>72</sup> This liminal relationship the dragon has with the water suggests the dangers of coastal living. The poet places Heorot inland, and only when it becomes more dangerous than the coasts do people relocate there. With the dragon episode, the dangers of living near large bodies of water become unmistakably clear.

After the fatal fight, Beowulf’s men push the dragon into the sea, which accepts the creature just as it does the valiant nobleman deceased and swallows his remains to decompose at its bottom. Importantly, Beowulf’s death occurs near the sea, in fact next to it, but not because of it. This shows that the sea with all its potency and danger cannot conquer the hero itself. Therefore, it cannot defeat humanity though it may destroy the lesser individual. Once again, the element sits subdued by the greater power. Humans have the victory though the hero has died. The people who must interact with the dangerous element may approach it with a faithful attitude and composure because all things are connected: life, death, water, land, people.

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72 Fleming-Blake 13.

### Chapter 3: Arthur and Lancelot

From Geoffrey of Monmouth's *The History of the Kings of Britain* or *Historia Regum Britanniae* (HRB) sprang Arthurian literature which spread to several European countries and lasted through the centuries. The success of the legend comes from what Arthur represents, and that is unity and a king worthy of support and loyalty. Michael J. Curley suggests that Geoffrey's purpose in writing HRB was to attribute those cultural accomplishments thought of as English to the Welsh.<sup>73</sup> As he does so, he creates an ancestral line of power, honor, and war to bring forth Arthur as the one British leader to build an empire comparable to that of Rome. Importantly, as Arthur represents all the hope, pride, and dreams of the Britons, he is invariably tied to the island, thus the natural environment becomes extremely important in the text. The unified landscape represents Arthur's reign and his value as the ultimate King of Britain. Because of Geoffrey's efforts to preserve and legitimize Celtic culture, in the text the water prevents Arthur's full domination of the landscape through prophecy and conflict.

As with all successful ventures, Geoffrey's HRB encountered many opponents, among whom William of Newburgh was of the most offended by Geoffrey's "lies." However, he takes on the role of the "Welsh poet" whose job was that of a genealogist who also recounts deeds and not accurate historical events. The Welsh were deeply connected to the landscape, and the Welsh poet was a storehouse of tribal memory containing stories, lore, and songs and as a storyteller held great "guidance, information, and knowledge."<sup>74</sup> Brynley F. Roberts, a Welsh scholar of Celtic studies, explains that for the Welsh people, myth and history coalesced.<sup>75</sup> Therefore, Geoffrey's *History* does not deviate from the truth as preserved by the Welsh, only

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73 Michael J. Curley, *Geoffrey of Monmouth*, (New York: Twayne, 1994), 20.

74 Brynley F. Roberts. "Geoffrey of Monmouth and Welsh Historical Tradition." *Nottingham Mediaeval Studies* Jan. 1, 1976, 31, Periodicals Archive Online.

75 Roberts 33.

from the Anglo-Norman perspective of it. It is important to note that these Welsh poets were not responsible only for Wales, but for all of Britain. Thus, to conserve the history of the Celtic peoples accurately, Geoffrey had to and did have a thorough knowledge of the geography of Britain. He adds the Humber to Gildas' list of principal rivers in Britain which contained only the Thames and the Severn which are in the south and west respectively.<sup>76</sup>

Adding the Humber in the north gave acknowledgement and legitimacy to the Celtic people in the North, those who lived in Albany or modern-day Scotland. Geoffrey also took the names of his characters from the names of places, natural features, and folklore,<sup>77</sup> thus binding the people to the landscape even more. For example, though Geoffrey names the land after the characters, the name Brutus, the founder of civilization on the island, comes from Britain itself; his three sons, Loegrinus, Kamber, and Albanactus come from the three main regions, Loegr (England), Cymry or Cambria (Wales), and Albany (Scotland). Even the rivers are named after significant people. While Geoffrey pushes his agenda to make cultural monuments Welsh, he inseparably binds the Celtic people to the landscape thus solidifying their claim to rule over it. Because they are a part of the landscape and it is a part of them, only their own disunity can allow another people to conquer them. The changing of place names over time reflects the discontinuity of *Insular imperium*, as Wace emphasizes in his work.<sup>78</sup> As the place names change, so do the unity of the people.

Geoffrey depicts all of Britain as a paradisaal garden or the *locus amoenus*, a place of debate, learning, amazement, and arousal of hope as depicted in the scene with the underground pool. Most importantly, it is a sacred place given to Brutus from the goddess Diana. "Geoffrey

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76 Curley 14.

77 Curley 19-20.

78 David Rollo, "Three Mediators and Three Venerable Books: Geoffrey of Monmouth, Mohammed, Chrétien de Troyes," *Arthuriana* 8, no. 4 (1998): 108.

adds information... on the abundant mineral deposits of the land and the flowers which provide home for bees and honey. He mentions its woodlands, so beloved to the Normans and the abundance of fish in its streams... Geoffrey... exploits the potentialities of the image of Britain as a garden.”<sup>79</sup> The value in depicting a land as a god-given garden shows in the success of its people and their reverence for their environment. Strange magnificence and safety are key characteristics of the *locus amoenus*. For example in Book Nine, King Arthur and his men discover the wondrous square pool found near Loch Lomond with the four kinds of fish that never mingle and the other pool found near the Severn in Wales that swallows the tide waters, but never overflows. Its waves splash ferociously:

Whenever the people of all that region would turn their faces towards that pool, their clothing would get splashed by the waves and they were scarcely able to avoid being swallowed up into the pool; however, if they turned their backs to the pool, the rushing of the waters was not to be feared, even if one was standing right at the edge.<sup>80</sup>

The peculiarity of the elements in Britain shows the relationship the water has with the British people. They do not control their paradise, but they know how to handle it, knowing amazement but no fear of the natural world. Geoffrey describes Loch Lomond as a safe haven for those fleeing Arthur for “they took comfort in the natural protection of the lake.”<sup>81</sup> This lake takes in sixty rivers, but only one river flows out of it. The sixty rivers represent division. The lake and single river which flows from it represent unity, particularly the unity under Arthur, for just a few lines after the lake’s description, “Arthur had fitted a fleet and now sailed around the rivers.”

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79 Curley 14.

80 Michael A. Faletra, ed., *The History of the Kings of Britain* (Toronto: Broadview, 2008), 170.

81 Faletra 168.

As he sails around the rivers, Arthur avoids fragmentation, division of the land and therefore his people. In this way, he preserves national and ethnic solidarity.

The unity of Arthur comes from the wholeness of the landscape as it reflects the actions and power structure of the people. Unity also comes from the people's harmony with the environment. As nature "demands accommodation or conflict,"<sup>82</sup> the people must react to what the divine has given to them. The British take their "garden of delight"<sup>83</sup> and nourish their ecological desire to create harmony with their surroundings. This phenomenon is manifested in the episode of Gomagog's Leap where the giant Gomagag, the nastiest of all giants, is defeated by the hero, hoisted upon his shoulders, carried to the coast, and finally thrust into the sea where the waves accept him.<sup>84</sup> The sea takes in the dead of their enemies similarly to how it accepts the dragon in *Beowulf*. Gomagog's Leap suggests the objectification of both the sea and enemy. The giant becomes food for the ocean, almost as if it was a pet of the British, representing the people's power over their enemies in the same way they have power over the natural world.

As the people are bound to the land in HRB, they subtly express ecological desire, or a "sustained desire for relations" with the environment.<sup>85</sup> Rationality separated humans from their environment, thus enabling them to objectify nature in such a way that its various elements might become useful to them. Particularly, Geoffrey uses bodies of water for militaristic purposes. In the text, rivers mean riches from travel and trade and the centralization of power. Building cities, establishing laws, and cultivating the land legitimized their sovereignty, and the rivers allowed them to do that through the transportation of materials and irrigation of crops. With transportation came enemy ships (such as the Romans) as well as allies. Many fierce battles in

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82 Portilla 67.

83 Curley 14.

84 Faletra 57.

85 Portilla 45.

HRB occurred in or near water, not for the purpose of dramatic effect or that it enhanced the warriors' ability to fight, but because bodies of water indicated national borders and locations of civilization. New Troy, for example, is built on the Thames. Attacking from the river was the easiest way to access the inward land, caused the most damage to a city, and allowed for the greatest chance of success when attacking an unsuspecting people. While towns on rivers were open to invaders, however, they also had greater opportunities for defense. For example, in HRB when the Romans come to attack, the people set stakes in the river ahead of time which sink the Roman ships, and the men drown. Whether this strategy would have worked in real life is irrelevant to Geoffrey's *History* because the truth of the story lies in the preservation of culture and tradition and not in the retelling of events as they actually happened. The rivers, therefore, are a gathering place of wonder, civilization, and utility.

Geoffrey believed that bodies of water, like land, exist for the sake of human possession. For example, at the end of Book Eight, King Uther owns a fountain of the purest water from which he drinks preferring no other liquid because of his long-term illness. After numerous failed attempts on the king's life, Uther's enemies send spies to learn about the state of his royal court. Geoffrey writes, "While they were learning about everything there, they discovered one particularly useful fact that they could exploit for their wicked plans: there was a fountain of the purest water near the king's hall from which he preferred to drink, since he detested all other liquids because of his sickness."<sup>86</sup> The king's source of hydration becomes his enemies' tool to kill him. Upon discovering the fountain they sprinkle it with poison, and Uther "succumbed to a swift death. One hundred other men also perished before this treachery was discovered." The fountain of water is objectified first through its possession by King Uther and his men and second by its being made into a poison conductor by the Anglo-Saxons. Its objectivity comes

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86 Faletta 162.

through the divine given to mankind in its first state as the purest of water, but because of its distance from the divine or rational, it is rightfully utilized and possessed by rational beings, i.e. King Uther.

Rationality leads to divinity. Because landscape was seen as an allegory of the divine, humans were to contemplate landscape in terms of increasing knowledge of divinity and reason. This contemplation led to ecological desire or as Alfred Siewers terms it the “geography of desire”<sup>87</sup> which embodies “cosmically connected creativity.”<sup>88</sup> In other words, contemplation of landscape gave humans an experience of the spiritually divine and a sense of place leading eventually to delight. Perhaps humans cannot create earth or water, but their creativity lies in manipulation of the elements to produce life sustaining and enriching materials. Due to an ability to reason and manipulate (the first step to creation), dominance over the objective creation, landscape, becomes a human right.

Geoffrey’s use of water, however, complicates this idea. For example, when King Vortigern tries to build a tower which repeatedly falls down, he summons Merlin to help correct the situation. Merlin divines that the tower will not hold because of the underground pool lurking under its foundation, and in the pool two sleeping dragons, which represent Arthur’s people and the Anglo-Saxons, lie in hollow stones. In this scene, water contains the secrets of the future. Real life applications apply to the River Dee which forms the boundary between England and Wales and changes its bed every year. The changes the river made foretold of whether the Welsh or the English would be more successful in battle that year.<sup>89</sup> In HRB, the displacement of the groundwater equates the revealing of the apocryphal and mysterious. As the

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87 Alfred Siewers, *Strange Beauty: Ecocritical Approaches to Early Medieval Landscape* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 11.

88 Siewers 11.

89 Wright 206.



prophecy tells of future events, the water reveals the characteristics of the Celtic people. During the dragons' prophetic demonstration, nature becomes a spectacle for the characters to interpret and heed the given counsel. This part of Geoffrey's HRB is particularly offensive to some of his contemporary critics who suggest that "a fraudulent author is a magician of words." However, "through metaphor, the writer of fiction may indeed be a sorcerer, but he plies his craft not to deceive, but to enlighten; and his clients may not be stolid buffoons, but initiates who appreciate the virtuosity of the performance itself and do so with no risk of confusing its results with the reality it is purported to be."<sup>90</sup> Therefore, the pool's characteristics and inhabitants bring enlightenment to the characters and audience.

Whether *The History of the Kings of Britain* was a warning or not, it was a masterpiece that by the second half of the twelfth century was firmly established. It influenced many other writers for centuries, among whom was Chrétien de Troyes who wrote in France in the 1170s and "transformed the apocryphal British past into the magical stuff of French romance."<sup>91</sup> He also popularized Arthurian literature and changed the way readers thought of King Arthur and his knights by introducing their ladies and questioning the authenticity of the Celtic King Arthur. Two of Chrétien's major sources were Geoffrey of Monmouth and Wace who strategically avoided all mention of Geoffrey in his *Roman de Brut*, a Romantic version of HRB. French culture and honor comes from that of Greece and Rome,<sup>92</sup> and "the personal conflicts between military duty and romantic love had become greater than ever in feudal society by this time in

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90 Rollo 106.

91 Rollo 112.

92 Rollo 109.

history.”<sup>93</sup> Whereas Geoffrey chose military duty for his *History*, Chrétien chose romantic love.<sup>94</sup>

Little is known about Chrétien’s life apart from the general time during which he wrote, not even his date of birth and death are known. Possibly, he took part in small holy orders, a student of religion, but not high enough in the religious hierarchy to make a living. Scholars have even disputed his name, saying that perhaps he did not want his identity revealed and that Chrétien de Troyes could be a pseudonym for “I am a Christian living in Troyes” (a known Jewish region) made out of necessity for a Catholic clergyman writing epic romantic poetry.<sup>95</sup> All we know is what scholars have gleaned from his writing as it is survived not in original manuscripts, but in copies made centuries later than the 1170s.

Writing about King Arthur, Chrétien throughout his five works describes Wales, England, and Brittany. Because of his inconsistent descriptions, scholars have also disputed Chrétien’s knowledge of geography. Some say that a simple reading of all of the texts shows his

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93 William Farina, *Chrétien de Troyes and the Dawn of Arthurian Romance* (London: McFarland & Company Inc., 2010), 83.

94 Romantic literature by definition is written in a Romance language instead of Latin; as writers produced tales in their native tongues they also wrote about certain things about which the people of that region liked to read which differed from other regions. For example, the growing female patronesses in France desired to read about love in the French language; therefore, authors wrote love stories in French to please their female audience members. People also liked King Arthur’s knights of the Round Table (mainly because of Chrétien), and thus, the rise of the Arthurian chivalric romance from the mid-twelfth century on. The French chivalric romance, mainly characterized by knighthood, amour courtois (courtly love), and an occult natural world, changed the way people saw Arthur and gave more information about what life was like for his court. The distinctness of the Romance from the History lies in the language; whereas Latin suggests rigid monastic learning and factual information (something Geoffrey takes advantage of), vernacular language invites an intimacy with characters and tales that reveal the truth of character and the moral and excites a desire for more. Vernacular literature rose because of the powerful women who sponsored aspiring writers and influenced the contents of the texts. Patrons certainly were not uncommon during the Middle Ages, but a great difference arose among writers of varying circumstances. For example, Geoffrey dedicates his *History* to both King Stephen and Earl Robert of Gloucester, but he does not rely on them for financial support. He had an occupation as the Bishop-elect of St. Asaph’s. Chrétien, on the other hand, dedicates *The Knight of the Cart* to Marie de Champagne, his patroness, for whom he writes in order to make a living.

95 Farina 205.

lack of understanding. Others say that because the towns and distances described in *Cligès* are accurate and plausible, he must have had an extensive knowledge of the geography of Britain. As this study examines only one of Chrétien's romances, *The Knight of the Cart*, I will discuss the geography in this work alone. One critic, William Farina, has exclaimed that in this work "physical geography becomes more nebulous and almost irrelevant to the story."<sup>96</sup> He also notes that because "this was an age...in which geographic knowledge, even among the literate, did not extend far beyond the boundaries of one's own fiefdom," audiences did not care about the accurate geographical depiction of poetry, and because the audience did not care, Chrétien did not care either whether he was familiar with it or not.<sup>97</sup> As the author takes no regard for physical geography, he writes as though he knows nothing about it. The landscape in *The Knight of the Cart* is, therefore, free to be whatever, function however, and transcend space as the underwater bridge does which I will discuss later. The physical geography is irrelevant because the reader now enters the "imaginary world of [Chrétien's] romances"<sup>98</sup> Chrétien vaguely notes for his French readers that Camelot (the illustrious and completely made up home of King Arthur) is somewhere near Caerleon in Wales.<sup>99</sup> The elasticity and constant shifting of geography in Arthurian literature has led some critics to conclude "that Camelot is best viewed as a state of mind or source of inspiration, rather than as a physical place in the map."<sup>100</sup> Perhaps these critics are right, since "the sense of purpose and familiarity conveyed by the geographical details exists only for the reader, not for the hero."<sup>101</sup> Place names connect the story to a tradition within Arthurian literature, and Chrétien's descriptions of physical location and

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96 Farina 71.

97 Farina 70.

98Ad Putter. *"Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" and French Arthurian Romance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 17.

99 In the average French person's mind: "wherever that is"

100 Farina 71.

101Putter 15.

placement of the human characters in their environment insinuates the moral geography of the work determining if a character belongs there or not and in what way.

Because the world of Romance is imaginary, the environment must undergo a certain defamiliarization which creates the realm of adventure<sup>102</sup> in a world where anything can happen, and this includes the bodies of water. In Chrétien's tale, the wilderness is everything that the court is not, wild, uncomfortable, dangerous, etc. which the knight must confront<sup>103</sup> However, its description comes to the reader through the hero's perspective and not through a lens of reality.<sup>104</sup> With this point of view, Chrétien infuses the natural world with a strangeness and often magic. For example, Meleagant's homeland becomes supernatural with its allusiveness and rare but effective forms of protection. The two bridges allowing passage to the kingdom certainly lead the reader to see Meleagant as magical when both ways are so dangerous that no one can cross them, yet an entire kingdom dwells on the other side. The convenience and placement of the bridges make them seem like the result of protective spells. The underwater bridge, the least dangerous of the two, holds a powerful force that subdues Gawain, the greatest of all knights, but his duty was to attempt to confront it. Interestingly the Underwater bridge is the easier of the two suggesting that water is less of an enemy than the man-made weapons of steel. Thus, the natural elements should evoke less fear than man's creation but still should be approached with caution. After the swordbridge utterly defeats Lancelot, some people find him bobbing in the stream and pull him out. Though Lancelot searches and tries to rescue Gawain too, he ultimately fails at saving his friend. These occurrences suggest the powerlessness of humans against the "magical" forces (i.e. fate, God's will, Mother Nature, time, etc.) in their

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102Putter 13

103Putter 15.

104Putter 20-1.

lives. The magic infused into nature symbolizes the forces humans are unable to control though they may try.

Interestingly, Lancelot, who goes to conquer the more dangerous and difficult bridge, succeeds though he is a lesser knight than Gawain and daydreams constantly. This phenomenon indicates that he has built some kind of resistance to the magic or has conjured his own supernatural abilities. His success, his magical reinforcement, however, is not from any wizard; it is due to his possessing the courtly love of a woman, of Queen Guinevere. *Amour Courtois* is characterized by the pure, spiritual love experienced between an honorable knight and a virtuous lady. This kind of love emphasizes emotional, intellectual aspects and devalues the physical consummation of it. The best situation for *amour courtois* is when the woman is already married for she then becomes forbidden meaning that all the knight may (rightly) do is yearn for her. The intensity of his feelings and inability to release them give the knight extra prowess.<sup>105</sup>

With the magical courtly love of a woman, nature becomes a reflection of that relationship for Lancelot. In particular, the bodies of water demonstrate the relationship between the knight and his opposites beginning with the woman as the water. For example, when Lancelot comes to the ford guarded by a mysterious knight, his horse is thirsty and goes to drink the “good, clear water.” The knight forbids him to enter the ford warning him three times. Once he enters the ford, the knight knocks him off of his horse and into the water. His weapons and pieces of his armor fall off of him and begin to float away. He then fights the knight, wins, retrieves his belongings from the stream, and continues on his way. The ford symbolizes Queen Guinevere, and his thirsty horse represent his animal instincts of physical attraction spurred by his love. The knight who warns him represents society, King Arthur (to whom he should be

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<sup>105</sup> Similar to the way a man feeling sexual tension might go to the gym to release that build up of emotion, except when a knight fights better, he gains more honor, and his love becomes purer. Therefore, he experiences more intense feelings.

loyal), courtly decorum, his sense of morality, anything which rationally tells Lancelot to stay away from Guinevere. As Lancelot enters the ford, just as when he “enters” Guinevere, bad things start to happen. Lancelot gets knocked into the water which “closed completely over him” in the same way she overtakes his thoughts and actions, also like a grave because his honor has now become compromised. Therefore, he is less deserving of the woman. Courtly love is a chaste love: once it is physically consummated it loses its magical influence, and thus the man loses his knightly potency. For this reason, knights were meant to be bachelors. Once they married and attached themselves to their wives they lost their dedication to knighthood in exchange for the physical love of the beautiful woman. The only way to regain their knightly honor was to fight and defeat opponents. Lancelot, therefore, beats the knight and retrieves his armor and weapons which he must do again when he defeats Meleagant and regains his honor. The pursuit of the woman and the constancy of her affection in a courtly love relationship is the key to its success and power. While Lancelot travels, Guinevere leaves him hints that her love is true. For example, when she leaves her comb with strands of her hair still tangled in it on a rock next to the stream in the meadow, she indicates to Lancelot that her love is as constant and flowing as that water (which symbolizes her as a woman). However, only natural bodies of water represent the woman because she should be in harmony with him the way people should be in harmony with their natural environment. The uncanny stream flowing underneath the sword bridge differs from the rest of the water in the tale because of its mystical associations, suggesting a difference in types of water. The good, flowing water on the land represents the flowing love of the woman while water that flows under the land represents evil.<sup>106</sup> Such an

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106 A knight is supposed to be courteous, merciful, virtuous, faithful, etc. thus that which is evil is his opposite.

occurrence suggests that the knight's point of position is centered on the land associating water with his opposites.

The river flowing underneath the bridge, Chrétien likens to "the Devil's stream." It is "treacherous, . . . roaring, swift, and swirling," "perilous and deep," and horrifyingly inescapable. The water seems like the endless darkness of Hell, yet Lancelot's reaction to it most strongly resembles the response of a Christian saint, perhaps as a reflection of Chrétien's ecclesiastical background: "I have such faith and such conviction in God and in His enduring protection: I have no more fear of this bridge and this water than I do of this solid earth."<sup>107</sup> This passage suggests that the evil river is not only his opponent, but his opposite existing to create balance on the world as a representative of Meleagant. It also alludes to the religious symbolism behind the sword bridge and its underlying river and that an inherent difference in relation with humans exists between land and water, and faith in God causes that difference to disappear. Faith takes the fear out of the water just like it takes away the fear of Hell.<sup>108</sup>

This scene delineates presence of ecological desire in *The Knight of the Cart*. It expresses a desire for the relation with the natural world to remain the same due to its spiritual implications and obedience to a Higher Power. Like Heaven, the earth is above the water and represents home, tranquility, safety. Like Hell, the water is beneath the place of human habitation. It is foreign, but neighborly and wanted in only small, controlled doses. This

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107 William W. Kibler, ed., *Chrétien de Troyes: Arthurian Romances*, (London: Penguin Classics, 1991), 245.

108 This water may also invoke Laura Hibbard Loomis discusses origins of the sword bridge in her article "The Sword Bridge of Chrétien de Troyes and Its Celtic Original" *Romantic Review* 4 (1913). She claims that while the sword bridge evokes the imagery of the Oriental soul bridge with its courage and worth-proving difficulty and danger to reach the otherworld, the sword bridge truly comes from the Celtic "Perilous Passage." The main difference she pushes is that mortals can cross the "Perilous Passage," but only the dead may pass the soul bridge though both lead to an otherworld. Other Christian attitudes expressed in this episode, however, make Hibbard's preference for the "Perilous Passage" difficult to support.

relationship suggests a repositioning of the human onto only the land as its place of belonging and not crossing the water in conquest or empire-building. The story's moral geography, the idea that certain things belong in certain environments and not in others, has therefore become apparent. As another example, Lancelot is locked in an isolated tower by the sea, but he clearly belongs at King Arthur's court. This instance demonstrates the alienness of the water as a part of wilderness to humans through its opposition to civilization. The most poignant example comes at the end of the text:

From beneath the elegant sycamore, which had been planted in the time of Abel, there gushed a sparkling spring of rapid running water over a bed of beautiful stones that shone like silver. The water flowed off through a pipe of purest, rarefied gold and ran down across the heath into a valley between two woods. Here it suited the king to take his place, for he found nothing which displeased him.<sup>109</sup>

In this passage, the king positions himself firmly on the land represented by the sycamore tree, heath, and woods with his earthly source of the purest water running beside him symbolizing his queen.

The militaristic and religious components of Geoffrey's *History of the Kings of Britain* and Chrétien's *The Knight of the Cart* are similar, especially regarding the political state of Europe during the construction of each text. Both became exceedingly popular surviving in several manuscripts, some dating centuries after the deaths of each author. Both works are secular pieces written by a clergyman. However, the history and the romance serve vastly different purposes and intend on vastly different audiences. Where the British history entertained the educated and preserved the traditions of a fallen and defeated people, the French

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109 Kibler 293.



romance excited the general population and introduced to them the incredible experience of entering an imaginary world, one still filled with truth expressed through nature. The natural environment then plays a much more active role in the romance based on the position of the human. In HRB, the human conquers its landscape as a means justified by God to gain power. In *The Knight of the Cart*, however, the human positions itself within nature and within a specific part of it as a counterpart to the human existence. Mankind, therefore, is a part of the environment learning truths about life and God from each aspect. People separated by the English Channel and only one generation apart saw their lives and their world very differently.

## Chapter 4: *Pearl*

In the late fourteenth century, the *Pearl* Poet wrote a series of poems which are didactic in nature. The message in *Pearl* revolves around the earthly perspective of the dreamer and his mental limitations. The Poet's audience would have identified with the main character learning the lessons he does in the text. Because of his desire to improve humanity through literature, the Poet describes nothing except that which has meaning and purpose for his message to the readers including the vision's natural environment. The necessary role which the water takes on provides the structure needed for the vision to maintain its potency. The Poet's use of the river as the barrier between and threshold into the Pearl Queen's land helps to emphasize the symbolism of the water and how it improves the dreamer's life.

While the *Pearl* Poet wrote his works, Richard II and his policies affected a change in the physical treatment and cultural perceptions of water. During his reign, physical cleanliness in the public sphere became a goal for the government as well as the royal court. As a result, water, particularly in rivers, gained a new, more important meaning for the people. The Church certainly played a significant role in emphasizing the cleansing power of water through symbolic cleanness and specifically baptism as the way to obtain the ultimate reward of salvation. The spiritual connection to water led people to see it as more than a resource or means of travel, but to see it as an instrument to God's power on earth and in Heaven. It could bring joy, peace, purity, and healing.

The holy city in *Pearl* represented all that Richard II could have wanted for London, his own New Jerusalem. The poet describes it as extraordinarily clean and glorious, made out of various precious stones, and even the river contains all kinds of exotic jewels. This description shows that the poet was familiar with St. John's depiction of the New Jerusalem in the Book of

Revelations. It also demonstrates his familiarity with the landscape of the earthly Jerusalem in Israel. “Since the French text of *Mandeville’s Travels* served as a source for the description of the Dead Sea in *Cleanness* (lines 1020-48), he certainly had available to him information on the physical geography of the Holy Land.”<sup>110</sup> The importance of this knowledge is demonstrated by the river in *Pearl* which symbolizes the River Jordan but also the Thames River which flows through London. Importantly, the real Jordan River is dirty and does not run through Jerusalem. Instead, it runs near it, a fact the *Pearl* Poet would have known from *Mandeville’s Travels*. The Thames also is dirty when it runs through London, but with the new efforts to clean the water and improve public sanitation, the river began to reflect what Richard II wanted the world to think, that the river is good and clean like he and his people. The *Pearl* river runs both through and next to the holy city, like a combination of Jerusalem and London, but is of the purest water, a demonstration of the ideal for both cities, not that the Poet used *Pearl* to promote Richard’s agenda, but this political atmosphere certainly would have influenced him.

In *Pearl*, the holiness of the landscape and of the city is personified by the Heavenly king who rules over them reflecting the purity or filth of the people. The governance of a nation is therefore located in a person, its ruler, and not in a physical location. Richard II tried to promote this idea as he attempted to strengthen his authority by establishing London as England’s capital but encountered difficulties with the moral geography of London versus the provinces.<sup>111</sup> Tim Creswell defines moral geography as “the idea that certain people, things, and practices belong in certain spaces, places, and landscapes and not in others.”<sup>112</sup> In *Pearl*, however, the dreamer’s

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110 Bowers 94.

111 Christopher Allmand, *The Hundred Years War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 136-50.

112 Tim Creswell, “Moral Geographies.” In *Cultural Geographies: A Critical Dictionary of Key Concepts*, ed. David Atkinson, Peter Jackson, David Sibley, and Neil Washbourne (London: IB Tauris, 2005), 128.

assumptions of moral geography are challenged by the visionary landscape.<sup>113</sup> For example, the dreamer tells the Pearl Queen that she is too young to be a Queen in Heaven (470-472). In this instance, the dreamer acknowledges that she is young and pure, but because he associates her with her mortal self, in his mind she is still his child and belongs in his physical world. Seeing her in this divine dream-world and especially noting her high position in it are confusing for him. No longer is she a lowly part of the physical realm. She is now an important part of the spiritual world.

Certain landscapes represent in one's mind specific maps of moral value. Due to its ethereal nature and construction, the heavenly kingdom described in the poem is a moral landscape depicted through the physical with the limited mortal on one side and everything divine on the other side of the river. Paul Piehler states, "The *potentia animae* [psychological force] is represented as existing not in the void one might at first consider appropriate for an interior *imago*, but almost invariably in a setting which...is composed of images taken from the external world and transfigured by spiritual vision."<sup>114</sup> The images the dreamer sees in his dream take the appearance of physically recognizable objects. Because of this, the dreamer describes and tries to interact with the images as though he was in the physical world. In *Mandeville's Travels*, the author writes that the Christian men would wash themselves in the River Jordan. Such an influence as the Poet had may have encouraged the dreamer's attempt to interact with the river physically whether he understood its Biblical reference or not. The moral value the dreamer comes to find in this dream-land is that everything he wants is out of reach because of his intellectual weaknesses and that his desires are not as righteous as they should be. In this land, God is at the center of the geography, and because the dreamer does not place God at the center

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113 Hammitt-McDonald 61.

114 Paul Piehler, *The Visionary Landscape: A Study in Medieval Allegory* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1971), 13.

of his spiritual geography in his heart and because he still lives, God does not allow him to enter the paradisaal land.<sup>115</sup> This experience does, however, promote his moral improvement as a citizen of the mortal world because they help him realize what he wants and what he must do while alive to get there, thus correcting his moral value.

To navigate their spiritual geography, medieval mapmakers took their information from the Bible. They placed Jerusalem at the center of the world, and these maps often were “not designed for travel, but for contemplation.”<sup>116</sup> The Ebstorf map, for example, is a T-O map that separates the three continents with a T drawn inside of an O with Asia on the top, Europe on the bottom left, and Africa on the bottom right.<sup>117</sup> This arrangement places the East at the top and makes Jerusalem the center of the map, and it thus places Jesus Christ as both the center and outer limits of the earth with His head in the East (top), His feet placed in the West (bottom), and His hands in the North and South. The body of Christ therefore “supports the world and is its boundaries.”<sup>118</sup> Because of these contemplative implications, the landscape becomes both internal and external,<sup>119</sup> something the dreamer does not at first comprehend. The moral geography the Pearl Queen tries to get the dreamer to understand stems from the physical geography. As one accesses Christ internally, one may then travel the physical and spiritual worlds successfully crossing the river at the appropriate time. The dreamer enters the internal world of the soul but because the center of his internal sphere is the Pearl Queen and not Christ,

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115 Hammitt-McDonald 95.

116 Evelyn Edson, *Mapping Time and Space: How Medieval Mapmakers Viewed Their World* (London: The British Library, 1997), 9,14.

117 see appendix item 1

118 Hammitt-McDonald 59.

119 Piehler 89.

he cannot access the spiritual world.<sup>120</sup> He must remain on the other side of the river where the misunderstanding mortal belongs.

His awe at the natural landscape as he enters this new world comes to its climax when he sees the river:

“In þe founce þer stonden stonez stepe,  
As glente þur3 glas þat glowed and glyzt,  
As stremande sternez, quen stroþe men slepe,  
Staren in welkyn in wynter nyzt;  
For vche a pobbel in pole þer pyzt  
Watz Emerald, saffer, oþer gemme gente,  
þat alle þe loze lemed of lyzt,  
So dere watz hit adubement.” (113-20)

(In the depths stood dazzling stones ahead as a glitter through glass that glowed with light as streaming stars when on earth men sleep stare in the welkin in winter night; for emerald, sapphire, or jewel bright was every pebble in pool there pent, and the water was lit with rays of light, such wealth was in its wonderment)

This scene resembles the Celtic fairyland so embedded into the British literary tradition with the wonderment of the place and jewels, but the description and the tone of the poem suggests that it is not only a strange, but a sacred place. The river is the most sacred feature of the landscape that the dreamer describes. According to Piehler:

Gods were associated with and perhaps scarcely distinguishable from “sacred places.” Such places might consist of a prominent tree, grove, rock, crag, cave, or mountain; in fact any place which could be easily and prominently distinguished

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120 Hammitt-McDonald 95.

from the monotony of the terrain where the tribe had its habitation...Ever since, though with progressively diminishing force, specific abstract ideas have been identified with specific places, by natural analogy.<sup>121</sup>

Through Biblical references, water had become associated with Christ. As a body of water, the river naturally alluded to Christ's kingdom in the poem and forced a connection between earthly life and Paradise. Many Asian rivers were considered paradisaical because of the jewels that washed up on the banks. Asia was also connected to the Garden of Eden because of the river coming out of the Garden that splits into four: Pishon, Gihon, Tigris, and Euphrates.<sup>122</sup> The Tigris and Euphrates are well-known rivers, but the others are not identified by their original names, and thus their locations are unknown. The river preventing the dreamer from entering paradise is bejeweled, and the dreamer makes reference to "perlez of oryente" (82) when describing the gems in the river. This remark alludes to the Asian rivers which medieval minds thought lead back into Eden. Importantly, the river is not the Pearl Queen's destination rather it is her point of departure.<sup>123</sup>

Pearls are the only gem that come from the water, and thus they contain no blemish.<sup>124</sup> As the "pearl of the orient," she departs from the river to re-enter Eden and return to God from the place of baptism and death spotless. Her particular lack of stain is reminiscent of the Virgin Mary who was spotless from her conception. Her uniqueness invokes the image of the phoenix, specifically the "Fenyx of Arraby" (line 430). Normally, the phoenix is a symbol for Christ and only rarely for Mary because the creature has no father, like Him, but uniquely regenerates from

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121 Piehler 70-1.

122 (Genesis 2:10-14)

123 Hammitt-McDonald 53.

124 Likely, this is something the poet learned from medieval lapidaries, books giving information about precious stones.

its own fire and ashes.<sup>125</sup> The imagery of fire, a purifying agent, is reminiscent of purgatory. The poem, however, makes no mention of this state of spiritual refinement. It only mentions heaven and mortality. Medieval Christians thought of heaven as a golden city of light or a fertile, paradisaical garden, calm and clean located “above,” clearly the city in the poem. Likewise, people believed purgatory to be a physical location, but it was characterized by burning and chaos and where the dead’s sins were purged through demonic torture. The dead stayed there only until they were completely refined and purified, and then they could go to heaven. With the river separating mortality and eternal life, a river of fire could have symbolized the fires of purgatory that one passes through after death to reach heaven, and in the Middle Ages, people thought of sorrow as “hot,” thus comfort meant cooling one’s woe. A diamond could have come from a fire, but diamonds always contain a defect of some kind. The symbolism would have only slightly altered.<sup>126</sup> The *Pearl* Poet, however, focuses on water instead. The practical reasons for this choice suggest the didacticism which was typical for the fourteenth century. While fire does purify, it has a connection with hell, a place of filth and darkness and not with God or garden life. This poem’s goal is to lead the readers to God and increase spiritual understanding. Therefore, to maintain its allegorical sense and to connect the landscape with God consistently, water necessarily is the cleansing agent used in the poem. Also, because the Pearl Queen died as an innocent, she went straight to heaven bypassing purgatory, “for God never decreed that the guiltless should suffer (668)”<sup>127</sup> Only pearls are entirely pure. Water was the only choice. Through Biblical references, Christ is associated with water as “the living

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125 E.V. Gordon, ed., *Pearl* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1953), 60.

126 Gilchrist explains, “In the later medieval context, it is likely that the rite of baptism removed any blurring of the boundary between person and thing; indeed it was argued that resurrection began with baptism. Nevertheless, the bodies of the ‘Holy Innocents’ may have been regarded as spiritually efficacious materials, while their spotless souls would have been desirable companions for adults journeying through purgatory” (209).

127 Gordon xxii.



water.” This image reflects Christ’s being the water especially as it descends from His throne meaning that Christ is the threshold between the worlds.

A truly Christian life is, therefore, reflected in the imagery and location of the various elements of the landscape. Lines 139-40 state, “I hoped þe water were a deuysē// By-twene myrþes by merez made.” (I weened that the water by device As bounds between pleasances was made.)<sup>128</sup> According to *A Concise Dictionary of Middle English*, “deuysē” has several meanings: division, arrangement, order, decision, tale, narrative, or devise.<sup>129</sup> The use of “deuysē” in the poem could mean simply that the river was the result of natural processes occurring when water from a source flows downland and creates a river. It also could be read as an implication that God specifically placed the river there as a boundary for His paradise. The reader can see both interpretations as useful toward the end of the poem. In *Cleanness*, a relating work written by the *Pearl* Poet, everything that happens God intends. In the first section, the poet describes the flood of Noah and specifically states that God controls the waters starting and stopping them thus using them as His tools of destruction. The water has the same relationship with God in *Pearl*:

þe hyȝe Godeȝ self hit set vpone

A reuer of þe trone þer ran outryȝte

Watȝ bryȝter þen boþe þe sunne and mone. (1054-56)

(High God Himself sat on that throne, whence forth a river ran with light outshining both sun and moon.)<sup>130</sup>

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128 J.R.R. Tolkien Translation *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight Pearl and Sir Orfeo* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1975), 128.

129 Rev. A. L. Mayhew, M.A. and Rev. Walter W. Skeat., *A Concise Dictionary of Middle English* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2008).

130 Tolkien 162.

Because the source is the throne of God, He is both the origin and sovereign of the water. It obeys Him because He is the water leading to eternal life. If the poet intended this interpretation, then God mindfully placed an appropriate boundary that is both physically significant and symbolically recognizable for the reader. In the medieval world, rivers often separated lands politically. For example, King Alfred after conquering the Vikings allowed them their own legislation known as Danelaw north of the Humber River, the area known as Northumbria. Nothing but a river separated the land dominated by the Vikings and the land populated by the Anglo-Saxons, and this kind of separation was not uncommon during the time period. As a natural consequence of the poet seeing this division, the river in *Pearl* purposefully separates two wholly different spheres - the material and the spiritual accessed only by baptism and death.

“The poem certainly associates the dreamer’s perceptions of landscapes with his spiritual limitations,”<sup>131</sup> but he does not comprehend the difference between the material and intellectual worlds. Margaret Hammitt-McDonald states that “in the very act of seeing, a flawed mortal (like the narrator of *Pearl*) displays a limited perspective by merely seeing the literal, or by mistaking entirely what he or she sees.”<sup>132</sup> Upon spotting the river, the dreamer forgets his pain and finds joy in following the river because of its splendor. He notices that the land on the other side is even lovelier, and he equates crossing the river with gaining greater joy. He also observes that the water is deep and flowing too quickly to cross safely placing him in a state of exile. He does not understand, however, that this exile is the result of his loss of grace, his sin and lack of spiritual understanding. He sees only the physical appearance of the land and of the Pearl Queen and thus finds himself excluded from that which he most desires without understanding why. With every moment that passes, the dreamer’s desire to cross the river increases, but he still

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131 Hammitt-McDonald 42.

132 Hammitt-McDonald 42.

cannot understand that the river is a threshold and that he must be clean and die before he may enter until the Pearl Queen appears and explains it to him. In *Cleanness*, the Poet makes a stark contrast between the filthy and the clean. Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, editors of *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript: Pearl, Cleanness, Patience, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, note that the *Pearl* Poet mindfully does not identify “cleanness” with chastity, because he “very clearly [has] a wish to see *clannesse* (without minimizing its traditional associations) in a context of wider morality and spirituality.”<sup>133</sup> Also in *Pearl*, the Poet refers to purity in the overall sense of the dreamer’s life and not only to the Pearl Queen’s virginity or innocence. As the river descends from God’s throne and waters the tree of life, it protects the land from all impurities that would cause the place to become spotted. Hammitt-McDonald states that “By remaining attached to his mortal location and mortal ways of thinking, the dreamer is stained, both physically and spiritually, by this location.”<sup>134</sup> This stain recalls the river as a washing agent and resonates with the wound in Christ’s side that fed the water for baptism<sup>135</sup> which washed away Original Sin. With these ideas going through the medieval mind, the rushing of the water suggests the power in religious observances and the necessity of cleanliness to inherit eternal life. As one enters the waters of baptism, one has figuratively died, and as one comes out of the water, one has been reborn as a new, clean person or resurrected as Christ was. The Poet’s readers would have recognized the Church’s doctrine that people must enter the waters of baptism before they can be saved, but they must physically die before they may join the kingdom of Heaven because it is a place of pure intellect. The river is the gateway through which the dreamer must pass to reach his ultimate goal of joining his deceased daughter, but the river is not a baptismal font. It is the experience of death of shedding the limiting and physical body to

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133 Hammitt-McDonald 23.

134 Hammitt-McDonald 42.

135 Bowers 53.

achieve pure intelligence. The orthodox Christian belief in the “transformative power of God”<sup>136</sup> manifested in the ordinances performed by the priests comes into play here as the river or death would cause a change in the physical, mental, and spiritual state of the one who crosses it much like the mythical rivers, Lethe and Eunoe, in Dante’s *Purgatorio*. Upon entering and drinking the water of Lethe, Dante forgets his previous sins, and upon entering Eunoe, he remembers his goodly deeds and virtues. Only after this experience does he go with Beatrice into heaven because at this point he is prepared for eternal life. As both baptism and death, the river in *Pearl* is a cleansing preparation for life in the New Jerusalem which it guards. Didactically, this situation teaches the medieval reader that the cleansing power of Christ prepares the soul for divine living.

In the Celtic tradition, bodies of water effectively hide connections between the mortal sphere and the fairy or spirit worlds. The hero then enters the otherworld either to prove himself or to save someone. In *Pearl*, however, the antagonist cannot cross the barrier. He is not the hero, and he is not saving anyone, even himself. Instead, he tries to encroach upon the otherworld:

He consistently interprets people and places in the otherworld as objects to acquire or invade, respectively, not as metaphors which point beyond themselves toward divine meanings...the dreamer’s impulse either to take the Pearl-Maiden back home with him or to invade her land is eerily prescient for the post-Columbian attitude towards what would become for Europeans an exploitable otherworld.”<sup>137</sup>

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136 Gilchrist 181.

137 Hammitt-McDonald 45.

The dreamer sees the water and recognizes that it leads to a better, more resourceful place, but his ideas about his right to invade such a place, as many Europeans had at the time, does not work on a place of pure intellect ruled over by God.

Exerting the power over him, the water does mercifully become his escort allowing him more time with the Pearl Queen, as she explains:

“If I þis mote þe schal vn-hyde,  
Bow vp to-warde þis bornez heued,  
and I an-endez þe on þis syde  
Schal sve, tyl þou to a hil be veued.” (973-76)

(If I this spot shall to you unhide, turn up towards this water’s head, while I escort you on this side until your ways to a hill have led.)<sup>138</sup>

Invoking the image of God as the water, the kindness of the river exemplifies the charity of God toward His children and allows the dreamer to gain helpful information but not more than his mortal mind can comprehend. The river prevents the profanity of the sacred, but allows a conversation which provides moral instruction for the dreamer and comfort for his grief.

The river allows the dreamer and the Pearl Queen to converse across worlds and intellectual states. “Aquinas asserts that *intellectus* is not itself the capacity of the soul (“*potentia intellectiva*”) by which it receives knowledge and understanding; *intellectus* involves instead ‘a certain correct appreciation of an ultimate principle assumed as self-evident’.”<sup>139</sup> The Pearl Queen knows the principles of Christianity to be self-evident, but the dreamer, while the reader is not to assume is stupid, certainly lacks the virtue of understanding. He quickly misinterprets his visionary surroundings, their purpose and meaning and his own position in this supernatural

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138 Tolkien translation 159.

139 Corey Owen, “The Prudence of Pearl,” *Chaucer Review* 45, no. 4 (2011): 425.

realm. Along with a lack of comprehension of divine law, his physical body could not withstand the presence of God. Therefore, the river flows from God's throne to the edge of the Kingdom to keep the sinner out while he is still in the process of learning spiritual truths and to cleanse him when the time has come for his departing earthly life.

In the meantime, after the liminal river lengthens his time spent with the Pearl Queen, it detains him when they reach the hill and she returns to fulfill her divine duties. Paul Piehler writes:

For as it will later appear, the river barrier, insubstantial as it first seems to the dreamer, is the ultimate barrier between time and eternity, between the highest visionary experience possible in this world, and the perfectly illumined existence of the transcendent world. So, in looking into the river, the dreamer is looking at the barrier separating him from that realm, and is therefore looking "through a glass darkly."<sup>140</sup>

As the river is to detain him and prevent his seeing fully the kingdom in which God and the Pearl Queen reside, it manifests God's will for His children in mortality. They are not meant to see spiritual things clearly, but they must try to see and develop spiritual qualities which will ultimately allow them to enter the New Jerusalem.

The relationship between the dreamer and the river, like his relationship with God, then relates to the spirituality of nature. The water is the portal to access God, but because the dreamer still lives, he may only gain the knowledge he needs eventually to access God's kingdom. Real water may not lead to a mythical land and it may not really be God, but in the spiritual mind its symbolism allows for the contemplator to see its connections to spirituality leading him to better understanding and behavior for his mortal life. In this instance the

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140 Piehler 148.

metaphysical implications of the river suggest that the spiritual is manifested in the physical, not necessarily that the physical accesses the spiritual. The Pearl Queen states:

“Þou wylnez ouer þis water to weue  
Er moste þou ceuer to oþer counsayl,  
Py corse in clot mot calder keue,  
For hit watz for-garte at paradys greve;  
Oure ʒore fader hit con myssezeme;  
Porʒ drwry deth boʒ vch man dreue.” (318-23)

(Now over this water you wish to fare: by another course you must that attain; your flesh shall in clay find colder lair for our heedless father did of old prepare its doom by Eden’s grove and stream; through dismal death must each man fare ere o’er this deep him God redeem.)<sup>141</sup>

Cold indicates death, and the Garden of Eden indicates the coming of mankind into the fallen world, but the river flowing from it acts like a guide back to paradise or to God. The grave is physically colder than the river which leads to redemption, and God alone grants his favor or withholds it from someone. “Like these terrestrial travellers [in Mandeville’s account of the Terrestrial Paradise], the dreamer of *Pearl* is not permitted to cross the heavenly river, since in his spotted state he does not bear the ‘special grace of God.’” Therefore, the natural world in his dream through its nonphysical rules teaches him what he lacks and what he needs to do to be with his daughter again.

Because the dreamer experiences this vision in corporeal terms, his reading of the landscape becomes bound to his earthly psychological and educational circumstances. His perception of the natural world depicted therein and the vision’s content also correspond to his

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141 Tolkien 135.

emotional state,<sup>142</sup> and his overwhelming grief creates a channel through which his utmost desires flow into his mind. This occurrence links to his spirituality and his knowledge of how to obtain them. The dreamer knows about cleanness and purity. Therefore, the river sweeps through the streets of the New Jerusalem cleaning them. He knows about the Garden of Eden, the fruit of life, and baptism. Therefore, the river descends from the kingdom to water the trees and garden, and one must have shed the physical body in order to cross it. He also knows from the scriptures that Christ is the living water. Therefore, the water separates him in his impure state from the Pearl Queen and the New Jerusalem. The dreamer subconsciously is working through his confusing emotions of grief, relief, anticipation, desire, disappointment, and faith while having this vision. Therefore, the river barrier created in his mind becomes the poem's most important place.

The water creates a space that is just for the dreamer to exist and experience this vision. Because it blocks the dreamer from moving forward toward his lost daughter, it allows the Pearl Queen's lecture to take effect. Piehler describes the *locus amoenus* as an intensely desirable place situated behind physical or psychic barriers and that it is the place where the solution to a problem comes to light.<sup>143</sup> Because the river is a boundary and threshold for the *locus amoenus*, it becomes a place of instruction, debate, comfort, and problem solving. While it blocks him from his desires, he learns the greater lesson which he can apply to his earthly life. The river functions as "the two types of allegorical *loci* most prevalent in later medieval allegory: the landscape as setting for *potentia* or Mistress of Discourse, and the contrast of landscapes to express contrasted psychological and spiritual states."<sup>144</sup> The exchange between the Pearl Queen and the dreamer exposes his spiritual defects, his pride and short-sightedness, but it allows his

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142 Owen 420.

143 Piehler 77-8.

144 Piehler 81.



most pressing concerns to be addressed and questions to be answered for healing to begin. The debate lets him and the medieval audience know that while he cannot be with his beloved daughter at present, he may obtain the same glory she has through looking to Christ and being obedient to the gospel. “Nature manifests the comfort of Christ, primarily in the symbolisms of harvest and the resurrection of the seed,”<sup>145</sup> and the discourse gives him hope.

“Being a creature of the earth, the dreamer is more closely associated with the ground. In contrast, the Pearl Queen’s spatial and moral spotlessness dictates the ground of her own bliss, which is not a topographically identifiable place but Christ himself”<sup>146</sup> manifested through the water of the river.<sup>147</sup> Because nature is often subdued by humankind, the dreamer occupies himself with thoughts of invading the land simply because that is how he is used to interacting with his environment. His emotional state positions himself in the Pearl Queen’s land as though he has power over his surroundings. The natural elements in his vision, however, are manifestations of God’s existence and will. Therefore, he cannot gain power over this world, for he has no power against God, and the dreamer’s lack of control over his situation comes from his inability to cross the “barriers of mortal understanding.”<sup>148</sup> His knowledge is limited like the space in the vision which he may occupy. The Poet wrote *Pearl* in such a way that the reader may identify with the dreamer learning the lessons he learns. God’s throne is the source of the river like a visual expression of His power flowing into the world, a river of spiritual life cleansing mankind in preparation of heaven. Through the waters that flow from Christ’s side, or baptism, the world contacts the divine light in each person allowing people such to gain further understanding to reach purity and obtain admittance into the New Jerusalem. To emphasize the

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145 Piehler 145.

146 Hammitt-McDonald 93.

147 The locating of a place of perfection, bliss, purity, cleanness in a person and not a physical region is what Richard II tried to get at with his sanitation acts and making London the capital of England.

148 Hammitt-McDonald 67.

importance of this understanding and to get around the controversy surrounding baptism of the day, the Poet exaggerates the dreamer's ignorance and makes him a somewhat obtuse Christian for his grief leads him to leave behind his reason and scriptural comprehension even as the Pearl Queen clearly instructs him. His lack of understanding allows for the didacticism of the poem to come to fruition.

God's will protects His city in the vision. Therefore, the water seals off the land, and the dreamer is forced to accept that the river separates them physically and ontologically<sup>149</sup> similarly to the way waters separated people of different nations. When he does not accept that fact and displeases God by attempting to cross the river, he is ejected from the dream-land entirely (1157-70). Prior to this event, however, he safely strolls along the riverbank and finds it a privilege to look at the water in all its beautiful glory. When the dreamer describes the river as shining with light that shone brighter than the sun and moon (1055-56), the poet teaches that water has the ability to enhance or materialize God's power similarly to the way it does light. Sunshine bounces off of a watery surface causing light to appear more dazzling. The poet perhaps saw such an occurrence and connected it to water's ability to refract the light of God. The contrast between the river of the New Jerusalem and the real Jordan River suggests that water, cleanness, purity, baptism bring about the changes necessary for admittance into God's kingdom where the water is clear, washes over priceless gems, and shines more brilliantly than the sun.

The attitudes expressed and actions performed by the dreamer in *Pearl* show that physical water, in the form of a river in particular, plays a useful religious and, most especially, a didactic role in normal human life during the late medieval period though mankind did its best to exercise authority over it.<sup>150</sup> As is typical in fourteenth century literature, when one

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149 Owen 423.

150 And still does

contemplates God's creations and power, the water teaches people about God's ways and can be a strong deterrent against His will. Through its spiritual connection and proper religious usage, water can ultimately bring comfort and healing. Most importantly, the dreamer states clearly that crossing the river would bring him great joy (287-88). By the end of the poem, the reader recognizes the point the poet was making in this scene that a joyful life after death awaits the sincere Christian. The relationship between water and humans as suggested in the poem reveals that the struggles between humans and nature are really struggles between the carnal desires of the body and the aspiration to cooperate with a Higher Power and find joy therein.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

The function of water as demonstrated in the examined texts from the tenth through the fourteenth centuries in many ways remains the same. It is characterized by boundaries, death, alienation or separation, honor, religion, and mysteries. The political boundaries of *Beowulf* and *The History of the Kings of Britain* are the same as the spiritual boundaries of *Pearl* separating worlds. In the first three texts, water shows people of the undesirability of death. The water still accepts the dead but the relationship changed. Each text does allude to the element's submission to a higher power though at first associated with evil. The last three texts show that contemplation of water leads to greater truths about life or religion. Even as the purpose behind the texts differs, the connections the characters make with the water remains the same.

In *Beowulf* the characters' honor depends on their ability to master the sea because of the danger of the waves and monsters which dwell in it. As an elegy, the work tells of the greatness of the warrior. Thus, his opponents are described in the most gruesome way. The fact that water is an opponent suggests the harshness of life and fear of the wilderness and being alone. In this text, water works as a mode of separation made evil by its inhabitants. This idea alludes to the superstitions and fears of the British people's ancestors, but it allows for the author to express pride in his ancestors. They conquered the dangerous natural world though they had great anxiety about it. Thus, the author may show his readers that their forefathers were worthy of praise and not just condemnation. Because Beowulf destroyed the evil parts of water (under the protection and favor of God, of course), it was no longer an enemy but an inanimate element. For this reason, the readers could be grateful for their pre-Christian ancestors. Therefore, the water connects the people to their forefathers and causes them to feel greater hope for them.

*Beowulf* and *The History of the Kings of Britain* share many things in common including discussing the doomed people of the past. Contemplation of the water leads the mind to insights which connect the characters to the bigger picture of life. In *The History*, the water reflects the unknown in people's lives and the harmony or disunity among the people. In this way, the characters' lives mirror the landscape while they are a part of it using it and influencing its behavior. As the humans dominate the landscape with their rationality, the water reminds them of their own limitations and vulnerability. Water then serves as a nature-induced warning system reminding the characters that they too are creations and should beware of disunity among themselves and with their environment.

Nature reflecting people is also present in *The Knight of the Cart*, but sometimes the water takes on supernatural qualities changing its function in the story. Instead of reflecting the people's relationships with each other and nature, the water represents Lancelot's counterparts. Water then no longer portends the people's lives as a whole, rather its presence suggests the balance between opposing forces of the knight's natural world. The balance between good and evil in the text presented by the water provides Lancelot with the opportunity to demonstrate his courage and faith. Thus, the water encourages action rather than contemplation, because knights should be good and faithful already. This use of the landscape comes from the purpose of the narrative which is to entertain Marie de Champagne, Chrétien's patroness. Therefore, he writes to move forward the plot rather than to develop the characters. Thus, the natural elements play a role in the text which suggests the multifaceted role water plays in people's lives.

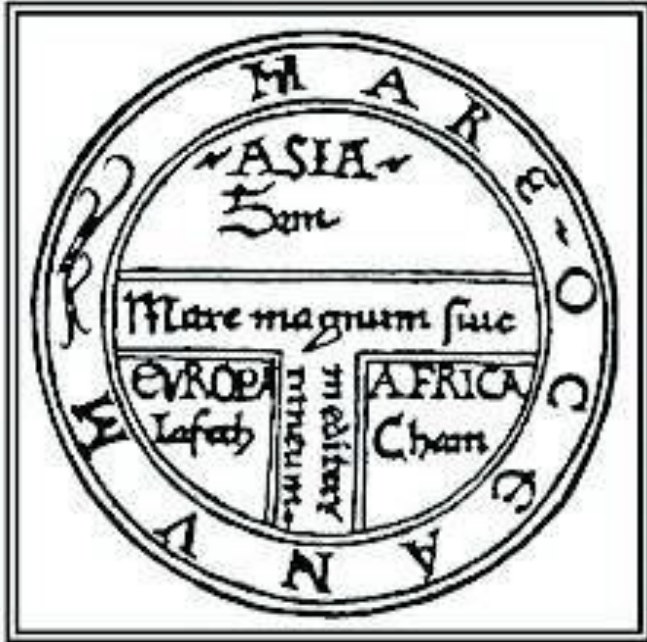
*Pearl* uses water in a way that suits the faith-based nation of its origin where cleanliness became a public concern. Using the Biblical notions of water, the Poet connects the natural world to the spiritual world and presents his message to the reader recalling the contemplative

pattern to suggest that water leads to God through cleanness and preparation. Contemplation comes to the forefront as the river prevents the union of the living and the exalted deceased. As the dreamer does not interact with the stream at all and awakens before he is able to, the dreamer sees the water in only visually descriptive terms. The depiction of the water then become like biblical descriptions of place further emphasizing the Poet's theme. Water in this text becomes inseparably connected to religious practices and beliefs.

As the authors describe the settings of each text, they present the various bodies of water differently. The sea in *Beowulf* is active and both good and bad. In *The History of the Kings of Britain*, it only acts as a means of international travel, and in *The Knight of the Cart*, the sea ensures Lancelot's isolation and misery. Such ideas suggest that people may use it, but they do not belong near the sea. Their position in their environment is inland. The lake (*mere*) in *Beowulf* is an extension of the sea penetrating the land and invading the human domain, and in *The History of the Kings of Britain*, the lake is a false safe haven for King Arthur's enemies. Such descriptions give lakes a sinister feel cautioning those who must interact with them. The characters in *The History of the Kings of Britain* meet the pools with amazement and wonder beginning the human's connecting water with higher thought. The rivers are the center of power and civilization in *The History of the Kings of Britain*, magical and representative of natural balance in *The Knight of the Cart*, and a place of knowledge and preparation for entering Heaven in *Pearl*. These descriptions suggest that people were more accepting of the smaller bodies of water and that at this point they began to ascribe to water its meaningful qualities. Therefore, water affected the mental, spiritual, and emotional health of medieval people and not just their physical well-being.

# Appendix

Figure 1: T-O Map



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# Curriculum Vitae

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### **Committees/Conferences/Publications**

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